

Islamic State Seizes Villages in Syria Near Turkey Border

Islamic State fighters encircled a Kurdish city in northern Syria near the border with Turkey on Thursday after seizing 21 villages in a major assault that prompted a commander to appeal for military aid from other Kurds in the region.

With the United States planning to expand military action against Islamic State from Iraq to Syria, a surveillance drone was spotted for the first time over nearby Islamic State-controlled territory in Aleppo province, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which tracks Syria's civil war, said.

It was not immediately clear who was operating the drone.

U.S. President Obama last week said he would not hesitate to strike the radical Islamist group that has used Syria as a base to advance its plan to reshape the Middle East according to its radical vision of Sunni Islam.

The United States is conducting air strikes against Islamic State in Iraq and last month Obama authorized surveillance flights over Syria.

Islamic State fighters, armed with heavy weaponry including tanks, seized a group of villages near the city of Ayn al-Arab, known as Kobani in Kurdish, in an offensive which the Observatory said had started on Tuesday night.

It said 21 villages had fallen to Islamic State in the last 24 hours as the group advanced on the city.

"We've lost touch with many of the residents living in the villages that ISIS (Islamic State) seized," Ocalan Iso, deputy head of the Kurdish forces in Kobani, told Reuters via Skype.

He said the group was committing massacres and kidnapping women in the newly-seized areas, giving the names of 28 members of a single family he said had been taken captive. It was not possible to immediately verify his account.

The Kurds were appealing for military aid from other Kurdish groups in the region including the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), he said. Support from Kurds who crossed from Turkey helped to repel an Islamic State attack on Kobani in July.

The Observatory said there were fears of massacres in the areas seized by Islamic State. "This is a very important advance for them," Rami Abdulrahman, the Observatory's founder, told Reuters, speaking by phone.

Footage posted on YouTube on Wednesday by the YPG, the main Kurdish armed group in Syria, appeared to show Kurdish fighters armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades battling a tank flying the Islamic State's black flag west of Kobani.

Redur Xelil, spokesman for the YPG, said Islamic State had encircled Kobani.

The group was using tanks, rockets and artillery in the attack. "We call on world powers to move to halt this barbaric assault by ISIS," he told Reuters via Skype.

The YPG, which says it has 50,000 fighters, says it should be a natural partner in a coalition the United States is trying to assemble to fight Islamic State.

But the Syrian Kurds' relationship with the West is complicated by their ties to the PKK, a group listed as a terrorist organization in many Western states because of the militant campaign it waged for Kurdish rights in Turkey.

Obama's plans to expand support for groups fighting Islamic State in Syria have focused on Sunni Muslim insurgents deemed

moderate by Washington.

But there have been new signs of cooperation between the YPG and such groups in Aleppo province: They recently set up a joint operations room to direct the fight against Islamic State in that area.

Islamic State has been trying to establish control over a belt of territory near the border with Turkey, expanding out of its strongholds further east in the provinces of Raqqqa and Deir al-Zor, which borders Iraq.

The group advanced westwards into northern Aleppo province in August, seizing territory from less well-armed groups that have been fighting Assad's forces.

Since Obama authorized aerial surveillance over Syria, activists have reported drones in the skies over Raqqqa, which is 400 km (250 miles), northeast of Damascus.

Residents had seen at least one drone over the Islamic State-controlled towns of al-Bab and Manbij in northeastern Aleppo province on Thursday, said Abdulrahman of the Observatory. "They hadn't seen them before," he said.

Islamic State had evacuated buildings it was using as offices in the area, he added.

It reflects the pattern in other Islamic State-controlled areas of Syria. In apparent anticipation of U.S. military action, the group has evacuated bases and moved its fighters and heavy weaponry.

Al-Bab is 40 km (about 25 miles) northeast of Aleppo, which is a crucial theater of the war between Assad and the insurgents. Assad's forces and his opponents are battling for control of the city.

The top U.S. military officer said on Tuesday the United States was planning "a persistent and sustainable campaign"

against Islamic State in Syria. Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the United States was not preparing to unleash a “shock and awe” campaign of overwhelming air strikes in Syria.

Editing by Janet Lawrence and Andrew Heavens

© 2014 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.