

Mosul strike survivors: 'There were pieces of bodies'

Dozens of civilians died in a recent coalition strike aimed at killing an ISIL commander in Mosul, residents say.

Al Jazeera, March 27, 2017 by John Beck

Mosul, Iraq - It was just past 8pm on January 11 when an air strike killed Ebtisam Ataallah's neighbours.

The intermittent electricity had come on a few minutes earlier - a rarity in the al-Amel district of ISIL-held western Mosul - so Ataallah, 44, had begun baking bread in a corner of their courtyard. Her four children remained indoors.

Two large blasts in quick succession knocked her to the ground, filling the air with dust, rubble and confusion. Inside the house, an external wall collapsed on top of her 16-year-old son Imran where he slept. He awoke covered in bricks and screaming, his leg badly broken.

In the now ruined room above him lay the body of a man thrown clear of the adjacent building by the impact, a young girl miraculously still alive in his arms.

Zaidan, 55, was having dinner with his family a street away when he heard the blasts. He rushed to the scene with his brother and two younger cousins.

"When we got there, we heard women and children screaming under the rubble," the silver-haired 55-year-old, who declined to provide his last name, told Al Jazeera. "So, we went to help."

As he extricated a young girl and took her to a nearby house, a third air strike hit, landing on top of the rescuers. His brother and one cousin were killed, and another cousin, 19, was injured. Zaidan eventually found the top half of his brother's corpse in the grounds of a school one block over; his legs were tangled in the remains of an awning over the Ataallah's house.

At least six households were wiped out in the strike, according to a number of witnesses. Those who combed the rubble for bodies said that they found the remains of 37 people, mostly women and children. They recognised all but two. A photograph said to be from the scene circulated by local activists showed a dusty, blood-covered baby wrapped in a red blanket.

All of the interviewees believed the target of the attack was Harbi Abdel Qader, a commander with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group (ISIL, also known as ISIS) - but added that he escaped unharmed in the few minutes before the third explosion.

The substantial death toll in al-Amel was uncovered at a time when civilian casualties from both air strikes and Iraqi shelling appear to be mounting in west Mosul, amid international pressure for a swift resolution to the six-month-old operation to retake the city from ISIL.

On Friday, the US military said that its aircraft were involved in strikes on a nearby neighbourhood that residents said had killed as many as 200 people. Iraqi forces were still concentrating on clearing the armed group from the eastern half of the city in January, but civilian casualties due to air strikes were already being reported in the densely populated western parts of the city.

Now, as government forces push ISIL back still further, some of these blast sites are becoming accessible, including al-Amel, which was only cleared in mid-March.

The scene of the attack is still pure devastation. Individual houses have been reduced to twisted concrete and debris dotted with blankets and tattered items of clothing scattered throughout.

The US-led international anti-ISIL coalition has conducted hundreds of air strikes in support of the Mosul offensive, while the Iraqi air force has carried out its own, more limited operations.

A spokesperson for the coalition acknowledged reports of air strikes in Mosul resulting in civilian casualties on January 11 and 12, noting that while coalition forces "work diligently to be precise", the January strike would be investigated further.

Coalition and Iraqi forces are required to operate under strict rules of engagement aimed at minimising civilian casualties. The coalition estimates that, as of March 4, 220 non-combatants have died in strikes it carried out since the international campaign against ISIL in Iraq and Syria began in 2014. Independent monitoring group Airwars suggests the figure is far higher, with as many as a thousand claimed deaths reported this month alone.

In al-Amel, residents said that, besides Qader and a low-ranking ISIL member, none of those who lived in the bombed area had any links to ISIL. Ataallah's neighbour, Ali Khalat, moved there seven years earlier with his wife, children and grandchildren. They ran a small shop from their home and the older men drove a taxi to supplement their income.

It was Ahmed Khalat, one of Ali's sons, who was blasted into the Ataallah's home holding one of his daughters. She, along with her sister and brother, were the only survivors.

The two families were not close, but neighbourly, and the Khalats were well-thought-of in the area. "They were good people and they were taking care of each other," Ataallah recalled.

At least five other civilian households were hit in the same strike. All were killed. The dead included Namis Salem Khadar, his wife Suha, and their two children, Sara and Sidra. The family can be seen in a picture recovered from the site dated June 4, 2012.

