

U.S.-backed forces celebrate fall of IS 'capital,' Raqqa

By SARAH EL DEEB and ZEINA KARAM
Associated Press



This frame grab from video released Tuesday, and provided by Hawar News Agency, a Syrian Kurdish activist-run media group, shows fighters from the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces celebrating their victory in Raqqa, Syria.

BEIRUT — U.S.-backed Syrian forces celebrated in the devastated streets of Raqqa on Tuesday after gaining control of the northern city that once was the heart of the Islamic State's self-styled caliphate, dealing a major defeat to the extremist group that has seen its territory shrink ever smaller since summer.

Militants took over the vibrant metropolis on the Euphrates River in 2014, transforming it into the epicenter of their brutal rule, where opponents were beheaded and terror plots hatched.

It took thousands of bombs dropped by the U.S.-led coalition and more than four months of grueling house-to-house battles for the Syrian Democratic Forces to recapture Raqqa, marking a new chapter in the fight against the group whose once vast territory has been reduced to a handful of towns in Syria and Iraq.

"Liberating Raqqa is a triumph for humanity, especially women," who suffered the most under IS, said Ilham Ahmed, a senior member of the SDF political wing.

"It is a salvation for the will to live an honorable life. It is a defeat to the forces of darkness," said Ahmed, speaking to The Associated Press from Ein Issa, just north of Raqqa.

Fighters from the SDF celebrated by chanting and honking their horns as they spun doughnuts with their

Humvees and armored personnel carriers, and hoisting yellow SDF flags around Naim, or Paradise Square.

The infamous square was the site of public beheadings and other killings by the militants. Bodies and severed heads would be displayed there for days, mounted on posts and labeled with their alleged crimes, according to residents who later dubbed it "Hell Square."

Crumbled and flattened buildings stood behind the

fighters as they drove around the square, a sign of the massive destruction the city has suffered since the militants took over. It was in Naim Square that the extremists paraded tanks and military hardware in 2014 in a chilling show of force that foretold what would come.

SDF commanders later visited Raqqa's sports stadium, which IS had turned into a notorious prison. Dozens of militants who refused to surrender made their last stand earlier Tuesday

holed up inside.

"Immortal martyrs!" chanted the men and women in SDF uniforms, saluting their comrades who died battling for the city. According to the coalition, about 1,100 SDF forces have been killed fighting IS in Raqqa and Deir el-Zour.

"Military operations in Raqqa have ceased and we are now combing the city for sleeper cells and cleaning it from land mines," Brig. Gen. Talal Sillo told the AP earlier in the day.

A formal declaration that Raqqa has fallen would be made soon, once troops finish their clearing operations, Sillo said.

Col. Ryan Dillon, the Baghdad-based spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition, was more cautious, saying only that "more than 90 percent" of Raqqa had been cleared. He estimated about 100 IS militants were still in the city and said he expects the SDF to encounter "pockets of resistance" during the clearing operations.

The battle of Raqqa has killed more than 1,000 civilians, many of them in coalition airstrikes in recent months, and displaced tens of thousands of people who face the prospect of returning to ruined homes. The coalition and residents who managed to escape accused the militants of using civilians as human shields and tried to stop them from leaving the city.

In a reminder of the humanitarian catastrophe unleashed by the fighting, the international charity group Save the Children said that camps housing tens of thousands of people who fled Raqqa are "bursting at the seams."

It said about 270,000 people from Raqqa are still in critical need of aid. With the high level of destruction reported in and around Raqqa, most families have nowhere to go and are likely to be in camps for months or years. The World Food Program said it was ready to send teams as soon as the area was secure enough.

Ahmed, the SDF official, said the hardest part will be administering and rebuilding Raqqa. The group has appointed a civilian administration of locals to rebuild the city, but larger questions loom.

The SDF is a multi-ethnic force, but its Kurdish leadership harbors ambitions of autonomous rule over a Kurdish region in Syria that now includes the Arab-majority Raqqa, leading to concerns of a possible backlash among the city's Sunni Arab population.

Oregon cuts 3,800 jobs in September

PORTLAND (AP) — Oregon shed jobs for the second month in the row, though its unemployment rate remained essentially unchanged, the state Employment Department said Tuesday.

Oregon's nonfarm payroll employment dropped by 3,800 jobs in September, following a revised loss of 7,000 jobs in August, according to the monthly jobs report. The late-summer slowdown came after six months of robust hiring, when employers added 42,600 jobs.

The jobless rate for September stood at 4.2

percent, up from 4.1 percent in August.

The leisure-and-hospitality industry cut 3,700 jobs in September, its second consecutive month of weak hiring after a spike in June and July. State employment economist Nick Beleiciks said employers probably got the workers they needed in early summer and didn't need as many as the season wore on.

Oregon's construction industry, consistently strong over the past year, added 2,900 jobs. No other industry added half that many.

Beleiciks said the forest fires that charred the state

in September did not impact the jobs report.

"Although some people were out of work because of the forest fires, I don't think enough people were out of work long enough," he said. "So, basically, if someone was out of work early in September because of the fires — but they ended up going back to work in September — they'd still be counted as having a job in these figures."

A total of 2.05 million Oregonians were employed in September, an increase of more than 68,000 workers from this time last year, when the jobless rate was 4.9 percent.

Voters will decide fate of health care tax

By CHRIS LEHMAN
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Oregonians will be voting on a tax on hospital and health insurance companies next January.

The Oregon Secretary of State's Office announced Monday that opponents of the tax had successfully gathered enough valid signatures to force a vote. It means that all registered voters in Oregon will receive a ballot in early January for a rare mid-winter special election.

