Iraqi military bombs Fallujah ahead of ground assault

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Iraqi military forces renewed their shelling and aerial bombardment of Fallujah over the weekend, in preparation for a ground assault to reclaim the city, located in Iraq's western Anbar province.

Government forces are reportedly stationed 15 minutes from Fallujah, awaiting a final go-ahead from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to launch their invasion. For several weeks the city has been subjected to indiscriminate artillery fire and aerial strikes that have killed an unknown number of civilians, and a blockade that has restricted access to food, medicine and water.

The government has delivered an ultimatum to anyone still inside the city to leave or be treated as a supporter of the Al Qaeda-affiliate Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Maliki administration officials had previously sought to negotiate with local tribal forces who took control of the city at the beginning of January. A top Iraqi security official told Reuters on Sunday: "That's it. They were given enough time to make their choice, but they failed ... The message was clear, we offered them to leave the city and be a part of the national reconciliation project. But, if anyone insists on fighting our forces, he will be considered an ISIS militant whether he is or not."

The *Turkish Weekly* reported yesterday that government forces, backed by helicopters, are fighting local tribesmen to retake parts of the capital of Anbar province, Ramadi. The newspaper said that seven bodies had been brought to the Ramadi hospital. The government declared that it had killed 50 "terrorists" in Ramadi and 15 "militants" in Fallujah over the weekend. However, it is impossible to confirm the identity of those killed, as the government labels all those fighting the military as "terrorists."

The government is acting with the full support of the Obama administration. Vice President Joe Biden called al-Maliki on January 26 to tell him "that the United States continues to support Iraq in its fight against the Al Qaeda-linked militants," according to the *Washington Post*. The fighting recalls the devastating sieges of Fallujah by US occupation forces in 2004 that levelled much of the city and transformed it into a deserted ruins.

The current conflict is the legacy of the illegal US occupation of Iraq and the destruction of an entire society. It is the direct result of the US military's conscious fomenting of sectarian divisions, pitting of Shiite Muslims against the Sunnis, who comprise about 30 percent of the population.

On December 28, the Shiite-dominated Maliki government arrested a Sunni member of parliament in Ramadi, Ahmed al-Alwany, and ruthlessly put down a local protest encampment, killing 17 people. Under conditions of mass outrage at the Maliki government and its openly sectarian manoeuvring, local armed tribal forces, including what appears to be a minority of ISIS supporters, took control of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi. Many of the local Sunni tribal groupings are opposed to Al Qaeda.

Having already sent shipments of Hellfire missiles to the Iraqi government, the Obama administration last week advanced plans to sell the regime $6.17 billion of military equipment, including 24 Apache attack helicopters. The administration has simply brushed aside concerns that the weaponry will be used by the Maliki administration to kill civilians and political opponents.

The deal's initial phase, worth $1.37 billion and expected to be delivered by this summer, will include 152 Hellfire missiles, as well as missile launchers, night-vision goggles and other equipment. Six Apache

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helicopters will also be leased, with US military personnel training Iraqi pilots and ground crew.

A longer-term sale of two dozen Boeing AH-64E Apache Longbow helicopters, another 480 Hellfire missiles and other weaponry, including 30mm chain guns and hydra rockets, will follow. The Apaches will help provide Iraqi security forces with "close air support, armed reconnaissance and anti-tank warfare missions," the Defense Security Cooperation Agency stated.

News has continued to emerge in the last fortnight about war crimes committed by the military, and about the developing humanitarian crisis. United Nations mission chief Nicholay Mladanov last Saturday said he was "deeply alarmed by the humanitarian situation of thousands of displaced families and particularly of those stranded in Fallujah. They lack water, fuel, food, medicine and other basic commodities."

The Turkish *World Bulletin* on January 26 quoted sources in Ramadi who reported that two civilians had been killed and another six wounded by Iraqi army shelling of residential neighbourhoods. A local tribal leader "accused the army of indiscriminately shelling residential areas, noting that all the victims are civilians, including women and children." The newspaper quoted Dr. Abdel-Sattar Lawas, the director of Fallujah General Hospital, as saying: "We have received 12 injured victims, including children and women, who sustained injuries as a result of the army's shelling of their homes."

The UN has labelled the present situation as the worst displacement crisis in Iraq since the period of 2006-2008, when the US military fuelled a sectarian civil war in which many thousands of Sunnis were killed and driven from their homes. On January 24, the UN reported that more than 65,000 people in Anbar had been made homeless in just the previous week, and 140,000 since the start of 2014. The head of Anbar's provincial council, Sabah Karhout, has declared Fallujah a "disaster zone," claiming that more than 250,000 families have fled throughout Anbar province, according to Anadolu Agency.

It appears that Iraqi military forces previously postponed a ground assault on Fallujah mainly due to doubts over the military's capacity to reclaim the city by force. The government has sought to enlist Sunni tribal forces in Anbar province with bribes of weaponry and investment. Reuters reported on January 30 that the Iraqi cabinet had approved $3.4 million for payments to tribesmen and more than $17 million-worth of infrastructure projects in Anbar province, while 2,000 Russian machine guns and 2,000 Kalashnikovs were delivered to Ramadi tribesmen last week alone.

There remains, however, bitter hostility between Sunni tribal forces and the government. Reuters quoted an army official admitting there was virtually no cooperation with local tribesmen. "We are not fighting shoulder to shoulder," he said. "They don't attack us, we don't attack them and they just provide security in their areas."

Iraq remains plagued by sectarian terrorist bombings and civil conflict. Figures released by the United Nations last Saturday reported that 618 civilians and 115 members of Iraqi security forces across Iraq had been killed, and another 1,229 people wounded, in January alone. These figures, however, are in addition to the deaths from the fighting in Anbar province.

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