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## **TITLE: US hits IS training camp, France to join air strikes in Iraq**

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BAGHDAD: US warplanes hit an Islamic State group training camp in Iraq on Thursday (Sep 18) in their first strike not directly supporting Iraqi or Kurdish forces as France announced it will join the air war.

The jihadists posted their latest video of a Western hostage, British journalist John Cantlie. Unlike previous grisly postings of two American journalists and a British aid worker being beheaded, Cantlie was only shown speaking to camera in the style of a news report.

The French move, which President Francois Hollande said would be limited to Iraq, came as Washington was set to approve plans to train and arm Syrian rebels in the fight against IS, which has gained more ground in recent days.

The strike on the training camp in northern Iraq killed fighters, as well as destroying buildings and vehicles, US Central Command said.

A US military officer told AFP that the strike, southeast of Iraq's IS-controlled second city Mosul, was the first of its kind since the US air campaign began on Aug 8. About 40 jihadist fighters were on the ground at the time of the strike, the officer said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

A second air raid damaged an IS ammunition depot southeast of Baghdad, Central Command said.

Two bombings and shelling killed at least 19 people in the capital, hitting Shiite districts that have been repeatedly targeted by Sunni extremists.

The United States has now carried out 176 air strikes against IS in Iraq, as Hollande announced on Thursday France will join the campaign "within a short timeframe."

But he underlined there would be no French strikes against IS targets in Syria such as those US President Barack Obama authorised last week.

"I decided to respond to the request of the Iraqi authorities to offer aerial support," Hollande told reporters. "As soon as we have identified targets, we will act ... within a short timeframe," he said. "We will not go further than that. There will be no ground troops and we will only intervene in Iraq."

France began reconnaissance flights over Iraq on Monday from a base in the United Arab Emirates. Britain too has conducted surveillance flights but has so far held back from launching

strikes.

US Secretary of State John Kerry welcomed the move by France, "one of the countries that we've been counting in on this."

The US Senate was expected to back a plan later Thursday to train and equip anti-jihadist rebels in Syria, a key part of Obama's strategy against IS.

Who exactly will benefit from the programme is unclear, as the rebels battling President Bashar al-Assad lack a clear command structure and range from secular nationalists to Al-Qaeda-backed extremists.

IS holds significant territory in Syria and seized large areas of Iraq in a lightning offensive in June, declaring a cross-border "caliphate" and imposing its brutal interpretation of Islamic law.

## **NEW HOSTAGE VIDEO**

It has carried out widespread atrocities, including crucifixions and reportedly selling women into slavery, and in recent weeks beheaded two US reporters and a British aid worker in chilling online videos.

The group posted a new video on YouTube showing British journalist Cantlie in an orange jumpsuit like those worn by the hostages in the previous postings, but with no immediate threat to execute him.

In the footage, Cantlie promises to reveal in a series of programmes the "truth" about the jihadist group.

Cantlie, who had contributed to British newspapers including The Sunday Times and Sunday Telegraph, as well as to Agence France-Presse, said he was captured after travelling to Syria in November 2012.

It was not clear when the video was shot, but in it Cantlie referred to recent events including the US-led campaign against IS.

In Syria, IS fighters were closing in on the country's third-largest Kurdish town of Ain al-Arab, or Kobane, on the Turkish border, cutting off its Kurdish militia defenders, a monitoring group said.

"IS fighters have seized at least 21 villages around Kobane," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights head Rami Abdel Rahman said. "The IS is using heavy weaponry, its artillery and tanks."

The town is one of three Kurdish majority districts where Kurdish nationalists have proclaimed self-rule and its capture would give the jihadists control of a large swathe of the Turkish border.

The exiled opposition National Coalition warned of "the danger of a massacre" in the area, where Kurdish militia have doggedly resisted the jihadists.

## **GLOBAL THREAT?**

The US estimates that IS has 20,000 to 31,000 fighters, including many foreigners, and there are concerns that returning jihadists could carry out attacks in Western countries.

Australia said it had detained 15 people in connection with a plot to behead random civilians, in the

country's largest ever counter-terrorism raids.

But analysts at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) warned against overestimating the IS threat, saying Al-Qaeda's global network was still the bigger danger worldwide.

"Despite its spectacular acts of violence, including against Westerners, (IS's) short- and medium-term objectives appear to be local and transnational rather than global," the London-based think-tank said.

Analyst Emile Hokayem told a press conference: "We shouldn't exaggerate its potency. It is a very serious security threat to the region - as a global threat it's still limited."

- AFP/xq/de