

International

Anger, grief sweep Iraq's Mosul; Ferry disaster toll death hits 100

Residents demand justice; PM decrees 3 days of mourning

MOSUL: The capsizing of a Tigris River ferry packed with families celebrating Kurdish New Year in Mosul left at least 100 people dead, mostly women and children, the Iraqi interior ministry said yesterday, as grief and anger swept the city. Residents of Iraq's second city, scarred by years of jihadist rule, demanded justice as Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi decreed three days of national mourning following Thursday's accident.

Mosulites had resumed the annual festivities this year for the first time since Iraqi forces ousted the Islamic State group following years of brutal jihadist rule. But the celebrations turned to tragedy when the overcrowded vessel ran into trouble as it headed to a popular picnic site across the River Tigris. Mosul security officials blamed the accident on high water levels and overcrowding on the boat. Hundreds of relatives of victims and residents gathered Friday at the scene of the accident, where prayers were held for the dead.

Many said the disaster could have been avoided, and chanted "corruption is killing us!" "We want those responsible to be brought to justice," said Mohammed Adel, 27, whose father was among those who died. He accused officials of failing to enforce safety standards. Abu Salem, who lost his wife and two children in the accident which also coincided with Mother's Day in Iraq, pinned blame for the tragedy on profit motives and the corruption that is endemic in Iraq.

The managers of the picnic site were "criminals... I want them to pay up and I won't leave here until they do", the 50-year Iraqi said. Hundreds of demonstrators later gathered at the city's amusement park to stage an

impromptu protest against "the thieves" running the city. Reflecting the popular mood, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, spiritual leader of Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority, in his Friday sermon accused "the authorities in charge of supervision of not doing their job". Transparency International ranks Iraq in 12th place in its list of the world's most corrupt countries.

'Investigation must produce results'

Video footage from cameras at the picnic site, posted online, showed a severely overcrowded vessel beginning to list as water comes aboard. As it capsizes completely, it traps dozens of people under its hull. Authorities had warned people to be cautious after several days of heavy rains led to water being released through the Mosul dam, causing the river to rise. Videos showed a fast-flowing, bloated river and dozens of people floating in the water or trying to swim around the partly submerged boat.

Kurdish New Year celebrations turn to tragedy

Abdel Mahdi announced Friday that a crisis team was being set up, comprised of top provincial officials but not the governor of Nineveh, of which Mosul is the main city. The team would have "executive powers... to carry out an investigation as quickly as possible, punish those responsible and decide on compensation", the prime minister said. He and President Barham Saleh have visited the site of the accident as the search continued for bodies, some of which were carried far downstream by the strong current.

While war and jihadist attacks have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in Iraq in recent years, such accidents are relatively rare. But corruption and the dis-



MOSUL: Iraqi women cast flowers into the Tigris River in remembrance for the victims of the capsized ferry in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, following the incident which left at least 100 people dead. — AFP

mal state of public services in Iraq were triggers for widespread protests last year. IS turned Mosul into its de facto capital after sweeping across much of the country's north in 2014. The city spent three years under the group's iron-fisted rule until it was recaptured by Iraqi troops backed by a US-led coalition in 2017.

Survivors of Thursday's disaster were treated in hospitals heavily damaged by the months-long military

campaign against the jihadists. A mortuary was receiving bodies wrapped in white shrouds, many bearing the names of women. A forensics official said many had yet to be identified. Iraq's justice ministry said it had ordered the arrest of nine ferry company officials and banned the owners of the vessel and the picnic site from leaving the country. Officials implicated in various scandals have fled Iraq in recent years. — AFP

Does Islamic State still pose a threat?

BEIRUT: US-backed fighters say they have captured Islamic State's last shred of ground in eastern Syria - but while its era of territorial rule may be over for now, there is near-universal agreement that IS remains a threat.

What defeat accomplished

Islamic State's possession of land in Iraq and Syria set it apart from other like-minded groups such as Al-Qaeda and became central to its mission when it declared a caliphate in 2014, claiming sovereignty over all Muslim lands and peoples. The destruction of the quasi-state it built there has denied the group its most potent propaganda and recruiting tool as well as a logistical base from which it could train fighters and plan coordinated attacks overseas.

