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Reuters

Bitter Memories Haunt Iraq's Falluja as US Departs

By Fadhil al-Badrani

12/15/2011

Ali al-Falluji's building lies with its ceiling collapsed, debris spilled over the Falluja city roadside just as the Iraqi businessman left it seven years ago when American bombs punctured its roof.

The last U.S. soldiers are finally leaving Iraq. But Falluja says he will never rebuild his business: It must stay that way, he says, as testimony to America's violence.

Falluja, once the heart of Iraq's al-Qaeda insurgency and witness to some of the war's bloodiest fighting, has become more than any other Iraqi city a symbol for the brutality of the war after the 2003 invasion.

Now Falluja is recalling its past, bitter memories resurfacing of lost relatives and of the overwhelming violence visited on the city on the banks of the Euphrates river.

"This scene must remain like it is as a testimony to the brutality of the Americans. For me, this scene is more beautiful than any other," Falluja said outside the building that once housed apartments and a car parts business.

Nearly nine years after the invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein, the last 4,000 U.S. troops will be on their way home by the end of the year, leaving a country still grappling a stubborn Islamist insurgency.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta flew into Baghdad on Thursday to officially announce the end the U.S. war in Iraq, staying briefly to watch American soldiers lower the flag.

A day earlier in Falluja, several thousand Iraqi residents rallied in celebration of the withdrawal. Some burned American flags; others waved Iraqi flags, and pictures of relatives lost during the years of conflict.

For many Iraqis the withdrawal evokes mixed sense of new sovereignty tainted by memories of violence, U.S. abuses and worries over whether their fragile democracy will slide once again into sectarian slaughter.

Falluja, a Sunni Muslim heartland, still bears the scars of the many battles fought between al Qaeda insurgents and the American troops trying to take the city.

HOUSE-TO-HOUSE FIGHTING

It took two incursions into Falluja in 2004, and weeks of house-to-house fighting to subdue the city.

"I feel how my son Ibrahim grieves. He was injured in his head by a U.S bullet in April 2004, and it paralyzed him," said Mudhafer Ali, a retiree. "The Americans have left, but they left us for our sorrow, pains and destroyed the future."

Violence in Iraq has ebbed sharply since the peak of as U.S. and Iraqi forces took on Sunni insurgents tied to al Qaeda. But Sunni insurgents and rival Shi'ite militias still carry out almost daily bombings, assassinations and attacks.

But few battles in conflicts in Iraq have caused more death, destruction, and bitterness toward the United States than the double 2004 U.S. assaults on Falluja.

The Sunni Muslim stronghold known as the "city of mosques", made the headlines in March that year after four U.S. security contractors were hijacked by insurgents, dragged through the streets, set alight and killed.

Burnt bodies were left hanging from a bridge into the city as Iraqis chanted anti-American slogans. Photos of the mutilated bodies were published across the world and the incident turned American public opinion sharply against the war.

Days later, enraged by the deaths, the U.S. military launched its first assault. Hundreds of Iraqis and dozens of U.S. troops were killed but the insurgency was not quelled.

Six months later, the U.S. Marines went back in. A month-long assault destroyed much of the city, killed an estimated 1,300 Iraqi fighters and civilians, and wounded thousands more. More than 100 U.S. troops also died.

Now, many buildings in Falluja have been reconstructed. But while their facades are rebuilt, their side walls are still pockmarked with bullet holes.

New bridges have been constructed, but other buildings sit with collapsed roofs. Two hotels and a mosque used by insurgents to target American patrols near the river are still in ruins.

"Today I have been assured that the U.S. withdrawal is real, I feel that I breathe pure air and I feel that I am a free man," said Hamid Abdullah, a university student.

"I hope we can get back to a united Iraq with no sectarian or ethnic feelings."