

## **Iraqi forces close to free 2 IS-held towns in south of Mosul**

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**Baghdad:** Iraqi security forces on Thursday were making pains to free two towns from the Islamic State (IS) militants in south of the IS stronghold in Mosul.

### **Representative Image**

As per security sources, a senior IS leader and two of his aides were killed in airstrike by the US-led coalition aircraft in south of Mosul.

The troops took control of the areas of Dawajin and Mahha in west of the IS-held town of Shirqat after the withdrawal of the IS militants, bringing the troops to new positions close to the edges of Shirqat, which located some 280 km north of Baghdad, the source told Xinhua on condition on condition of anonymity.

The security forces and allied paramilitary units, known as Hashd Shaabi, are preparing to wage an operation to liberate Shirqat soon, the source said, adding that the town is the last IS stronghold in north of Iraq's northern central province of Salahudin.

Meanwhile, the security forces fought the IS militants and drove them out of an abandoned residential district belonging to Qayyara airbase, just east of the militant-seized town of Qayyara, some 50 km south of Mosul, leaving at least 18 IS militants killed, along with destroying two car bombs and a vehicle carrying heavy machine gun, the source said.

The battle in the district brought the troops to new positions closer to the outskirts of Qayyara, and they are now ready to carry out operation to drive out IS militants from the town, the source added.

The advance toward both towns of Shirqat and Qayyara are part of a major offensive aimed at liberating the last major IS stronghold in Mosul, some 400 km north of Baghdad.

Separately, a security source in Salahudin province told Xinhua that Muwafaq Hawijah, leader of the IS group in the town of Shirqat was killed with his two aides when the international aircraft carried out an air strike on their car near the village of al-Mrear outside the town of Shirqat.

"The bodies of the IS leader and his aides were evacuated Shirqat hospital," the source said, citing intelligence report.

In addition, a roadside bomb went off near a vehicle carrying Shakir Amerli, leader of a Shiite paramilitary Hashd Shaabi paramilitary unit, near the town of Tuz-Khurmato, some 90 km east of Salahudin provincial capital city of Tikrit, killing him and one of his guards and wounding two more guards, the source added.

Iraq's security situation has drastically deteriorated since June 2014, when bloody clashes broke out between Iraqi security forces and IS militants.

The IS took control of the country's northern city of Mosul and later seized territories in Nineveh and other predominantly Sunni provinces.

A US-led international coalition has been conducting air raids against the IS targets in both Iraq and Syria.

Many blame the current chronic instability, cycle of violence, and the emergence of extremist groups, such as the IS, on

the U.S. that invaded and occupied Iraq in March 2003 under the pretext of seeking to destroy weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the country.

The war led to the ouster and eventual execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, but no WMD was found.

- (With IANS input)