Apparently taken at a fairground, it shows Namis sitting on one end of a bench in a crisp white thawb and Suha perched on the other, wisps of brown hair escaping from a patterned headscarf. Sara stands between them, a small girl in red and white dress gazing solemnly at the camera.

Rakan Sukur, 48, was among those who helped to recover bodies from the rubble and line them up outside the house for collection by family members. A grey-haired man with prominent features and a black moustache. It was he who retrieved the family photo albums.

"You can't imagine how I suffered to find these," he said, describing how he darted in to grab them as heavy machinery worked to remove chunks of masonry. "There were pieces [of bodies] there, too."

He and others were sure that Qader was not among the dead. The stocky, grey-bearded ISIL commander, who, in the neighbourhood, was said to have been an air force pilot under Saddam Hussein's regime, was familiar to them and had even attempted to recruit local men.

"He used to come to the mosque and speak to us, encouraging all to fight," Zaidan added.

Last week, Iraqi special forces were still battling ISIL just 200 metres from the scene of the al-Amel strike. Bullets cracked overhead with great frequency, punctuated by the sporadic boom of artillery shells. The fight centred on a graveyard where some of the dead from the January strike had been buried.

Ataallah's family has replaced the broken walls and windows of their home with stacks of breeze blocks that once made up their neighbours' homes. It is a precaution against mortars, two of which landed in their courtyard recently, leaving black marks and shattered tiles.

Her son, Imran, still hobbles around on crutches. The room where he was buried for a time is still just rubble, and he points to the blanket that he was under when it happened.

"I had one breath there. I used it to shout," he recalled. In a cast, his broken leg appears dark and swollen, and he dabs a handkerchief at an infected eye that will not stop watering.

The family has little doubt as to what happened and who is responsible.

"We know what an air strike sounds like," said 25-year-old Radwan, Ataallah's eldest son. Seconds later, a jet called in by special forces roared overhead, reportedly to bomb an ISIL target a few blocks away.

Comprehending why is harder. "They killed most of our neighbourhood for one ISIL member and they didn't even get him," Ataallah said despairingly. "I don't understand it."

Battle for Mosul: ISIL's innocent victims

Iraqi medics on Mosul frontline say growing proportion of the patients they treat are non-combatants.

Al Jazeera, November 21, 2016 by John Beck

Al-Samah, near Mosul - Four men clung to the black Humvee as it careered toward the east Mosul field hospital. Anguish marked their faces, blood stained their clothes and they cradled between them the broken frames of two slightly built boys - victims of a mortar strike minutes earlier.

A crowd rushed forward to meet the vehicle, helping to lift the casualties on to stretchers under a shroud of settling dust. Matham, 15, was unresponsive - head back, mouth open, gaze unfocused - and an ugly red stain had soaked through his clothes at the neck. A medic placed him on a stretcher, examined his wounds and put two fingers on his carotid artery, searching for a pulse.

The 12-year-old Mohammed lay on a nearby cot. He was conscious, but his right leg was torn open from ankle to groin and dangled sickeningly. A crowd of doctors cut away his trousers then applied a tourniquet to halt the massive blood loss.

He called weakly for his mother as they worked then closed his eyes. "Is he breathing?" someone asked urgently. "Is. He. Breathing?" A few seconds later, the boy groaned, asked for water, then lay with his head tilted sideways staring at the sky.

A middle-aged woman in a white headscarf and black polka dot dress skirted the clinic wall and rushed frantically forward, calling the younger boy's name. Male relatives intercepted her a few metres from the cot, took an arm each and coaxed her away.

She turned her head as she walked, looking back at a scene that has become increasingly common as civilian casualties of the month-long offensive to retake Mosul from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) continue to mount.

The military-run field hospital is the forwardmost facility along this front. It's set up outside a battle-scarred house in the city's al-Samah district: 10 dark green cots folded out on the irregular ground of a compound still littered with spent bullet casings. It smells of dust, cigarettes and smoke from burning piles of used bandages and gauze. Supplies are piled on the back of pickups.

A team of more than 20 Iraqi and foreign volunteer medics take shifts treating as many as 50

casualties every day. The priority is to stop bleeding and stabilise patients to the point that they can be sent on to better-equipped facilities in IDP camps, army bases or the nearby city of Erbil.

