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Iraqi PM: Operation to free Falluja from ISIS starts

By Hamdi Alkhshali and Jomana Karadsheh, CNN



Source: CNN

(CNN) Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi took to live television early Monday to announce the start of an operation to recapture the city of Falluja from ISIS.

Speaking on Iraqi state TV from the military's Joint Operations Command in Baghdad, Abadi said Iraqi security forces would provide safe passage for civilians to leave the city during the operation.



Abadi's overnight announcement came hours after Iraq's military implored residents of ISIS-held Falluja to flee their homes ahead of the operation to wrest the metropolis from the terror group. "I am calling for citizens who are inside Falluja to leave their areas and head towards safe corridors," military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Rasoul said on Iraqi TV. "In the coming few days, the operations to liberate Falluja will be launched."

The Iraqi leader, in his capacity as the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, is personally overseeing the military operation to retake the city, according the military media department.

Iraqi planes have dropped thousands of leaflets -- safe passage cards -- on Falluja, according to a statement from Iraq's Joint Operations Command.

Falluja, in Sunni-dominated Anbar province, was the scene of two major battles during the Iraq War. It has been under ISIS control since January 2014.

Human Rights Watch warned last month that ISIS was barring civilians from leaving Falluja and that residents faced starvation due to food shortages and exorbitant prices after an extended siege.

On Saturday, Iraqi security forces and Shiite militias known as Popular Mobilization Units safely evacuated 30 families who managed to escape the city, according to a PMU statement.

Families who are unable to flee the city have been told to raise a white flag above their homes. The military has told families to call or text an emergency line to seek evacuation.