

WORLD NEWS

# Iraqis Tell of Brutal Islamic State Tactics

Militants use booby traps, human shields as government forces advance in Mosul

By Ben Kessler and Awadh Altairi

MOSUL, Iraq—Ali Muhammad Khalif buried his wife, sister and two nephews recently and left a grave open beside them for his son, whose body was too difficult to retrieve from near the front lines here.

Islamic State had planted a bomb just outside Mr. Khalif's front door in western Mosul to prepare for an expected advance by Iraqi troops. The family saw the extremists set up the booby trap and was forced to live with it, and a few days ago, Mr. Khalif's wife went to milk the family cow and accidentally stepped on the trigger.

A day later, the 76-year-old patriarch and his family crowded into his home to prepare for the burial. They said a mortar fell on the gathering during breakfast, killing the other family members.

"When the fighting started, Daesh wouldn't let anyone leave their houses," said Mr. Khalif, a shepherd from rural Mosul, using an Arabic acronym for the terror group. He said Islamic State forced him and his family to move into the embattled northern city when the Mosul offensive first began in October to serve as a human shield. Mr. Khalif and surviving family members said they had fled to safety elsewhere in Mosul as fighting erupted in the neighborhood.

As Iraqi forces have squeezed the militants into a fast-shrinking patch of territory in the western half of Mo-



Iraqi security forces, above, fired on Islamic State militants in western Mosul as Iraqi forces pursued their campaign to recapture the city. Below, Ali Muhammad Khalif stood near the graves of family members, several of whom were killed recently.

sul over the past week, stories of Islamic State's trademark brutality are proliferating. The offensive has already sent tens of thousands of civilians fleeing with tales of the terror they endured.

Fighting resumed Sunday after a short pause during bad weather and Iraqi forces pushed even deeper into the densely populated neighborhoods. Islamic State used at least a dozen car and motorcycle bombs Sunday in their fight against advancing Iraqi troops, according to Iraqi security officials.

As the sun set Sunday, a cloud of smoke rose just inside the city and there was a boom. Minutes later, Iraqi troops brought a gasping soldier to



an aid station on the edge of town. His lungs had likely been damaged by that car-bomb blast, medics said. Last week, Iraqi Kurdish

journalists died in an explosion while examining a mass grave on the outskirts of the city. Islamic State had booby trapped the gruesome site.

They forced Mr. Abu Duha

to knock out man-sized holes in the walls of his house so they could connect it to the other houses around it. Several homes are now largely connected in this manner.

Mr. Abu Duha and others said Islamic State demanded residents move their cars from houses into the street and leave the keys in them. They packed some with explosives, creating a new fleet of car bombs at the ready.

Iraqi officers said militants now park massive car bombs near homes to deter surgical airstrikes against the fighters that could blow up multiple houses and harm civilians.

Though Iraqi forces captured the eastern half of Mosul in late January after months of tough battles, Islamic State continues to terrorize that side of the city as well. For weeks, Islamic State has used commercially available drones to drop bombs on civilians and aid workers.

On Thursday, three rockets containing a chemical were fired at civilians in eastern Mosul, according to eyewitnesses and people injured in the attack.

A spokeswoman for the International Committee of the Red Cross said injuries from the attack were due at least in part to some sort of chemical.

At a hospital an hour away in the Kurdish city of Erbil, a young boy injured in the attacks lay in a hospital bed with his eyes swollen shut.

"The smoke from the rocket had a very bad smell," said Wisam Rashid, another victim who had fared better in the attack and was standing in one of the hospital hallways. "It was very hot on our hands and on our tongues."

He pointed to small burns on his scalp and his arms as he spoke.

## Crackdown Mars Political Transition in Congo

Activist groups say forces of Joseph Kabila's government have killed scores of people as country awaits his departure

By Nicholas Barbo

Congolese security forces are brutally cracking down on opposition groups and local militias two months after sealing a deal that would see President Joseph Kabila cede power this year, jeopardizing the transition plan and the nation's broader stability.

An agreement in the final hours of 2016 calls for national elections by the end of 2017 and bars Mr. Kabila from running again. But instead of implementing the accord, the president's forces have intensified the campaign against dissent.

Activist groups say government forces have killed some 180 people since the Catholic Church brokered the transition deal on New Year's Eve, setting the country on a trajectory toward



Red Cross staff carried a victim of a clash in Kinshasa last month.

surpassing last year's death toll of 480 people. Meanwhile, there are indications peaceful opposition groups are radicalizing, a development some observers said

as would reports, if verified, that at least one local militia was recruiting and deploying child soldiers.

The unrest has spread to usually stable regions in the central region of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the capital Kinshasa and rattled conflict zones in the east and south. It is dampening voter registration, further dimming the prospect of holding national elections by December, as foreseen under the transition agreement.

"The turmoil is a reflection of the growing sense of insecurity the government currently feels," said Charles Pembroke, an analyst with U.K.-based PGI Intelligence.