Gogjali was only recently cleared of ISIL fighters and a large military presence remains in the area. But there are civilians too. Some preferred to stay in their homes regardless of the fighting and now sit on doorsteps cautiously chatting and smoking.

Many more arrive every day from further into Mosul, trudging along roads or barren hillsides holding white flags and battered suitcases, then converging on an Iraqi army gathering point opposite the clinic. There they are ushered on to trucks and taken to recently constructed camps on the Erbil road.

There had been a run of military and civilian casualties that day, but the afternoon brought respite. The medics relaxed in the last of the sun, lounging on plastic chairs or with their backs to a breeze block wall.

Regular outgoing artillery fire from a nearby battery punctuated the murmur of conversation, as it had done for hours. No one appeared to notice. Then came the crash of a mortar landing nearby and another quickly afterwards. The hospital crew looked up as black smoke rose a few hundred metres beyond the compound wall.

The shells had torn into Matham and Mohammed as the two, who had been neighbours, made their way towards the IDP assembly point with their families.

A nearby squad from the elite Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) hauled the boys on to their Humvee hood, one of the soldiers helping three family members to hold them as it sped the short distance to the clinic.

It was quickly apparent that Matham had died from his wounds by the time they arrived. A burly, goateed medic gently closed the boy's eyelids and covered his face with a blood-soaked jumper. Two black uniformed CTS soldiers then unfolded a light grey body bag on the ground next to the stretcher. Matham had been small for his age and it only took one to move him.

His father rushed over as they begin to zip up the bag, dropped to his knees and kissed his son's cheek again and again, collapsing on top of him. A doctor carefully pulled him back, while the soldier and a relative placed the body on the ground next to an ambulance. His silver-haired grandfather and two other relatives crouched there among empty water bottles and discarded food containers, sobbing.

A small boy from the house next door to the clinic sat on top of the wall and watched, expressionless.

Meanwhile, Mohammed had been stabilised and what was left of his leg bandaged up. Medics moved him to an orange-framed stretcher and into a waiting ambulance that bounced off along the irregular road. No one seemed sure whether he'd live, and even if he did, his leg would likely have to be amputated, an American volunteer who'd treated him said.

Having done all that they could, the clinic staff relaxed again, even posing for a smiling picture with a news crew security guard who'd arrived with a leg wound shortly after the boys.

A few metres away, Matham's grandfather opened the bag a few inches to say a final goodbye. The sturdily built patriarch stared for a moment then cried and cried, eventually collapsing back cross-legged, where he remained, crippled by grief, with one hand over his face.

These kinds of injuries are distressingly typical, said clinic head Colonel Khalil Jawad Kadim. "We

see gunshot wounds, head wounds, amputations and shrapnel in all parts of body," he explained, perched on a lawn chair during a quiet moment. Kadim, a small man with a soft handshake and hint of grey moustache, added that recent days had been some of the worst he's seen in his 26-year medical career.

A colleague, Captain Ala, who worked in similar field hospitals during previous battles against ISIL, added that ISIL fighters were desperately defending the only major Iraqi urban centre still under their control.

"This is more difficult than Ramadi and those areas," he said, referring to offensives in Anbar province. "[ISIL] know it is their last land, so they are trying their best to kill as many as possible."

Commanders reported there were no major operations taking place that day, but fighting further into Mosul was still heavy. Around noon a radio crackled with the news of an ISIL suicide car bomb attack. A Humvee roared up soon afterwards with a casualty lying across the back seat.

A medic examined him as others rushed to prepare a stretcher. "No," he yelled, urgency suddenly evaporated. "We need a body bag."

Sergeant Ali Jafar arrived later with bullet fragments in his arm from clashes in Mosul's al-Zahra, formerly known as Saddam district. He chatted to medics as they probed and washed out his wound using iodine solution from a water bottle, grimacing only when they tightened his bandage, then quickly breaking into a smile.

ISIL have been fighting hard, Jafar said. Their typical tactics involve teams four or five strong employing sniper rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars from inside densely populated areas, sometimes even using the roofs of inhabited homes as firing positions.

Worse still were the suicide car bombs, he said, describing an incident the previous day when his squad had been forced to use their own Humvee as a barrier to stop one advancing.

His commander, Captain Sarmad al-Saadi, derided ISIL's methods as cowardly. "They only use suicide attacks," he said lighting up a slim cigarette.

