

Iraqi forces retake Mosul HQ

Government building and River Tigris bridgehead liberated

NEAR MOSUL (Iraq): Iraqi forces have retaken the provincial government headquarters and a second bridgehead on the River Tigris in west Mosul.

The operation to retake west Mosul – IS' largest remaining urban stronghold – was launched on Feb 19, but the advance had slowed in the face of several days of bad weather until a renewed push began on Sunday.

"The heroes of the federal police and Rapid Response liberate the government building for Nineveh province and control the second bridge (Al-Hurriyah Bridge)," the Joint Operations Command said in a statement yesterday.

Mosul, Iraq's second city, is the capital of Nineveh province.

The city is divided by the Tigris River, and while bridges crossing it have been either damaged or destroyed, they would provide a link between the government-held east and IS-held west if they can be repaired or otherwise bridged.

British and US military instructors have been training Iraqi soldiers in the use of floating bridges for precisely this kind of situation.

Iraq's Bridging Battalion currently numbers around 90 troops and a further 25 are completing training.

Iraqi forces have retaken a series of government buildings in west Mosul since launching their renewed offensive.

The elite Rapid Response Division and federal police forces have recaptured the provincial police headquarters, the courts complex and the water, electricity and sewage directorates.

And the Counter Terrorism Service, the country's premier special forces unit, retook Al-Sumood neighbourhood, another target in the drive, and attacked Al-Mansur.

The fighting in west Mosul has forced more than 50,000 people to flee, the International Organisation for Migration said.

The operation to retake Mosul was launched on Oct 17, with an array of forces taking part but CTS and Rapid Response ultimately playing the leading roles.

In January, Iraqi forces retook the last neigh-



Pushing ahead: Iraqi special forces standing guard while displaced Iraqis flee their homes, following the ongoing battle with Islamic State militants in western Mosul, Iraq. — Reuters

bourhood of east Mosul still in IS hands.

IS overran large areas north and west of Baghdad in 2014, but Iraqi forces backed by US-led air strikes and other support have since regained most of the ground they lost.

The militants have also lost large swathes of territory in neighbouring Syria, threatening the end of the cross-border "caliphate" they declared in June 2014.

They have faced offensives by three rival forces. Turkish troops and their Syrian rebel allies

have pushed south from the Turkish border and drove IS out of the northern town of Al-Bab.

Syrian government troops have pushed east from second city Aleppo with Russian support and seized a swathe of countryside from militants.

An a US-backed alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters have been advancing on IS' de facto Syrian capital Raga and on Monday reached the Euphrates River cutting the main road to the partly IS-held city of Deir Ezzor downstream. — AFP

2,100 Iranian fighters killed in Iraq and Syria, says official

TEHERAN: More than 2,000 fighters sent from Iran have been killed in Iraq and Syria, said the head of Iran's veterans' affairs office.

"Some 2,100 martyrs have been martyred so far in Iraq or other places defending the holy mausoleums," Mohammad Ali Shahidi told the state-run IRNA news agency yesterday.

Shahidi, who is head of Iran's Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, was speaking at a conference on martyrdom culture in Teheran.

The figure was more than double the number he gave in November, which referred only to Syria.

Iran is, with Russia, the main military backer of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and also organises militias fighting the Islamic State group in Iraq.

Shahidi did not provide details on the nationalities of those killed.

Iran oversees "volunteer" fighters recruited from among its own nationals as well as Shiite communities in neighbouring Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The families of those killed in battle are given Iranian citizenship under a law passed last May.

Teheran refers to the fighters as "defenders of the shrines" – a reference to Shiite holy sites in Iraq and Syria that have been targeted by Sunni extremists. — AFP