

Barack Obama warns Islamic State leaders: 'You are next'

15/12/2015 21:44 by admin

Washington: President Barack Obama on Monday said the US-led coalition is making progress against Islamic State militants in both Iraq and Syria, as he delivered an update on the campaign aimed at reassuring Americans worried about the spread of extremism-fueled terrorism.

"We are hitting ISIL harder than ever," Obama said, using the shorthand for the Islamic State group. Obama said airstrikes had increased and the coalition had successfully knocked out key figures in the group's leadership "one by one."

"The point is, ISIL leaders cannot hide and our next message to them is simple: 'You are next.'" Obama said.

The tough talk came after Obama met with his top national security advisers at the Pentagon, part of weeklong push to explain his strategy for stopping the Islamic State group abroad and its sympathizers at home. Obama is also slated to attend a briefing at the National Counterterrorism Center later in the week.

After a series of setbacks, the US and its coalition partners have claimed progress recently in wresting back territory from IS and eliminating some of its key leaders in Syria and Iraq. The military has said hundreds of US airstrikes in recent days dealt a major blow to IS ranks in the western Iraqi city of Ramadi, which IS seized in May.

But progress in Ramadi, as elsewhere, has been slow, leading to calls in the US and abroad for a tougher US response. Aside from authorizing a small number of special forces, Obama has insisted he won't budge from his determination not to send in major US ground forces.

Flanked by top military brass, Obama offered some of the first public details about the status of those special forces, ordered before the recent attacks in California and Paris. He said special forces in Syria had started their work helping local groups cut off IS supply lines and put pressure on Raqqa, the unofficial capital of Islamic State group's "caliphate."

In an effort to encourage coalition allies to contribute more to the fight, Obama said he was dispatching Defense Secretary Ash Carter to the Middle East on Monday.

The high-profile visits to agencies charged with keeping the US safe follow an Oval Office address Dec. 6 that aimed to reassure the public but that critics said failed to do the job.

"The American people are smart enough to know when something is working or not, and it's obvious that the president's current strategy isn't working," House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a Republican, said in response to Obama's appearance at the Pentagon.

As national security takes center stage in the presidential race, Obama is also hoping to draw a contrast with Donald Trump and his inflammatory remarks about Muslims, which the Obama administration has said endangers US national security.

On a conference call Monday with religious leaders, top White House officials pledged vigilance by the Justice Department in pursuing hate crimes and other civil rights violations, calling an attack on any faith an attack on all faiths. Obama's aides were also holding separate meetings at the White House with Muslim leaders and with Sikh leaders.

The public relations campaign, one week before Christmas, comes as the public is jittery about the specter of extremism after deadly attacks in California and Paris.

Seven in 10 Americans rate the risk of an attack in the US as at least somewhat high, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll — a sharp increase from the 5 in 10 who said that in January.

US officials have insisted there are no specific, credible threats to the United States. But the apparent lack of warning before San Bernardino has raised concerns about whether the US has a handle on potential attacks, especially during high-profile times such as the end-of-year.

- AP