

Civilian death toll rises as fighting to retake Mosul from ISIL intensifies

Fighting between Islamic State (ISIL) forces and the Iraqi military has intensified in recent weeks as the latter has pushed towards the Old City area of Mosul, where hundreds of thousands of civilians have remained trapped in the densely populated area. The reported number of civilian deaths in the city has dramatically increased in the past two weeks. Mayor Hussein Ali Khajem [stated](#) that more than 150 people have been killed in violent clashes and airstrikes in Mosul since 20 March, including numerous women and children. Other sources put the civilian death toll even higher, reaching over 200, at least 130 of which are believed to have been killed by airstrikes on residential buildings in the New Mosul neighborhood. The Iraqi Civil Defence has reportedly pulled 136 bodies from the rubble from the same area of the city. It is unknown how many of the bodies, if any, may have been ISIL combatants.

The threat posited by airstrikes has increasingly become the most dangerous feature of the conflict for civilians in the city. Iraqi officers have reportedly [told](#) media sources that as the fighting against ISIL has increased in intensity, the US-led coalition has quickened decisions on whether to strike targets within the city. US military officials have insisted that there has been no change to the rules of engagement regarding distinction and proportionality, but have also said that US military advisers with the Iraqi forces have been given a greater unilateral ability to call in airstrikes since the beginning of the push for Mosul in December.

As more information has become available about the collapse of homes believed to have been caused by US-led coalition airstrikes on 17 March, the number of civilian casualties caused by the airstrikes has steadily risen, with some sources [estimating](#) it to be from 200 to 250. Residents have [alleged](#) that there was ample reason for both the Iraqi forces and the US-led coalition to believe there was a significant civilian presence in the area, claiming that leaflets asking civilians to stay in their homes rather than risk fleeing during the intense street-to-street fighting had been distributed. If the estimated number of civilian casualties proves to be accurate, this strike will be one of the deadliest US military strikes for civilians in Iraq since the 2003 invasion.

On Tuesday, the top US commander in Iraq [stated](#) that his initial assessment of the evidence from the incident indicated that the alleged US airstrike probably had a role in the building collapse and the resulting civilian deaths, but also said his personal impression was that ISIL had at least some role in the casualties. He also insisted that [further](#) investigation is needed. Several conflicting reports of the incident [blamed](#) ISIL for the casualties, with some alleging the blast that leveled the building was a result of an ISIL truck-bomb or from IED booby-traps. Others have suggested it was the result of compounding actions by the conflict forces. ISIL has also been accused of forcing civilians into the building and intentionally provoking the airstrike.

The Islamic State's use of civilians in Mosul as human shields has been well documented, and has [prompted](#) UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, to condemn the group as "cowardly and disgraceful." Civilians have also been killed and wounded by ISIL booby-traps, IEDs, shelling, and snipers. The High Commissioner noted that due to the known use of civilians as human shields by ISIL, the use of airstrikes on ISIL positions carries the potential for a disproportionately lethal impact on civilians. As a result, the High Commissioner called on the Iraqi military and its US-led coalition allies to reconsider their tactics in order to ensure the risk to civilians is reduced to the absolute minimum in accordance with international law, particularly as the fighting draws closer to the most densely populated areas of the city.

Source for above photo of civilians awaiting the distribution of aid in Mosul: Ivor Prickett/The New York Times

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Burma/Myanmar:

The United Nations Human Rights Council [adopted](#) a resolution on 24 March regarding the ongoing human rights crisis in Burma. The resolution, among other things,

[dispatched](#)

"an independent, international fact-finding mission" to investigate the serious human rights violations that allegedly have taken place in Burma at the hands of the military and security

forces, particularly those in Rakhine State. The resolution stressed the need for sexual and gender-based violence experts to be included in the mission. Moreover, it extended the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma for one more year. The Burmese government is [opposed](#) to the resolution's operative paragraph dispatching the fact-finding mission within the country, as well as the resolution in general.

Burundi:

Several non-governmental organizations within Burundi have [called](#) for an immediate end to the alleged human rights violations occurring within the country. The group of NGOs, including the Human Rights Defenders of Burundi (DDH) through its SOS-Torture campaign, has claimed that law enforcement officers have conducted several extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and torture, and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment of citizens. In addition, human rights activists have [insisted](#) that there has been a recent upsurge in political and ethnic violence in Burundi. The Collective of Lawyers of civil parties and victims' families of human violations in Burundi reportedly [submitted](#) 124 new individual complaints to the International Criminal Court (ICC) against the government of Burundi regarding specific allegations of human rights abuses on Monday. The organization also submitted a collective mandate regarding general "crimes committed by the Government," which was signed by over 400 families accusing the government of committing human rights abuses against their relatives.