It also freed its former subjects from summary executions and draconian punishment for breaking its strict laws or, for some minorities, sexual slavery and slaughter. Warfare wiped out thousands of its fighters. And, financially, its defeat deprives it of greater resources than any modern jihadist movement has enjoyed, including taxes on its inhabitants and the proceeds of oil sales.

What threat does IS still pose?

In its previous guise as an Al-Qaeda offshoot in Iraq a decade ago, IS navigated adversity by going underground, biding its time to rise suddenly again. Since suffering devastating territorial losses in 2017, IS has steadily turned again to such tactics. Sleeper cells in Iraq have staged a scatter-gun campaign of kidnappings and killings to undermine the Baghdad government. The group has also carried out many bombings in northeast Syria, which is controlled by US-backed Kurdish forces, including one that killed four Americans in January. Kurdish and US officials say it remains a menace there.

In Syria, IS fighters still have a presence in



MOSUL: In this file photo, a Humvee passes over the body of a jihadist in west Mosul. Kurdish forces announced yesterday they had fully captured the Islamic State group's last bastion in eastern Syria and declared the total elimination of the jihadists' 'caliphate'. — AFP

sparsely populated territory west of the Euphrates River in an area otherwise held by the Syrian government. The US Pentagon's internal watchdog released a report last month saying Islamic State was regenerating functions and capabilities more quickly in Iraq than Syria. "Absent sustained (counterterrorism) pressure, ISIS could likely resurge in Syria within six to 12 months and regain limited territory," the report said.

IS leaders, fighters and followers

The fate of the IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, remains a mystery. The US government's top experts strongly believe he is alive and possibly hiding in Iraq, US sources recently said. Other top-echelon leaders have been killed in air strikes. Thousands of Islamic State insurgents and civilian followers have also been killed and thousands more captured. An unknown number remain at large in both Syria and Iraq. Iraq is putting on trial, imprisoning and often executing IS detainees.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) holds many hundreds of Islamic State fighters and followers, but the numbers have ballooned as the SDF advanced into the area near Baghouz. The SDF said over the past

two months, more than 60,000 people had left the Baghouz enclave, including 29,000 surrendering Islamic State supporters, 5,000 of whom were fighters. Many low-level local operatives have been released in Syria. The SDF complains that Western states are reluctant to take back the foreign fighters, who are widely seen as a security threat at home but who might be hard to legally prosecute.

Can IS inspire attacks overseas?

As Islamic State clung to its last scrap of land, the head of Britain's spy agency MI6 warned that the group would return to "asymmetric" attacks. Even after it began losing ground militarily, IS still claimed responsibility for attacks made in different countries, though often these have been blamed on "lone wolves" without its direction. It started years ago to call on followers abroad to plan their own attacks, rather than focusing purely on ones staged by trained operatives supported by the group's hierarchy. In early 2018 the head of US military central command said Islamic State was resilient and remained capable of "inspiring attacks throughout the region and outside of the Middle East".

At least 60 killed in Ghana bus collision

ACCRA: At least 60 people were killed on Friday in a head-on collision between two buses in Ghana, police said, in the latest deadly crash on the country's roads. Survivors of the deadly smash told rescuers the driver of one of the buses had been feeling sleepy before the crash but refused to take a break. They said they shattered the vehicle's windows and escaped with just seconds to spare before flames took hold with other passengers still inside.

The accident happened at about 2:00 am in the Bono East region, some 430 kilometers by road north of the capital, Accra. "The vehicles were travelling in separate directions when the collision occurred," police commander Joseph Antwi Gyawu said. "At least 60 people have been confirmed dead and one of the buses caught fire, with the other seriously mangled," he added. The buses were each carrying about 50 passengers at the time of the crash. One of the buses caught fire, leaving victims burned beyond recognition.

Emergency services were at the scene, including firefighters who put out the blazing vehicles, which were still smoldering hours after the crash. Video footage of the crash site indicated that one of the buses was completely gutted. The road was strewn with debris over several hundred meters. Bags and belongings of passengers from the second bus were in piles on the roadside. The side of the vehicle, which was at an angle into the embankment, appeared ripped off.

Kwame Arhin, a doctor at the Kintampo Government Hospital, said 28 people were being treated for head injuries and multiple fractures. "Seven out of the 28 passengers who were rushed here are in critical condition," he added.