Critics say Mr. Kabila, whose approval ratings have dropped to 40%, the lowest point in his term, is using his government's security

apparatus to get an edge over the opposition, weakened by the death of leader Etienne Tshisekedi in February. They also fear the violence could benefit the president, who has been in office since 2001, by offering him an argument for a need for

stable leadership in a country that has a history of triggering regional conflicts and making an election practically impossible.

Lambert Mende, Congo's information minister, meanwhile, on Feb. 24 accused the opposition of trying to topple a "legitimate government." Mr. Kabila's support-

ers point to a ruling by the constitutional court that allows the president, whose term officially ended in December, to stay in power until a successor is elected.

If Mr. Kabila continues to drag his feet on implementing the transition plan and

*There have been indications that some peaceful opposition groups are radicalizing.*

fail to properly investigate recent atrocities there is bound to be more bloodshed, analysts warn. "Militias and the opposition are aware that Kabila's regime is weakening. An escalation of the violence is inevitable" said Jason Stearns, the director of the Congo Research Group at New York University

## In Italy, Same-Sex Parents Enter Legal Limbo

By Pietro Lombardi

ROME—An Italian court's decision to recognize two homosexual men as the fathers of twin children has exposed confusion and a deep divide in the country over parenting rights of same-sex couples.

It was disclosed last week that a court in the northern Italian city of Trento granted the men full rights as parents to their six-year-old twins, who were born in Canada through surrogacy.

The gay community hailed the decision—the first to accord full parental rights to a non-biological father—as historic in a country that last year became one of the last in Europe to approve civil unions for gay couples. But the ruling kicked up controversy right away, with the head of the main group opposing the civil-unions bill saying it marked a "sad day for Italy."

The ruling also illustrated the chaos surrounding parental rights for same-sex couples in Italy, where courts are stepping in to fill a legislative vacuum left by the law.

The 2016 legislation approving civil unions stopped short of addressing broader questions of parental rights

and other family-law issues for same-sex couples. Political opposition was so fierce that lawmakers scotched any reference to adoption or parental rights to get the bill passed.

As a result, Italian law today recognizes only the biological parent, and joint adoption by gay couples isn't allowed.

Italian courts have been left to fill that gap in a haphazard way, with some judges approving adoption requests by gay partners of a biological parent and others turning them down. The result: As many as 1,000 children of gay couples are caught in a legal limbo.

For instance, Mariena Grassadonia married her partner Laura Terrasi in Spain in 2009. Ms. Grassadonia gave birth to a son, while Ms. Terrasi had twins. Under Italian law, each woman was the parent only to her biological children. The couple fought in Italian courts for a year until a Rome tribunal approved the respective adoption of each woman's biological children.

Around the same time, a judge in Milan rejected a similar adoption request from another lesbian couple with children.

"The rights of homosexual couples and their children hang on court rulings," said

Ms. Grassadonia, head of a gay-rights association.

The confusion in Italy reflects the patchwork of family rights for homosexual couples throughout Europe, a situation exacerbated by the European Union's recognition of the right of any EU citizen to live in any member country.

Riccardo and Lorenzo, the Trento couple who released only their first names, sought to break new ground. The pair, an entrepreneur and a civil servant in their 50s who have



Then-Rome Mayor Ignazio Marino, center, congratulated couple Mariena Grassadonia, left, and Laura Terrasi in 2014.

been together for more than 20 years, were married in Canada. Their twins were born in Canada via surrogacy, a practice that is illegal in Italy. Canadian law allowed both men to be listed as the twins' fathers on the birth certificate.

Once back in Italy, the couple sought to have the Italian state recognize the Canadian birth certificate, seeking a parental status that affords more rights than adoption in Italy. An adoptive parent's relatives have no legal relation with the

adopted children, who therefore have no legal status when it comes, for instance, to inheritance from grandparents. The court granted the couple's request, effectively recognizing both men as fathers.

"[We] sought no more than to see our children's legal family rights protected, just as with other families," they said. Nichi Vendola, a gay Italian politician and leader in the fight for same-sex rights, hailed the decision. "When you raise, care for and love a child, you're a father, mother, parent," he said.

In Italy, however, court decisions don't set legal precedent, so the legislative gap remains for parliament to fill. With Italy headed to elections this year or next, there is little political appetite to take up the bruising battle over parenting rights again.

## U.K. Set to Remain on Frugal Path

By Jason Douglas

LONDON—U.K. Treasury chief Philip Hammond on Sunday signaled that he would keep a tight rein on Britain's public finances when he presents his latest tax-and-spending plans to U.K. lawmakers on Wednesday, despite better-than-expected economic growth that economists said should swell government tax revenue.

In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corp. Mr. Hammond said the U.K. is still borrowing too much even after years of belt-tightening.

He said it is sensible to maintain fiscal discipline to ensure the U.K. can weather any economic surprises, especially as it takes steps to leave the European Union. "I regard my job as chancellor as making sure that our economy is resilient, that we have reserves in the tank," Mr. Hammond said.

The U.K. economy grew a better-than-expected 1.8% in 2016 after an anticipated slowdown following the Brexit vote failed to materialize.