A civil society organization collective named "Halte au Troisième Mandat" ("Halt to the Third Term") is [continuing](#) its campaign against President Nkurunziza's third term, which surpasses the constitutionally mandated two-term limit for presidents. On 26 March, the collective released a statement to the press in which they insisted "terror and resignation are progressively taking hold in Burundi" as a direct result of the government's "bloody repression" of their protests.

Central African Republic:

Armed groups [attacked](#) at least three villages in the central Bambari region of CAR this week, where a contingent of the UN peacekeeping force is based. The attacks resulted in the deaths of 50 people and have left several more injured. The Unity of African People, a faction of the mainly Muslim Seleka movement, has been accused of perpetrating the attack, although the UAF denies involvement. Such raids are remnants of the civil war in CAR and are indicative of the CAR government's inability to effectively transition to peace.

Cote d'Ivoire:

On 24 March, the UN peacekeeping chief, Herve Ladsous, [said](#) he expects peacekeeping operations in Cote d'Ivoire to end by March of 2018. That same week, it was reported that former Ivorian First Lady, Simone Gbagbo, was

[acquitted](#) of committing crimes against humanity by Cote d'Ivoire's high court. Human Rights Watch asserted that the decision highlights the flaws of the country's judicial process and further emphasizes the importance of the International Criminal Court's continuing case against her regarding similar crimes during the 2011 post-election crisis.

DPRK:

On 24 March, the United Nations Human Rights Council [adopted](#) a resolution addressing the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. This echoes the statement of Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson during the Council meeting in which the resolution was adopted, where Mr. Eliasson explicitly

[stated](#) that both the DPRK and the international community as a whole have the "responsibility to protect [DPRK's] population from the most serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights." Furthermore, the resolution strengthened the capacity of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Seoul, which continues to monitor human rights abuses within DPRK. The improvements to the Seoul office include the

[addition](#) of international criminal justice experts, whose specific function will be developing plans for the future prosecution of DPRK leaders and officials responsible for human rights crimes. Finally,

the resolution extended the mandate of the Special Rapporteur of the situation of human rights in the DPRK for an additional year.

Democratic Republic of Congo:

Violence has continued to [escalate](#) this past weekend in Kasai, a notably poor and remote region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as 42 police officers were decapitated by the regional militia group Kamuina Nsapu. Instances of both armed violence and political tensions within the country have been increasing at an alarming rate.

On 28 March, Congolese police [used](#) tear gas and opened fire into the air in order to scatter hundreds of opposition supporters in Kinshasa. The demonstrators had formed public protests after talks between President Joseph Kabila's government and the opposition party collapsed. Many critics insist President Kabila has intentionally delayed the country's elections in order to remain in power. The event has escalated tensions within the country, raising the possibility of renewed violence.

On 29 March, the UN [announced](#) that bodies discovered recently in Kasai are in fact the two missing UN staff recently kidnapped in the DRC, along with the body of their Congolese interpreter. The staff members were investigating large-scale human rights violations in the region. Ida Sawyer, Central African director at Human Rights Watch, said the disappearances reflect the violence currently going on in the Kasai region of DRC. The UN will launch an investigation into the killings and [urges](#) the Congolese government to do so as well.

Mali:

The main faction of Tuareg-led rebels in Mali and other opposition groups [declared](#) their intention to boycott talks with the government on 1 April concerning the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. On Tuesday, some of the groups [agreed](#) to take part after receiving additional assurances from the government. It is unknown if the rest of the opposition intends to do the same.

Medecin Sans Frontieres (MSF) has [released](#) a new report that is highly critical of the politicization of humanitarian aid by several domestic and international actors in Mali. The incorporation of humanitarian aid into the country's political and security efforts is seen by many groups as promoting the government's political agenda, and therefore, MSF has [warned](#) that there may be risks to doing so. Particularly, aid could be rejected by these opposition groups and, as a result, humanitarian organizations could be attacked if they are seen as partisan forces. MSF has argued that the common practice of using of armed escorts by humanitarian workers and the use of civilian vehicles by the military aggravate the risk of these attacks occurring, further hindering the delivery of the much needed aid in the country.

Nigeria:

In a move [believed](#) to be aimed at winning grassroots trust and support, a Boko Haram faction in northeast Nigeria has reportedly vowed not to harm civilians so long as they do not cooperate with state security forces. However, numerous witnesses have reported that Boko Haram has continued to kill civilians. The group [remains](#) a threat to civilians, contrary to the government's claims that the group was "technically defeated" in Nigeria. Furthermore, unstable and lethal explosive devices from previous clashes between the military and Boko Haram continue to plague the Nigerian countryside.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has [called](#) on the Nigerian authorities to take more action in rescuing the hundreds of children that have been abducted and continue to be held captive by Boko Haram. In particular, HRW has called on the government to publicly acknowledge the 501 missing children abducted from Damasak two years ago when the Nigerian military and their Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) pushed Boko Haram out of the town. As the abductions have never been publicly acknowledged by the government, it is not believed that any concerted action has been taken to rescue them.

