

Casualties soar in Iraqi city of Mosul

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An air strike on western Mosul on March 17, carried out by either the United States or one of its allies, resulted in the destruction of homes and the slaughter of as many as 200 civilians.

According to an eyewitness, the attack in Baghdad Street, in the suburb of Aghawat Jadidah, appears to have been called in to dislodge a lone Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) sniper who was holding up the advance of Iraqi government forces. Unnamed American officials told the *Los Angeles Times* a truck containing fuel or explosives may have been “inadvertently hit,” causing a massive explosion.

LA Times correspondents in Mosul reported on Friday: “Bodies were still pinned under houses; blackened hands and a pair of feet in yellow high-top sneakers protruded from one place in the rubble.” A woman, Munatha Jasim, who lost a seven-year-old son and four-year-old daughter in the attack, said: “Just because one Islamic State [fighter] was on our house, the aircraft bombed us.”

Before news of the latest carnage broke, the US military had already announced that it carried out four air strikes in Mosul on March 17, boasting that it destroyed 25 ISIS “fighting positions” and 56 vehicles. US Army spokesperson Joe Scrocca told the *LA Times* it will “assess the allegations and determine what, if any, role a coalition strike may have had in that area.”

The countries whose air forces and ground units are involved in bombing Mosul, and could be responsible, are the United States, Britain, Australia and France, as well as the Iraqi government itself. According to US figures, its “coalition” has unleashed over 18,000 bombs and missiles on the city since October 17.

The reported atrocity in Mosul follows the report on Tuesday that US air strikes against alleged ISIS targets in the Syrian city of Raqqa struck a school occupied by hundreds of civilians. Unconfirmed estimates placed the death toll at 30, though it may have been far higher.

An earlier attack on a mosque in the Syrian province of Idlib reportedly killed at least 42 people.

There are no credible figures on the civilian death toll in Mosul. Hundreds of people are believed to have been murdered by ISIS, with thousands more killed or wounded by gunfire, artillery shelling and air strikes. Large parts of the city lie in rubble.

The US and its allies have dramatically intensified attacks on the city over recent weeks, as Iraqi troops push deeper into the western suburbs that are still held by ISIS. Iraqi government representatives claim that their forces are now just 500 metres from the 1,000-year-old al-Nuri mosque, where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed an Islamic “caliphate” after ISIS captured Mosul in July 2014.

Bloody fighting is reportedly taking place in densely-populated residential areas. An estimated 400,000 civilians are trapped in the ISIS-controlled suburbs. A resident reached by Agence France Presse reported: “It’s been four months that we haven’t eaten fruit and vegetables. The kids ask for just a piece of chocolate, but there are only lentils, and even these are running out.”

Another resident declared: “When the planes strike, one Daesh [ISIS] dies for every 20 civilians. The homes are old, so if an air strike hits, it destroys more than one.”

Unknown numbers of ISIS militants have been killed. Last October, when the siege began, as many as 10,000 ISIS loyalists were said to be in Mosul. It is believed a number escaped, including key leaders of the organisation, and crossed the border to its stronghold in Raqqa, Syria. A recent estimate, published by the *Wall Street Journal*, put ISIS’s remaining strength in Mosul at barely 1,500 to 2,000 fighters, of whom 70 to 90 percent are from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, China, the Central Asian republics, France and the Chechnyan region of Russia, along with small numbers from other

West European countries, the US, Canada and Australia.

Some ISIS fighters have surrendered to Iraqi forces. The majority, however, are allegedly “fighting to the death”—a claim generally made during war time to justify the summary execution of captured or wounded opponents. Iraqi commanders have made little secret of their desire to exact vengeance for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi Army in 2014, when tens of thousands of its troops in the Mosul area abandoned their equipment and weapons and fled from an ISIS force.

The Iraqi government refuses to release statistics on the casualties suffered by its forces. The total was estimated at over 2,000 more than three months ago, well before the intense fighting for control of western Mosul began.

As the fighting and destruction has escalated, the number of civilians fleeing Mosul has risen exponentially. In just 10 hours on Thursday, the Iraqi military reported that some 15,000 new refugees passed through one transit point. Tens of thousands more are expected to flood out of the city over the coming days and weeks.

It is now estimated that 200,000 people are sheltering in desperately under-resourced refugee camps. Hundreds of thousands more have remained in their homes in the city’s eastern suburbs, which were retaken several months ago by government forces.

An Oxfam representative told Reuters that people are arriving in camps “traumatised, hungry, dehydrated and completely exhausted.”

Aid agencies are struggling to cope. United Nations humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, Lisa Grande, warned this week that if numbers continue to grow at the current rate, “it’s going to stretch us to the breaking point.”



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