

Iraqi Special Forces enter centre of IS-held Fallujah, reclaim government compound

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Baghdad: Iraqi forces today reclaimed the government complex and a neighborhood that served as a base for the Islamic State group militants after an enormous war against the militant group.

Commander Haidar al-Obeidi of the special forces told the Associated Press that the forces are now besieging the nearby central hospital, clashing with IS snipers in adjacent buildings.

Aid groups estimate that 50,000 civilians remain trapped inside Fallujah, which has been under IS control for over two years. It is the last major city in western Iraq to be held by the extremist group.

“Iraqi forces are now in the center of the city. They had not been there since the beginning of 2014,” al-Obeidi told AP. He said IS militants “collapsed,” suggesting that most of them fled after the Iraqi forces moved in on al-Nazzal neighborhood.

The neighborhood, near the government complex, served as a base for the militants, and had weapons warehouses and command centers. When the neighborhood fell, the troops were able to move in to the city center and the government complex. He said special forces believe militants are hiding in areas nearby and the search for them continues.

He said troops entered the city center around 6 a.m. local time (0300GMT) after intense fighting with Islamic State militants and with air support from the US-led coalition and Iraqi air force. Iraqi forces are now clearing roadside bombs near the government complex, which includes the municipality offices that IS had torched, the police station and other government buildings. Troops are also clearing the highway west of the city, linking it to Baghdad, al-Obeidi said.

The United Nations has said that about 42,000 people have fled since the military operation against Fallujah began in late May. Aid groups such as Doctors Without Borders and the Norwegian Refugee Council say the number of those who have fled Fallujah is lower, closer to 30,000.

The conflict in Iraq has forced more than 3.3 million people to flee their homes. Iraq is also hosting up to 300,000 refugees who have fled the civil war in neighboring Syria. Most are living in camps or informal settlements.

- (With inputs from AP)