

Iraqi Forces Claim They Defeated Islamist Attack

Iraqi forces said they fought off an overnight attack by Islamic State militants near the city of Ramadi, which the insurgents overran at the weekend in the most significant setback for the government in a year.

Islamic State is seeking to consolidate its gains in the vast desert province of Anbar, of which Ramadi is capital, where only isolated pockets of territory remain under government control. The IS advance has exposed the shortcomings of Iraq's army and the limitations of U.S. air strikes.

Government forces backed by Shiite militias have meanwhile been building up at a base near Ramadi in preparation for a counterattack to retake the city, where Sunni Islamic State forces have taken over tanks and artillery and large amounts of ammunition abandoned by fleeing Iraqi forces.

There are fears in Washington and elsewhere that the fighting in Iraq will become a polarizing clash between Shiites and Sunnis as Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a Shiite, becomes increasingly dependent on the Iranian-backed Shiite militias to step in where the Iraqi military has failed.

Islamic State fighters attacked government forces in the town of Husaiba al-Sharqiya, about halfway between Ramadi and the Habbaniya military base where militia fighters have assembled, police and pro-government forces said.

"Daesh (Islamic State) attacked us around midnight after a wave of mortar shelling on our positions," Amir al-Fahdawi, a leader of the pro-government Sunni tribal force in the area, told Reuters on Wednesday.

"This time they came from another direction in an attempt to

launch a surprise attack, but we were vigilant and, after around four hours of fighting, we aborted their offensive," he added.

The Habbaniya base is midway between Ramadi and the town of Fallujah, which has been under Islamic State control for more than a year and is 50 km (30 miles) from the Iraqi capital. Islamic State appears to be trying to join up Ramadi and Fallujah by taking territory between the two towns.

"They want to occupy more of Anbar," said Sabah Karhout, head of the Anbar provincial council. "Their primary aim is to connect Ramadi to Fallujah."

As pressure mounted for action to retake Ramadi, a local government official urged citizens to join the police and the army to join what Shiite militiamen have said will be the "Battle of Anbar".

Islamic State fighters have set up defensive positions and laid landmines, witnesses in Ramadi said. The group's black flags are flying over the main mosque and other buildings.

The White House said a air campaign would back Iraqi forces in their attempt to regain Ramadi, whose fall exposed the limits of U.S. air power in its battle against the radical Sunni Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.

SECTARIAN HOSTILITY

Abadi's decision to send in the militia, known as Hashid Shaabi or Popular Mobilisation, to try to retake the predominantly Sunni city of Ramadi could stir up further sectarian hostility in one of the most violent parts of Iraq.

Ramadi was Islamic State's biggest success since it captured the northern city of Mosul last year and declared itself an Islamic caliphate. While it has been forced to give ground in Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's home town, and in the Syrian city of

Kobani, the group still controls large areas of Iraq and Syria.

Local officials have said 500 people were killed in the fighting to take Ramadi and the international migration agency says more than 40,000 people have fled the city.

When the Iraqi forces beat a hasty retreat from Ramadi at the weekend, they left behind a large amount of military supplies, including about a half a dozen tanks, around 100 wheeled vehicles and some artillery, the Pentagon said.

A Pentagon spokesman said it would have been preferable if the Iraqi troops had destroyed the equipment before leaving.

An Iraqi army officer who commanded an armored regiment before Islamic State swept through Ramadi, said the militants had seized a storage facility that contained enough ammunition to sustain Islamic State for months.

"The consequences of seizing the ammunition storage in Ramadi will be much worse than seizing the city itself," the officer said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"The real gain for Daesh was not control of Ramadi, but the bigger prize is the seizure of the army's major ammunition warehouse, where tonnes of different types of ammunition were stored."

In Syria, Kurdish forces backed by air strikes are pressing an attack on Islamic State that has killed at least 170 members of the group this week, a Kurdish official and a monitoring group said.

The official said Kurdish YPG fighters and allied militia have encircled Islamic State in a dozen villages near the town of Tel Tamr in the northeastern Hasaka province. The region is important in the battle against Islamic State because it borders land controlled by the jihadists in Iraq.