Iraqi commanders stress that they are doing everything possible to avoid civilian casualties, but Ala, the medic, says that a growing proportion of the patients they treat are non-combatants.

The danger is not only of stray bullets or bombs. Both soldiers and civilians describe ISIL targeting residents attempting to flee. "They are doing that every day," Saadi says. "They want everyone to stay as a human shield."

Recent victims included three-year-old Jawahar, a tiny, curly-haired girl in a red top who'd been hit in the foot with bullet fragments. Her uncle, Ahmed, said that they'd joined a large group attempting to move towards the relative safety of the Iraqi army in al-Zahra when ISIL fired on them from the other end of the street, hitting several people.

"[ISIL] are shooting people who try to leave," he said. "They think we are unbelievers going to the land of unbelievers."

Iraqi troops are still fighting on Mosul's outer edges, but as they push deeper into the city against determined and ruthless resistance, hundreds of thousands more civilians are expected to be displaced.

With few ways out that don't involve a gauntlet of violence, medics at the frontlines expect many more Mohammeds and Mathams to come.

Iraq's Yazidis living in fear on Mount Sinjar

Two years after ISIL massacres, the ancient Yazidi religious minority remains on the mountain where they fled.

Al Jazeera, July 26, 2016 by John Beck

Guley can see her village from Mount Sinjar. It isn't far - a short drive down twisting roads into the dusty plains below - but beyond reach, and for almost two years she's been unable to return.

Her family was among the hundreds of thousands who fled as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) swept across northern Iraq's Sinjar region in August 2014 and captured the town of the same name.

Civilians rarely escape the group's notorious cruelty, but as members of the ancient Yazidi religious minority, they had particular reason to fear. ISIL considers the sect heretical "devil worshippers" to be either captured, converted, or executed.

ISIL came in the early hours of August 3, a large force strengthened by weaponry plundered from the Iraqi army, and a reputation as unstoppable killers. They advanced swiftly through the darkness and encountered little resistance.

By morning Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in the area had retreated in disarray, leaving civilians unprotected. In the panic that followed, Guley gathered her five daughters and three sons then made a dash for the mountain's jagged ridge.

Many weren't quick or lucky enough to follow. ISIL slaughtered entire villages, killing at least 5,000 Yazidi men and boys and abducting as many as 7,000 women and girls as sex slaves. It was a methodical campaign of murder, rape, and slavery that UN investigators said in June amounted to genocide.

More than 40,000 people traced Guley's route to high ground, but it offered little sanctuary. Without supplies or shelter in the intense summer heat, starvation and dehydration killed dozens. ISIL continued to advance on the desperate group, almost completely encircling them as poorly equipped local men fought a rear-guard action to block the road and save their families.

The plight of Sinjar's Yazidis became global news. American, British, Australian and Iraqi aircraft dropped aid, while US jets began bombing ISIL positions in an attempt to halt the onslaught and avert a humanitarian disaster. Guerrilla fighters from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its Syrian affiliate the YPG, meanwhile, broke through ISIL lines to open a safe passage from the mountain.

Help came too late for Guley's youngest child, a girl. She died on the hillside for want of food and water and was buried there.

Today the mother of seven remains. Thousands of others do too in a sprawling mass of tents made or amended with old tarps, carpets, blankets, wood and corrugated iron in the valleys below the peak. Outside many are in the vehicles their owners escaped in: ubiquitous Opel saloons, rusted tractors, and battered mopeds. Others still litter the steep road leading up from the town's northern edge, abandoned when they could go no further.

Guley told her story outside a toy-strewn tent, bare feet planted in the dirt as a warm breeze plucked strands of her henna-dyed hair from beneath a black headscarf. Two strikingly blonde toddlers hid among the folds of her floral patterned purple dress, while older children played nearby. She wasn't sure where they'd next get food from, but despite the hardship, was

determined not to stray far from her former home.

"We cannot go back, but we will stay here," she said twirling the silver rings on her finger. "It is our land and it is better for us than anything else."

Sinjar town is now free, at least in name. A Peshmerga-led offensive backed by American air support retook it last November to widespread celebration. But it's badly damaged and ISIL fighters are still close, so for now many of its former residents live where they fled.