South Sudan:

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and the Ugandan government jointly [urged](#) the international community for large-scale and immediate support for the thousands of South

Sudanese refugees who continue to arrive in Uganda every day. In addition, after UN Secretary-General Guterres urged South Sudan to prioritize the needs of its people, the country's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Joseph Moum Majak Ngor Malok, reassured the Security Council that his government would cooperate with the UN to resolve the issues affecting his country. However, mass displacement in the country has continued as the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) initially [estimated](#) 60,000 South Sudanese refugees would flee the country in 2017, but this estimate has been exceeded in the first three months of 2017 alone. The UNHCR anticipates even more refugees this year.

The Sudanese government is due to [open](#) a new humanitarian corridor to deliver food assistance to the people of South Sudan. At this time, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been [dropping](#) tons of food to aid thousands of displaced citizens and their communities. The South Sudanese Red Cross is on the ground helping to distribute the supplies. Unfortunately, an aid worker expressed his concern that even if citizens had money to buy food, they would not be able to use this money in the current situation. As a result, airdrops have been the only option in some regions, such as Maar in the Jonglei Province.

The UN [called](#) for an open investigation for the six aid workers that were [ambushed](#) and killed in South Sudan on Saturday. The UN Children's Agency (UNICEF) [stated](#) it is in shock following the killing of the aid workers. The workers were from UNICEF's partner organization, the Grassroots Empowerment and Development Organization (GREDO), which works "to support children released from armed groups." Aid agencies say that humanitarian aid in South Sudan could be [delayed](#) due to the attack of these six aid workers.

According to the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, sexual violence in the country has [reached](#) "epic proportions." Regional leaders [issued](#) a joint statement expressing concern over the humanitarian crisis and urging the parties to stop hostilities.

South Sudanese rebels loyal to former First Vice President Riek Machar have [claimed](#) they have captured the Kajo-Keji county headquarters in Yei River state after clashing with government troops and killing 14 soldiers. The Eastern Africa's Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has [condemned](#) the proliferation of armed groups in South Sudan and called upon these groups to renounce violence as a means to solve the issues in the country. The South Sudanese government has [rejected](#) the participation of troops from countries outside the region in the regional protection forces. However, President Salva Kiir has [accepted](#) the call for a unilateral ceasefire.

Sudan:

Clashes between militia and state security personnel have [continued](#) in Sudan, as well as violent crimes like murder, robbery, kidnapping, and rampant sexual assault and gender-based violence. Clashes in North Darfur [resulted](#) in the death of a police officer and the injuring of six others last Saturday. Additionally, on 27 March, militiamen [attacked](#) and robbed a group of mourners while traveling between the North Darfur capital of El Fasher and the town of Tawila.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) [urged](#) Jordan this week to either deny entry or arrest President Omar al-Bashir prior to his entry to the country for the Arab League meeting on Wednesday. Despite the warnings from HRW and other organizations that failure to arrest Bashir would be a violation of their obligations under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Jordan [became](#) the most recent ICC member state to fail to arrest Omar al-Bashir when he entered their sovereign territory. Bashir has two outstanding warrants issued by the ICC for a total of eight counts of atrocity crimes, including three counts of genocide. Representatives for South Africa are [expected](#) to appear before the Court next Friday to account for their government's failure to arrest Bashir when he entered South Africa in June 2015 to attend a summit of the African Union. The lawyers for the South African government are expected to submit arguments against a finding of non-compliance.

The UN Secretary-General's recent [report](#) on children in armed conflict in Sudan, which was [released](#) last Friday, has found that the numbers of children recruited into the conflict by the warring parties decreased in the most recent reporting period. However, the report also noted that children are still killed, injured, and victimized by sexual violence and exploitation as result of the conflict. During the reporting period from March 2011 to December 2016, roughly 1,300 children were killed or maimed as result of the conflict, mostly in Darfur. Darfur was also an area of high occurrence of sexual violence and exploitation against children, with at least 372 victims during the same period.

Burkina Faso has announced it will be [withdrawing](#) its 850 troops currently serving with the UN mission in Darfur (UNAMID). The Sudanese government will reportedly be paying for the costs of the withdrawal, according to a statement delivered by the Foreign Minister of Sudan.

Syria:

On Sunday, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [announced](#) they had captured the Tabqa airbase west of Raqqa from the Islamic State (ISIL), resulting in the first major victory for the Kurdish group.

