

Amerli: Iraqi town besieged by IS starving to death

By Lydia Green BBC Arabic



The majority of the residents of Amerli are Shia Turkmen

With each new dawn, the people of Amerli wake up to the same nightmare.

Surrounded by towns and villages taken by the Sunni jihadist militants of Islamic State (IS), the residents of this small Shia Turkmen community about 180km (110 miles) north of Baghdad have been living under siege for two months.

There is no electricity, little medicine and food supplies are dwindling. Unlike recent US intervention to help save members of the Yazidi religious minority trapped on Mount Sinjar in north-western Iraq, there is no dramatic plan to rescue people here.

In the eyes of those in Amerli, the world has turned its back on them.

"After the attack of Mosul, all the Shia Turkmen villages around Amerli were captured by Islamic State," explains Dr Ali Albayati, a local resident. "They killed the people and displayed their bodies outside the village."

The majority of the residents of Amerli are part of the Turkmen ethnic group, who make up roughly 4% of Iraq's population. As Shia, they are directly targeted by Islamic State, who consider them apostates.

"We have been trying to fight them off for 70 days," says Dr Albayati. "We have no electricity, no drinking water."



"We are depending on salty water, which gives people diarrhoea and other diseases. Since the siege started, more than 50 sick or elderly people have died."

"Children have also died," he says, "because of dehydration and disease."

'Fighting off death'

Although most of the town's residents are farmers, fighting has dragged the men from their fields and the crops have had to be neglected.

As a result, the only food supplies that arrive into the town come by means of Iraqi army helicopters. They come once a day at most, and the provisions they bring are not enough to serve the whole community.

"It is a humanitarian disaster," says Dr Albayati. "Twenty-thousand people in Amerli are fighting off death. There are children who are only eating once every three days. I can't describe the situation. I just don't know what to say."

Dr Albayati works with the Turkmen Saving Foundation, an NGO seeking to improve conditions for members of the Turkmen community across Iraq. He travels in and out of the town in the army's helicopters, trying to ensure that the most essential provisions get delivered.



Amerli is surrounded by towns and villages taken by jihadist militants from Islamic State

For many however, these supplies are too little or come too late.

"Women have died in childbirth because there aren't doctors here. People are dying from simple wounds because we don't have the means to care for them," says Nihad Albayati, who lives in the town with his wife and seven children.

The Iraqi army helicopters are able to evacuate about 30 people per visit, and some of the wounded have been taken to hospitals in government-controlled areas, but the army is stretched and the route is dangerous. The helicopters cannot always make the journey.

'Godless and merciless'

When it comes to defending the town, it is the residents themselves who must step up to the plate.

"There are no soldiers," explains Nihad. "The families are working together to fight Islamic State - fighting to defend ourselves and our land."

Among those fighters is Nihad's own son. He is just 13 years old.

"Am I scared for him? No, I am proud," he says. "We parents are proud that our children are helping. This is our jihad. Islamic State are godless and merciless people."



Amerli's residents must defend their town with what few weapons they have

In reality, the residents see little alternative.

"You know what happens when Islamic State captures a village?" Dr Albayati asks. "They capture all the men, women and children and they kill them all, believe me. They keep just a few girls, you know, for other things..."

The town is no stranger to the brutality of extremist Sunni militants. In one of the bloodiest attacks in Iraq after the US invasion, 159 residents were killed and a further 350 wounded in an al-Qaeda truck bombing in 2007. Amerli knows all too well what it feels like to lose loved ones to acts of violence.

'Completely forgotten'

Sundus Abbas is the UK representative of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, a political party which represents the community.

She is campaigning desperately to get the West's forces to intervene in Amerli as they did in Mount Sinjar.

"Amerli has been under siege for two months now," she says. "How long do we have to wait? How much suffering must we see and how many children have to die before the international community realises that the people of this town need help urgently and they have to help them? We have been completely forgotten."

This week the UN launched a major new push to provide assistance for over half a million people displaced by the fighting in northern Iraq.

The aid will offer some welcome relief to the Yazidis, Christians, Sunnis and Shia displaced by the fighting. But since Amerli is now inaccessible by land, its residents have little possibility of making it to refugee camps, let alone receiving this much-needed support.

For now, men like Nihad and his son must continue to defend their town with what few weapons they have and hope that help, in whatever form, reaches them soon.