



Residents, security forces and volunteer militia fighters hold a position in the town of Amerli on August 4, 2014. The Turkmen Shiite town has been surrounded by Sunni militants of the Islamic State group for more than six weeks. Ali Al Bayati / AFP

Besieged Iraqi Turkmen town cries for help

August 6, 2014 Updated: August 6, 2014 07:38 PM

BAGHDAD // All 34 villages around Amerli are under the control of Islamist militants but the small town of Turkmen is holding out in one of the longest and most dramatic sieges of Iraq's current conflict.

In the searing summer heat –without electricity or drinking water, and dwindling supplies of food and medicine – even a heroic defence appears unable to save the town's 20,000 people.

"We've been under siege for almost two months, fighting terrorists who want to eradicate the real people of this district, the Shiite Turkmen," said Abu Zahraa, a middle-aged labourer.

His leg was wounded in combat, and he looked exhausted, but like most of Amerli's fighters, he would not talk of suffering for fear of deflating the town's morale.

On Sunday, Amerli's volunteers, with the help of the local police force and some Shiite militiamen, repelled one of the fiercest attacks they had seen.

Uncollected bodies of Islamic State gunmen were strewn across the fields around the town, around 160 kilometres north of Baghdad.

"They attacked in huge numbers but the courage of our fighters stopped them," said city council member Abdullah Shukur Zain Al Abidin, lying on a bed with a keffiyeh wrapped around a neck wound.

Amerli was first attacked on June 10 and has been completely surrounded since eight days after that. Mr Al Abidin said all he wanted was for the federal government to send them more weapons.

"Is nobody going to help them out of this death trap," asked Ali Al Bayati, who heads a Turkmen rights group.

"Amerli has brave men but the problem now is with the children, the women, the sick and elderly people. They need a humanitarian corridor," he said.

Iraq's Turkmen minority, of Turkic ethnicity, is one of the country's largest and lives exclusively in the north. It is mostly Sunni Muslim but its Shiite component has been systematically targeted by extremist Sunni militants over the past two months.

Mr Al Bayati said the Iraqi air force could help secure a way out to Tuz Khurmatu, a large Turkmen town now under the control of Kurdish peshmerga forces just 25 kilometres to the north.

"We are drinking unclean water from the wells, residents are affected by diarrhoea and our clinic has no drugs left," said Wahab Saleh, 40, an oil company employee with four children.

He said food supplies that army helicopters have been bringing were insufficient. "Livestock farmers have been slaughtering all their animals so the people have something to eat."

According to several sources, only a handful of Amerli fighters have been killed since the start of the siege but dozens have serious injuries that require treatment in hospital.

The Kurds to the north have so far been unwilling to take on Islamic State in Amerli.

To the south, the Iraqi army has seemed unable to press on from its positions on the Udham River.

Amerli has a force of about 400 trained Turkmen fighters, a few hundred more men who have been given weapons to defend their homes, and volunteers from Shiite militia.

"Relief is tantalisingly close but it won't take the final step," said Michael Knights, an analyst with the Washington Institute.

"With 20,000 Shiite civilians surrounded by IS, could the Iraqi army not even try to make a little push? This is real lethargy."

Knights said there was a rare opportunity for consensus over the siege, a chance for many of the conflict's players to overcome mutual distrust and, with US backing, score a morale-boosting victory.

"You're looking for the example effect. If you can give IS a black eye in this place, maybe they'll want to do the same next door."

When Islamic State fighters, who already dominated swathes of Syria, conquered Iraq's main northern city of Mosul on June 10 and swept through much of the country's Sunni heartland, many government forces ran for their lives.

The military has since had time to regroup, has received some equipment from its allies and support from Shiite militiamen, but Baghdad's fightback remains sluggish.

Amerli had already been scarred by the violence that has plagued Iraq in recent years.

In 2007, about 160 people were killed when a huge suicide truck bomb ripped through the heart of town in what was then the deadliest such attack in Iraq's history.

Turkey stepped in to help at the time, flying out the wounded for treatment.