While garrisoned largely by the Peshmerga and therefore under Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) control, Sinjar remains technically within Baghdad's mandate, so is isolated and accessible only by a road that runs along the Syrian border a few hundred metres from mounds of earth shoring up Sykes-Picot.

The flags fluttering above a series of bases and checkpoints lining the route signal the different groups that hold power here. The KRG's sun-centred tricolour alternates with the PKK's red star pennant and the golden wing insignia of its Yazidi offshoot, the YBS.

Livelihoods are hard to come by on the mountain. Young boys tend small herds of goats and sheep grazing in the dry scrub or picking through piles of rubbish. A few fields are cultivated and sporadic breezeblock shops sell fruit and vegetables alongside, soap and cans of warm soda. One man now repairs ancient engine parts in a mechanic's shop made partly from a UN tent.

It's hard to see a future. Near the top of a mountain, a group of youths in a mix of traditional clothing and football strips crowded around a sturdy pool table in a wood framed tent floored with baked mud and cigarette butts.

"Life is hard there's nothing here," said Zeydan, a sparse-moustached teenager slouched on a block of metal chairs lifted from a waiting room. "But we can't go back," interjected a friend. "There are [ISIL] mortars every day."

There isn't much to go back to. Liberation was desperately costly and Sinjar itself is now between 60 percent and 80 percent destroyed, KRG officials say. Parts of the northern old town and market district were hit hardest in the fighting and are little more than piles of stone and shattered concrete studded with twisted rebar.

Even buildings in less devastated quarters are blackened, battle scarred or half collapsed. Looters have stripped them of anything of value; doors, windows and even kitchen cabinets.

About 200 ISIL members from Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Turkey were based here, the local Kurdish security forces, known as asayish, say. Signs of their occupation are still visible; spray-painted flags adorn walls, documents are scattered outside buildings used as offices, and entrances to tunnels where fighters holed up open out of the rubble. One begins in the corner of the ruined market area and contains patterned mattresses and pillows alongside small hi-fi speakers.

Some buildings reek of death. Human remains are strewn around inside one. "Daesh" said an asayish member spitting towards a withered hand emerging from a bundle of winter jackets, and a shinbone clinging with flesh encased in a woollen sock.

ISIL left behind IEDs too, and in large numbers. A bomb disposal unit operating in the town have removed several tonnes of TNT, they said, but still have work to do.

The fighters didn't retreat far and still hold a string of villages just 4.5km south of Sinjar's outskirts. From there, they regularly target the town with mortars and rocket fire. Some days all is quiet. On others a dozen land. The attacks are haphazard but have been lethal.

A police officer was killed recently and two others injured in a separate attack, asayish Major Mohammed Amin said, adding that some of the rockets were thought to have contained locally manufactured chemical agents.

"Sinjar is still the front line between the KRG and ISIL... The area is still not so safe and ISIL are not so far," Amin said, perched on a floral blanket-covered bed in the office turned sleeping quarters his men set up in a largely undamaged house.

Like many asayish members, he's from Sinjar and took part in the fight to liberate it. He was here, too, when ISIL first came and vividly remembers the confusion and alarm.

"We just heard that people were fleeing their villages and going to the mountain," he said drawing on a slim cigarette and raising his voice over the sporadic rattling of a bulky air conditioning unit cranked in an open window. "It's still like a nightmare... I don't know how to explain it to you."

The town is largely controlled by Peshmerga and asayish, but PKK-related factions have a significant presence too. They also took part in the offensive to retake the town and played a pivotal role, commanders say, although the official KRG line denies their involvement.

Tensions between the two have been mounting in recent months. But in the town at least, the guerrillas seem to largely keep to static positions, occasionally exchanging a nod or wave with KRG forces as they pass.

To the southeast is a front-line position held by Peshmerga forces rotated in from Erbil. It's static and dug in, but regular ISIL shelling has become part of the day's cadence. "This is the time for mortars," one fighter said gesturing at the sunset on a recent evening. "They come now and in the morning".

The attacks are hard to counter, he adds, as ISIL employs truck-mounted weapons that move into position, fire, then quickly relocate.

The group also launches sporadic suicide strikes with armoured, explosive-packed vehicles, one of which left a large blackened crater just a few metres in front of the well-fortified Peshmerga. Key to countering them are German supplied MILAN guided missiles, and coalition air strikes, which section commander Werya Ziarati said both saved "a great number of lives".

