

Iraqi forces push into Fallujah as IS bombings kill 24

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Baghdad: Iraqi forces started pushing into the city of Fallujah on Monday as a wave of bombings claimed by the Islamic State group in Baghdad and near the Iraqi capital killed at least 24 people.

The advance is part of an offensive to rout militants from Fallujah and recapture the city west of Baghdad, which has been held by the Islamic State for over two years. The offensive on Fallujah, backed by paramilitary troops and aerial support from the U.S.-led coalition, was first launched about a week ago.

The battle for the strategic city is likely to be a protracted one, with Iraqi forces advancing slowly to minimize civilian casualties. Tens of thousands of civilians are believed to be still inside the city, trapped by the fighting.

Meanwhile, the bombings by the Islamic State, which has been behind several recent deadly attacks in Baghdad and beyond, are seen as an attempt by the militants to distract the security forces' attention from the front lines.

The deadliest of Monday's attacks took place in the northern, Shiite-dominated Shaab neighborhood of Baghdad where a suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden car into a checkpoint next to a commercial area, killing eight civilians and three soldiers. The explosion also wounded up to 14 people, a police officer said.

A suicide car bomber struck an outdoor market in the town of Tarmiyah, about 50 kilometers (31 miles) north of Baghdad, killing seven civilians and three policemen, another police officer said, adding that 24 people were wounded in that bombing.

And in Baghdad's eastern Shiite Sadr City district, a bomb motorcycle went off at a market, killing three and wounding 10, police said. Medical officials confirmed casualty figures. All officials spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to release information.

In an online statement, IS claimed responsibility for the attacks, saying they targeted members of the Shiite militias and a government office. The Associated Press could not verify the authenticity of the statement but it was posted on a militant website commonly used by extremists.

Since launching the Fallujah offensive and until Monday, Iraqi government troops have mostly been fighting IS in the outskirts of the city to tighten the siege ahead of a planned final push into its center. By Sunday, the troops had recaptured 80 percent of the territory around Fallujah, according to Iraqi Maj. Dhia Thamir.

At dawn Monday, Iraq's elite counterterrorism forces started pushing into Fallujah from its southern edge, said Brig. Haider al-Obeidi. He described the clashes as "fierce," with IS deploying snipers and releasing a volley of mortar rounds on the Iraqi forces.

Fallujah, which is about 65 kilometers (40 miles) west of Baghdad, is one of the last major IS strongholds in western Iraq. The extremist group still controls territory in the country's north and west, as well as Mosul, Iraq's second largest city.

In a televised speech Sunday to parliament, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi called on Fallujah residents to either leave the city or stay indoors. Government officials and aid groups estimate that more than 50,000 people remain inside the center of the Sunni majority city.

- AP