But Mr Al Bayati expressed little hope of a joint effort to rescue his community.

"It is the story of the Turkmen in Iraq now; they are completely forgotten," he said.

* Agence France-Presse

One-page article

BAGHDAD // All 34 villages around Amerli are under the control of Islamist militants but the small town of Turkmen is holding out in one of the longest and most dramatic sieges of Iraq's current conflict.

In the searing summer heat –without electricity or drinking water, and dwindling supplies of food and medicine – even a heroic defence appears unable to save the town's 20,000 people.

"We've been under siege for almost two months, fighting terrorists who want to eradicate the real people of this district, the Shiite Turkmen," said Abu Zahraa, a middle-aged labourer.

His leg was wounded in combat, and he looked exhausted, but like most of Amerli's fighters, he would not talk of suffering for fear of deflating the town's morale.

On Sunday, Amerli's volunteers, with the help of the local police force and some Shiite militiamen, repelled one of the fiercest attacks they had seen.

Uncollected bodies of Islamic State gunmen were strewn across the fields around the town, around 160 kilometres north of Baghdad.

"They attacked in huge numbers but the courage of our fighters stopped them," said city council member Abdullah Shukur Zain Al Abidin, lying on a bed with a keffiyeh wrapped around a neck wound.

Amerli was first attacked on June 10 and has been completely surrounded since eight days after that. Mr Al Abidin said all he wanted was for the federal government to send them more weapons.

"Is nobody going to help them out of this death trap," asked Ali Al Bayati, who heads a Turkmen rights group.

"Amerli has brave men but the problem now is with the children, the women, the sick and elderly people. They need a humanitarian corridor," he said.

Iraq's Turkmen minority, of Turkic ethnicity, is one of the country's largest and lives exclusively in the north. It is mostly Sunni Muslim but its Shiite component has been systematically targeted by extremist Sunni militants over the past two months.

Mr Al Bayati said the Iraqi air force could help secure a way out to Tuz Khurmatu, a large Turkmen town now under the control of Kurdish peshmerga forces just 25 kilometres to the north.

"We are drinking unclean water from the wells, residents are affected by diarrhoea and our clinic has no drugs left," said Wahab Saleh, 40, an oil company employee with four children.

He said food supplies that army helicopters have been bringing were insufficient. "Livestock farmers have been slaughtering all their animals so the people have something to eat."

According to several sources, only a handful of Amerli fighters have been killed since the start of the siege but dozens have serious injuries that require treatment in hospital.

The Kurds to the north have so far been unwilling to take on Islamic State in Amerli.

To the south, the Iraqi army has seemed unable to press on from its positions on the Udham River.

Amerli has a force of about 400 trained Turkmen fighters, a few hundred more men who have been given weapons to defend their homes, and volunteers from Shiite militia.

"Relief is tantalisingly close but it won't take the final step," said Michael Knights, an analyst with the Washington Institute.

"With 20,000 Shiite civilians surrounded by IS, could the Iraqi army not even try to make a little push? This is real lethargy."

Knights said there was a rare opportunity for consensus over the siege, a chance for many of the conflict's players to overcome mutual distrust and, with US backing, score a morale-boosting victory.

"You're looking for the example effect. If you can give IS a black eye in this place, maybe they'll want to do the same next door."

When Islamic State fighters, who already dominated swathes of Syria, conquered Iraq's main northern city of Mosul on June 10 and swept through much of the country's Sunni heartland, many government forces ran for their lives.

The military has since had time to regroup, has received some equipment from its allies and support from Shiite militiamen, but Baghdad's fightback remains sluggish.

Amerli had already been scarred by the violence that has plagued Iraq in recent years.

In 2007, about 160 people were killed when a huge suicide truck bomb ripped through the heart of town in what was then the deadliest such attack in Iraq's history.

Turkey stepped in to help at the time, flying out the wounded for treatment.

But Mr Al Bayati expressed little hope of a joint effort to rescue his community.

"It is the story of the Turkmen in Iraq now; they are completely forgotten," he said.

* Agence France-Presse