Nevertheless, over a hurried dinner of rice and beans just after dusk, he complained that his men are short on weapons, ammunition and equipment.

The front extends westward a little way out of town, large berms cutting through unkempt fields filled with birdsong. The grass grows long, golden and dry here. Larks flit from clump to clump above patches of purple flowers, and where the soil has eroded, piles of rags and human bones.

These are mass graves. At this spot, ISIL shot Yazidi victims then bulldozed the bodies into pits. Winter floods have since washed away topsoil, exposing the remains, scraps of clothing and whatever possessions those who died here were carrying; a rusted cigarette lighter, some prayer beads, a traditional head scarf. There's a pile of shell casings too, ejected from the guns that killed them.

At one grave, Ala Qandil, an asayish member with a permanent burgundy beret and wraparound sunglasses retrieved a limb bone from further down the hill and gently placed it with the rest. About 40 people are buried here, he said, part of a mixed group who were cut off as they tried to reach the mountain from a village near his own. The young women and children were taken captive, the men and elderly women slaughtered.

There are two other such graves within 100 metres and several others nearby, although it remains too dangerous for forensics teams to excavate them. At least 50 sites containing three or more bodies are known to exist around Sinjar, estimated Andrew Slater, who supervises the documentation of ISIL atrocities with US-based Yazidi NGO Yazda, and more will inevitably be found when villages to Sinjar's south are finally retaken.

Yazidi families are beginning to return to villages north of Mount Sinjar, but the damage and still significant security risks mean that just 20-30 families have gone back to the southern side and the town itself. Besma, an older woman, came directly following liberation from a camp near the Iraqi Kurdish city of Zakho. She's determined to stay even though life is far from safe.

"There are rockets and bombing, the children are afraid and crying," she said. Most of all, she wants electricity to be restored, streetlights would help alleviate her constant fears of a night-time ISIL infiltration.

Merza, a middle-aged father in a pressed shirt and chinos, lives a few ruined streets away. He too decided to defy the danger. "It is our home, it is always better than a camp," he said scratching greying stubble and adding while the town needs services, his priority is freeing his many relatives being held by ISIL.

The women, he said, were taken to the group's Syrian capital of Raqqa and the children to Iraq's Tal Afar, about 50km from Sinjar. He added that escapees told him an 11-year-old girl on his wife's side had been raped by a large group of men. He's expressionless as he describes the reports. For Sinjar's Yazidis, the most horrifying atrocities have become routine.

A boom broke the morning calm, echoing off the ruined buildings. No one glanced up, even the children. "Probably an air strike," someone muttered as smoke began to rise a few kilometres away.

But Merza has little faith in military progress against ISIL, largely due to inter-factional squabbles within the central government in Baghdad and political differences between it and the KRG.

"We don't care who looks after us, we just want someone to protect us, if not Iraq, even Israel... I wish they would push a bit further and to the next villages," he said.

In a well-defended headquarters at the north of the town, Sinjar regional asayish commander Lieutenant-Colonel Qasm Simo sat behind a neat, L-shaped desk overlooked by a portrait of KRG President Masoud Barzani and explained his struggle with the same issues.

"From November until now there is no big difference in Sinjar, but that's not what we want and it's not as the people want," he said, dealing with a constant stream of subordinates delivering messages and files. "They don't want to come if there's any threat on their lives and while ISIL are so close, there is a threat, [and] there is no water, no roads, no electricity, no schools, no hospitals, there is nothing."

Simo, with his cropped hair, cleft chin and neat moustache, has an obvious military bearing. He was in nearby Snuny when ISIL took Sinjar and stayed on the mountain until its liberation, he said, picking up one of his two gold-cased iPhones and proudly displaying a picture of him with a full beard from his time there.

He's originally from Khocho, a nearby village where ISIL massacred the entire male population of 400 or so and abducted about 1,000, according to the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). It remains under ISIL control along with many other Yazidi villages.

Now, he said, he awaits orders to move on them. That's unlikely to come soon. In the regional capital of Erbil, the KRG's head of foreign relations Falah Mustafah said the repeatedly delayed offensive to retake Iraq's second city of Mosul from ISIL has held up progress outside Sinjar too.

"There were areas that President Brazani and the Peshmerga wanted to liberate [south of Sinjar], but they [the US-led coalition] told us they wanted to do it in one go with the Mosul operation."

