

Iraqi troops discover mass grave near IS-held Mosul; experts begin probe

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Baghdad: Iraqi troops advancing into Islamic State-held territory near the city of Mosul discovered a mass grave on Monday, following which a team of Iraqi investigators today began probe into the site.

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The chilling find was the latest instance of mass graves being uncovered in territory wrested from IS militants. The group has killed thousands of people in summary executions and extrajudicial killings in Iraq and Syria so far and the graves are a dark testimony to its brutality.

Associated Press footage from the site shows bones and decomposed bodies among scraps of clothing and plastic bags dug out of the ground by a bulldozer after Iraqi troops noticed the strong smell while advancing into the town of Hamam al-Alil on Monday.

"Investigators flew in this morning and are on their way to the grave to conduct examinations and determine the cause of death," said Cabinet official Haider Majeed, in charge of mass grave investigations.

The first officials at the site said the grave, behind an earthen embankment near an agricultural college, likely holds about 100 bodies, many of them decapitated. The town lies some 30 kilometers (19 miles) from Mosul.

It was unclear who the victims were, but a soldier at the site pulled a child's stuffed animal from the scraps of clothing and rotting flesh, swarming with flies.

IS militants have carried out a series of massacres since seizing large swaths of southern and central Iraq in the summer of 2014, often documenting them with photos and videos circulated online.

The campaign to drive them from Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city and the extremists' last major urban stronghold in the country, began on Oct. 17.

Iraqi troops and the Kurdish peshmerga forces are now converging on Mosul, although the deepest advance into an eastern sliver of the city has stalled after militants counterattacked advancing special forces from within built-up, populated areas.

To the northeast, some 13 kilometers (8 miles) from the city, the peshmerga forces continued their push on the town of Bashiqa, believed to be largely deserted except for dozens of IS fighters.

Mortar fire, automatic weapons, and explosions rang out through the morning, as a thick plume of smoke hung over parts of the city, obscuring the view of aircraft.

- (With AP inputs)