Lawmakers who created the tax and other supporters have said it's needed to fund health care for low-income

Oregonians.

"If this measure fails, cuts to health care and critical services will be devastating," said Democratic Party of Oregon chair Jeanne Atkins in a statement supporting the taxes.

But the three Republican state lawmakers who are spearheading the referendum effort said the taxes aren't needed.

They said Oregon instead needs systemic changes to the way it provides health care to low-income residents.

"I think the successful results of this petition effort shows just what Oregonians really think about what

kind of job politicians are doing, and they aren't very happy with the bills coming out of Salem," said Rep. Sal Esquivel, R-Medford, who served as one of the chief petitioners.

The Jan. 23 election date for what will be known as Measure 101 was chosen by Democrats in the Oregon Legislature. They argued that if the tax is overturned, lawmakers will have to act immediately to ensure that people who receive health care that's paid for by the tax aren't left in the cold.

Lawmakers will be meeting in February for their regularly scheduled legislative session.

BRIEFLY

A short-term health deal by senators; but Trump a question

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican and Democratic senators joined in announcing a plan Tuesday aimed at stabilizing America's health insurance markets in the wake of President Donald Trump's order to terminate "Obamacare" subsidies. The president, at first, spoke approvingly of the deal, but as conservatives rebelled, the White House insisted Trump actually opposed the plan as a bailout of insurance companies.

The agreement followed weeks of negotiations between Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Democratic Sen. Patty Murray of Washington that sought to address health insurance markets that have been in limbo following GOP failures to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. The talks took on added urgency when Trump announced last week that he would end monthly "cost sharing reduction" payments the government makes to help insurance companies reduce costs for lower-income people.

Without that money, premiums for some people buying individual health plans would spike, and some insurers would flee the markets, industry officials warn.

The Alexander-Murray deal would continue the insurer payments for two years, while establishing new flexibility for states under former President

Barack Obama's law.

"This would allow the Senate to continue its debate about the long term of health care, but over the next two years I think Americans won't have to worry about the possibility of being able to buy insurance in counties where they live," Alexander said in announcing the deal after a closed-door lunch where he presented it to GOP senators.

Californians head back home to altered lives, communities

PETALUMA, Calif. (AP) — Some have lost loved ones. Many have survived near-death experiences. Others have lost their homes and a lifetime of possessions.

A week after fleeing raging wildfires, tens of thousands of emotionally ravaged Californians have drifted back home to find their lives and their communities dramatically altered.

At a Red Cross shelter in Petaluma on Tuesday, 69-year-old Sue Wortman recalled the words that raced through her mind when she fled the flames near her home in Sonoma.

"We're all going up in smoke," she thought at the time. Since then, she's been walking around in a daze.

Firefighters gained more control Tuesday of the massive wine country wildfires, even as other blazes erupted in mountains near Los Angeles and Santa Cruz.

Politics and the fallen: Trump hasn't called all military families

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has pulled bereaved military families into a painful political fight of his own making, going so far Tuesday as to cite the death of his chief of staff's son in Afghanistan to question whether Barack Obama and other presidents did enough to honor the military dead.

He's boasted that "I think I've called every family of someone who's died," though The Associated Press found relatives of two soldiers who died overseas during Trump's presidency who said they never received a call or a letter from him, as well as relatives of a third who did not get a call from him.

The White House said Trump did telephone on Tuesday the families of four soldiers who were killed in Niger nearly two weeks ago, the issue that had spawned the controversy this week.

"He offered condolences on behalf of a grateful nation and assured them their family's extraordinary sacrifice to the country will never be forgotten," said a White House statement.

Contending that Trump's propensity for a political fight has drifted into "sacred" territory, Democrats and some former government officials have expressed anger at his comments that he, almost alone among presidents, called the families

of military members killed in war. They accused him of "inane cruelty" and a "sick game."

Files reveal details of U.S. support for Indonesian massacre

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Declassified files have revealed new details of U.S. government knowledge and support of an Indonesian army extermination campaign that killed several hundred thousand civilians during anti-communist hysteria in the mid-1960s.

The thousands of files from the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta covering 1963-66 were made public Tuesday after a declassification review that began under the Obama administration. The Associated Press reviewed key documents in the collection in advance of their release.

The files fill out the picture of a devastating reign of terror by the Indonesian army and Muslim groups that has been sketched by historians and in a U.S. State Department volume that was declassified in 2001 despite a last-minute CIA effort to block its distribution.

In 1965, Indonesia had the world's third-largest communist party after China and the Soviet Union, with several million members, and the country's president, the charismatic Sukarno, was vociferously socialist and anti-American.

Xi says China's prospects are bright but challenges severe

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese President Xi Jinping proclaimed his nation's prospects as bright but made a rare acknowledgement of severe economic challenges as he opened the ruling Communist Party's twice-a-decade national congress on Wednesday.

Other Chinese leaders have regularly warned since the 2008 financial crisis that China's economic growth faces "downward pressure" due to weak global demand that threatens export industries in the world's second-largest economy. But Xi's comments in the massive Great Hall of the People near Tiananmen Square were unusual in a keynote speech meant to highlight the party's confidence and long-range vision.

Among the grave issues Xi said were insufficiently addressed are a widening income gap and problems in employment, education, medical care and other areas.

"The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is no walk in the park or mere drum-beating and gong-clanging. The whole party must be prepared to make ever more difficult and harder efforts," Xi said. "To achieve great dreams there must be a great struggle."

He added that the party would have to take big risks and overcome "major resistance."

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