As the fifth round of peace talks resumed in Geneva, opposition forces [launched](#) the biggest offensive in the last 18 months against the Syrian army in Damascus and north of Hama. The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

[reported](#) that several clashes were ongoing in the countryside north of the city, where government forces were trying to retake territory. In Geneva, the Syrian opposition's chief negotiator in the talks, Nasr al-Hariri, accused the government of not being committed to peace because several civilian buildings have been targeted by the State air force since the beginning of the last round of talks. Consequently, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura,

[admitted](#) that he is not expecting breakthroughs, but all parties have at least agreed upon the agenda, which is a mark of progress in itself. On 29 March, the Syrian opposition and a senior Russian diplomat

[agreed](#) upon the need to stabilize the fragile ceasefire implemented on 30 December 2016. Cessation of hostilities is seen as crucial to any hope of progress in the Geneva peace talks. However, as bloodshed in the country continues, Western diplomats are skeptical about any practical outcome the talks could reach.

Meanwhile, as fighting intensifies, the UN [said](#) around 300,000 people are in dire need of humanitarian assistance in Damascus. "Starvation is just around the corner," affirmed UN humanitarian adviser on Syria Jan Egeland, adding that civilians have not received any supplies at the hands of the UN since October in Douma, and not since June of last year in the Kafr Batna area.

The UN has [estimated](#) that nearly 40,000 civilians, mostly women and children, have been displaced over the past week by fighting to the northwest of the Syrian city of Hama. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said that people have begun to flee Hama and the districts of Homs, Latakia, and Tartous. On Thursday, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) [reported](#) that the number of Syrian refugees now exceeds 5 million, while he also estimated that 6.3 million people are internally displaced. Turkey hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees, numbering nearly 3 million people.

Yemen:

Human Rights Watch (HRW) [released](#) a report on Sunday [arguing](#) that a recent attack on a refugee boat off the coast of Yemen, which resulted in the deaths of around 40 people, likely constitutes a war crime. HRW also noted that the Saudi-led coalition is the only party to the conflict with access to the military aircraft allegedly used in the attack. The report was also critical of the system for investigations established by the Saudi-led coalition and expressed doubt that the inquiry requested by Somalia, an ally of the coalition, will have meaningful results. HRW has reportedly documented 62 unlawful airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition that are believed to have killed nearly 900 civilians in total. It is unknown what impact this event will have on the decision the US government is [expected](#) to soon make on a proposal to increase its intelligence and logistical support for the Saudi-led coalition.

Residents in Taiz [reported](#) on Sunday that a girl was killed by a Houthi sniper in the eastern portion of the city where clashes between government and rebel forces have already killed dozens. President Hadi has reportedly declared that 80% of Yemen is now under his government's control and that the offensive against the Houthis will continue until they are forced to the negotiating table. The contested port city of Hodeidah remains the Houthis' last stronghold position and the primary target of the government and Saudi-led coalition's offensive.

On Thursday, the UN Special envoy for Yemen [urged](#) the UN Security Council to apply pressure on all parties in the conflict in Yemen to engage in diplomatic and political negotiations to end the ongoing bloodshed. The past week [marked](#) the second anniversary of the beginning of the Saudi-led bombing campaign in the Yemeni conflict. UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien released a statement marking the anniversary in which he [said](#) that the thousands of civilians killed in the conflict, including over 1,400 children, shows "the magnitude of the tragedy unfolding in Yemen." Mr. O'Brien went on to discuss the looming man-made famine in the country and the need of two-thirds of the Yemeni population for humanitarian aid. Mr. O'Brien [called](#) on all parties to the conflict to start a political dialogue to prevent the imminent humanitarian catastrophe.

The UN children's agency (UNICEF) also [released](#) a report marking the second year of the escalated conflict in which it noted that there has been a markable increase in the number of girls forced into child marriages in Yemen since the conflict escalated. UNICEF estimates that now more than two-thirds of girls are married off before the age of 18 in Yemen and that more

that 44% of girls and women are married under the age of 15 in some parts of the country.

The UN has begun to [look](#) for alternative ports to deliver vital food and medicine to Yemen should Hodeidah come under attack. The UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, Jamie McGoldrick, has said that despite the urgency for the 17 million Yemenis facing imminent famine conditions, humanitarian access has been hampered by a massive funding gap of over \$2 billion USD, as well as by the intense fighting along the western coast. The International Committee of the Red Cross estimated that the international community has, at most, three to four months to save two-thirds of Yemen's population from starvation.

[According](#) to the Norwegian Refugee Council, 17 million Yemenis live in a state of severe food insecurity as result of "ruthless war tactics against civilians by both parties to the conflict." This figure is equal to about two-thirds of the entire country's population.