Ghana's Vice-President Mahamudu Bawumia said action was required to prevent such accidents. "As a country we need to put in place appropriate measures to drastically reduce the occurrence of such mishaps," he wrote on his Twitter account. "We wish the injured speedy recovery and may the souls of the departed rest in perfect peace."

Road safety fears

The cause of the crash was yet to be established but local media said a driver of one of the vehicles lost control after falling asleep. "Some of the survivors are telling us that their driver was feeling sleepy at some point during that time of the night so he was asked to park but he refused," Kintampo fire service commander Ankomah Twene told local station TV3. "We believe it contributed to the accident," he added. A survivor, Rose Anane, said: "I was fast asleep then I heard a loud bang. We managed to break the glass and it was just a few of us - about 10 - who managed to move out. "In a matter of seconds then the vehicle went on fire with the others still trapped in the car. We watched on as the fire consumed them. It was late into the night."

The crash has renewed calls for the authorities to enforce traffic rules to reduce deaths and injuries on the country's poorly-maintained road networks. "We've been speaking to the local assembly to fix rumble strips on the road but they said this is a highway so it's not possible," said local resident Gift Mintah. Rumble strips are a noise-making safety feature that alerts drivers when their cars are at the edge of the road. "But people keep dying and for how long are we going to look on for people to keep dying?"

Crashes are common on highways in Ghana because of poor maintenance, disregard of traffic regulations and unroadworthy vehicles. An average of six people die on the roads every day, according to the Motor Transport and Traffic Directorate (MITD) of Ghana police. — AFP

Kamnan Style: Thailand 'godfathers' resurgent

CHONBURI: Itthipol Khunpleum grabs the mic, bounds onto the stage and flashes a winning smile as he works the crowd gathered for a final rally. "Chonburi... show me your hands!" he says to wild applause. But he need not have bothered. The feared and revered Khunpleums have run eastern Chonburi province for decades and - like the other 'godfathers' who preside over swathes of Thailand - carry voter loyalty wherever they go. This time the Khunpleums have thrown their lot in with Phalang Pracharat, the party of the Thai junta which is scheming a return as a civilian government after Sunday's general election.

In an unpredictable poll whose outcome

has pundits in a spin, Chonburi's eight seats could prove invaluable to a potential junta-led coalition. "We are confident of winning," Itthipol said, chuckling at the question of where the political loyalty of his family truly lies after years of taking posts in governments of all stripes. "We are on the side of the people... and not the parties who divide the people by promising democracy or dictatorship."

The Khunpleums are the source of local power in Chonburi province, southeast of the capital Bangkok. They are gatekeepers to political office, fixers of problems and businessmen whose name has been earned through cultivation of their constituents and a reputation for ruthlessness with their rivals. The smooth, US-educated Itthipol, a two-time former mayor of Thailand's boisterous sex capital Pattaya, was hired to advise the junta in early 2018, as it raced to cement pre-election alliances.

The junta installed his gruffer older brother, Sonthaya, as mayor of Pattaya, while the notorious family patriarch - nicknamed 'Kamnan Poh' - was freed early from jail on a murder conviction. The family's

vote bank is with the junta, for now. In return, the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), Thailand's biggest ever investment scheme worth nearly \$60 billion, has been signed off, promising to upgrade the Khunpleums' patch into a tech, industrial and state-of-the-art tourism hub.

'Kamnan Poh'

The Khunpleums are among the most famous of Thailand's influential families. Father Somchai - nicknamed 'Kamnan Poh', as kamnan is a term for a head of a cluster of villages - is a storied bootlegger and smuggler turned local bigwig. He carved out the family name and built a political and business empire, which sweeps in the lucrative resort town of Pattaya, visited by millions of tourists each year. "He is a real 'godfather', he does exactly what he says... he helps his people the very best he can, and he competes his hardest against his opponents," a veteran Pattaya politician told AFP, requesting anonymity. Kamnan Poh was given a 25-year sentence for masterminding the 2003 murder of one of those opponents, a business rival.



CHONBURI PROVINCE: Supporters of the Phalang Pracharat party hold placards in support of their candidates during a campaign rally in Chonburi province. — AFP

But made a dash across the Cambodian border before he could be arrested. His impunity ended in 2013 when he was caught at a tollway in Thailand. But in late

2017 as the junta came knocking for Khunpleum support, he was suddenly freed early on medical grounds. Months later his family was working for the military. — AFP