

Iraq launches offensive to recapture Islamic State-held Mosul

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Baghdad: The Iraqi military backed by U.S.-led coalition aircraft on Thursday launched a long-awaited operation to recapture the northern city of Mosul from Islamic State militants, a military spokesman said.

In the push, Iraqi forces retook several villages on the outskirts of the town of Makhmour, east of Mosul, early in the morning on Thursday and hoisted the Iraqi flag there, according to the spokesman for the Joint Military Command, Brig. Gen. Yahya Rasool.

It was not immediately clear how long such a complex and taxing offensive would take. Only recently, Iraqi and U.S. officials refrained to give a specific time on when the Mosul operation could begin, saying it would take many months to prepare Iraq's still struggling military for the long-anticipated task of retaking the key city.

Some U.S. and Iraqi officials have said it may not even be possible to retake it this year, despite repeated vows by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Iraqi state-run TV interrupted its morning program Thursday with a series of news alerts announcing the operation and broadcasting patriotic songs and flag-waving video clips.

Rasool told The Associated Press that the U.S.-led international coalition was providing air support but would not divulge more details on the offensive, which he said was dubbed "Operation Conquest."

According to an official at the military's provincial Nineveh Operations Command, the aim of the first phase of the Mosul offensive was to clear the areas between Makhmour and the adjacent Qayara area to the east of the Tigris River, and to cut one of the supply lines to the nearby Shirqat area.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to talk to the media.

Mosul "Iraq's second-largest city" fell to the Islamic State group during the militants' June 2014 onslaught that captured large swaths of northern and western Iraq and also neighboring Syria.

Mosul, about 360 kilometers (225 miles) northwest of Baghdad, became also the largest city in the Islamic State group's self-declared caliphate on the territories the militants control.

Rasool's declaration came only few days after the United States announced that it has set up a small Marine artillery outpost in northern Iraq to protect a nearby Iraqi military base in Makhmour "the likely staging ground for a Mosul assault, located 40 miles (67 kilometers) southeast of the city.

On Saturday, the militants fired two rockets at the base, killing a U.S. Marine and wounding several others.

Despite Thursday's announcement, the number of Iraqi troops needed to carry out the operation to retake Mosul, nearly two years after it fell to IS, is not yet in place and training efforts by the U.S.-led coalition are still ongoing.

Under political pressure to show victory, al-Abadi has repeatedly vowed to "liberate" Mosul, but U.S. Lt. Gen. Vincent Stewart, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told Congress last month that he is "not as optimistic."

Coalition and Iraqi officials estimate that an eight to 12 brigades, or an estimated 24,000 to 36,000 troops, will be needed for the Mosul operation. So far, only 2,000 to 3,000 Iraqi troops have been deployed at Makhmour base.

The Iraqi military must also clear IS fighters from more than 100 kilometers (70 miles) of territory to ensure reliable supply lines between Makhmour and Baghdad.

One leg of the Iraqi military's efforts to clear some of that territory in Anbar has been put on hold. A political crisis in Baghdad has prompted al-Abadi to pull some of Iraq's elite counterterrorism forces back from the front in the Euphrates River valley to secure the capital.

The prime minister recalled the forces after influential Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr mobilized thousands and staged a sit-in outside Baghdad's highly fortified Green Zone last week in a show of force meant to put pressure on Iraq's political leadership.

- AP