Even once ISIL are driven to a safe distance, rebuilding will be difficult and costly. The KRG has little to give. Two years of war have cost lives and resources, while it now shelters almost 1.8 million displaced Iraqis and refugees from neighbouring Syria, placing its resources under significant strain. Plummeting oil prices have severely dented the region's only major source of revenue.

Peshmerga and public servants haven't been paid for months, Mustafah said, and his government is struggling to cope. As if to emphasise his point, the power suddenly cut out, plunging his office into darkness as assistants scrambled to light the room with their smartphone screens.

Sinjar requires security and basic services, he continued. "They need electricity, they need water, they need education, they need healthcare... For the Yazidis who have suffered the most, at least we can do something to help them and prepare the ground for them to come back." But the \$10.2m his government has attempted to raise from the international community to provide this has not been forthcoming.

Little international help makes it through to Sinjar now. On the mountain, Gelal, a sunburnt shopkeeper who presides over a dark, dirt-floored tent stocked with dusty packets of crisps and off brand toiletries, said they're in need of just about everything. "There's not enough aid, we need food, we need water," he explained, fretfully stroking his clipped moustache.

There isn't much in the way of healthcare either, and no schools. The most obvious NGO presence is a small group of Barzani Charity Foundation tents; clean, white and conspicuous among the rest. Yazda also provide support. So do the PKK.

Midway down the mountainside is a small medical centre guarded by a moustachioed YBS fighter in a camouflage outfit. Inside, a grey-haired doctor in a checked shirt who gave her name as Medya attended to a waiting room full of patients. She's German but speaks fluent Kurdish and her medicine bottle-covered desk faces a wall dominated by a portrait of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. A flag of his face emerges from a pen holder on her desk, a smaller poster of him in a casual jumper is pinned behind her and she fiddled with a passport photo sized headshot as she spoke.

The town itself is considered too risky an environment for most aid groups to operate. As a result, the only regular foreign aid presence is an unlikely one: a group of American Mennonites working for a small organisation named Plain Compassion Crisis. Chad Martin, an affable former concreter in his early 20s from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who's been working with refugees in Iraq since early 2015, leads them.

His skin, where it emerges from a work-stained T-shirt and loose stonewash jeans, is burned a uniform terracotta, and as he makes his way through the city in a battered white pickup, fighters and civilians call out the nickname "Suoro!" - meaning "red" in Kurdish - that his complexion has earned him.

His team consists of two other men, two women and a small dog that barks furiously when visitors knock on their metal door, then runs joyfully into the road when it's opened to seek attention from asayish members slumped on dusty arm chairs in the street.

The group cleans still viable houses then replaces blown out windows with locally cut glass and empty entrances with plastic doors. They've completed about 60 houses so far, and replaced glass in 170 more, Martin said. Those they've completed are marked with a green spray painted number in western numerals.

It's something, but for Simo, not nearly enough. "You see those Americans and they are doing some very, very small things," he said shaking his head. "Thank you for them, but they are doing nothing when you compare with what these organisations usually are."

Sinjar's residents are also suffering because of its disputed status within Iraq and strained relations between the different groups operating there. Yazidi factions want greater autonomy and PKK influence is growing, but the KRG controls access to the territory from Iraqi Kurdistan, and therefore dominates the region.

Locals, as well as aid groups, complain of goods, including food, fuel and medicine being blocked at entry checkpoints. It's seemingly arbitrary, and not official policy, but is further hindering local reconstruction and return efforts. Some even fear it could lead to inter-Yazidi conflict as locals take sides.

Meanwhile, international efforts and attention have shifted to the battles to retake other ISIL-held territory in Iraq and Syria, including Fallujah and eventually Mosul.

Sinjaris, however, feel far from liberated and even those living within sight of their homes are resigned to staying put for some time yet. "This is our land, if we are killed here, at least we are killed on what is ours, not in Syria, not in KRG," said Kemal, a former farmer who took up arms in 2014 to defend those stranded on the mountain against ISIL.

He's proud of the role he played then, but feels powerless to do anything more. "Of course we can see our houses from the top of the hill, but from there is ISIL and we can't go any further. It's out of our hands, so what can we do," he asks rhetorically. "We just stay, we stay and wait."