

ME on the brink of greater turmoil

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The beheading of dozens of Sunni and Shia prisoners by the West's main Middle East ally, Saudi Arabia, threatens to renew sectarian violence in the oil-rich kingdom and plunge the Middle East into greater turmoil.

The mass executions – in Riyadh, Mecca, Medina and in the eastern and northern regions – have been seen as a bloody statement of intent delivered by an increasingly powerless Saudi Interior Minister.

Among those killed was Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a leading Shia cleric with the rank of ayatollah, a political prisoner and vocal supporter of protests against the Saudi royal family. His death, which has sparked outrage in Iran, the dominant Shia power in the region, is likely to lead to an escalation of hostilities in Yemen, where a proxy war between the two nations is being fought.

Regional sources told The Independent yesterday that the deaths were ordered as part of a feud that threatens the future of the Saudi royal family. The executions went ahead despite international condemnation and calls to spare six Shia prisoners who had been jailed under the kingdom's draconian anti-terrorism laws.

The execution of Sheikh Nimr, ordered by Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayef, has escalated the sectarian hatred that is tearing the region apart. An internecine power struggle within the ruling family is predicted to affect the country's relationships with both its neighbours and the West.

Iran's retaliation could come in Yemen, where Shia Houthi rebels backed by Tehran are fighting a Saudi-led coalition. Iran's retaliation could come in Yemen, where

SAUDI ARABIA EXECUTION

Shia Houthi rebels backed by Tehran are fighting a Saudi-led coalition. The Saudi-led coalition, which has been bombing the Houthis in Yemen for nine months, announced the end of a ceasefire that began on 15 December. The ceasefire had been repeatedly violated by both sides. Almost 6,000 people have been killed since the Saudi coalition entered the conflict in March, almost half of them civilians.

Asked if the UK should be pressing the Saudis to reform their policies, former foreign secretary Sir Malcolm said: "That is not the way the world works. You can't just trade with the countries you approve of, otherwise you would be ruling out trade with China, Russia, and probably three-quarters of the world."



Kashmiri Shia protesters shout slogans during a demonstration in Srinagar yesterday against the execution of prominent Shia Muslim cleric Nimr al-Nimr by Saudi authorities. Saudi Arabia on Saturday executed 47 people convicted of "terrorism", including the Shia cleric behind anti-government protests.

PHOTO: AFP

INDIAN AIR FORCE BASE ATTACK

Strike plotted by Pak army? 'I am on a suicide mission'

TNN, New Delhi

The Pathankot attack may have been masterminded by the Pakistan Army's General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, as per an assessment by a section of the top Indian security establishment.

According to a senior intelligence official, the Pak GHQ is reportedly peeved at the positive reaction of the international community and media to PM Narendra Modi's Lahore diplomacy and Nawaz Sharif's hospitality and feels bypassed after the "fait accompli".

Though there were suggestions that the Pakistan army had backed the recent peace outreach, this narrative disagrees and feels ISI too is of the view that Modi's surprise visit to Lahore created a favourable civil society sentiment in Pakistan towards the civilian 'pro-peace' regime.

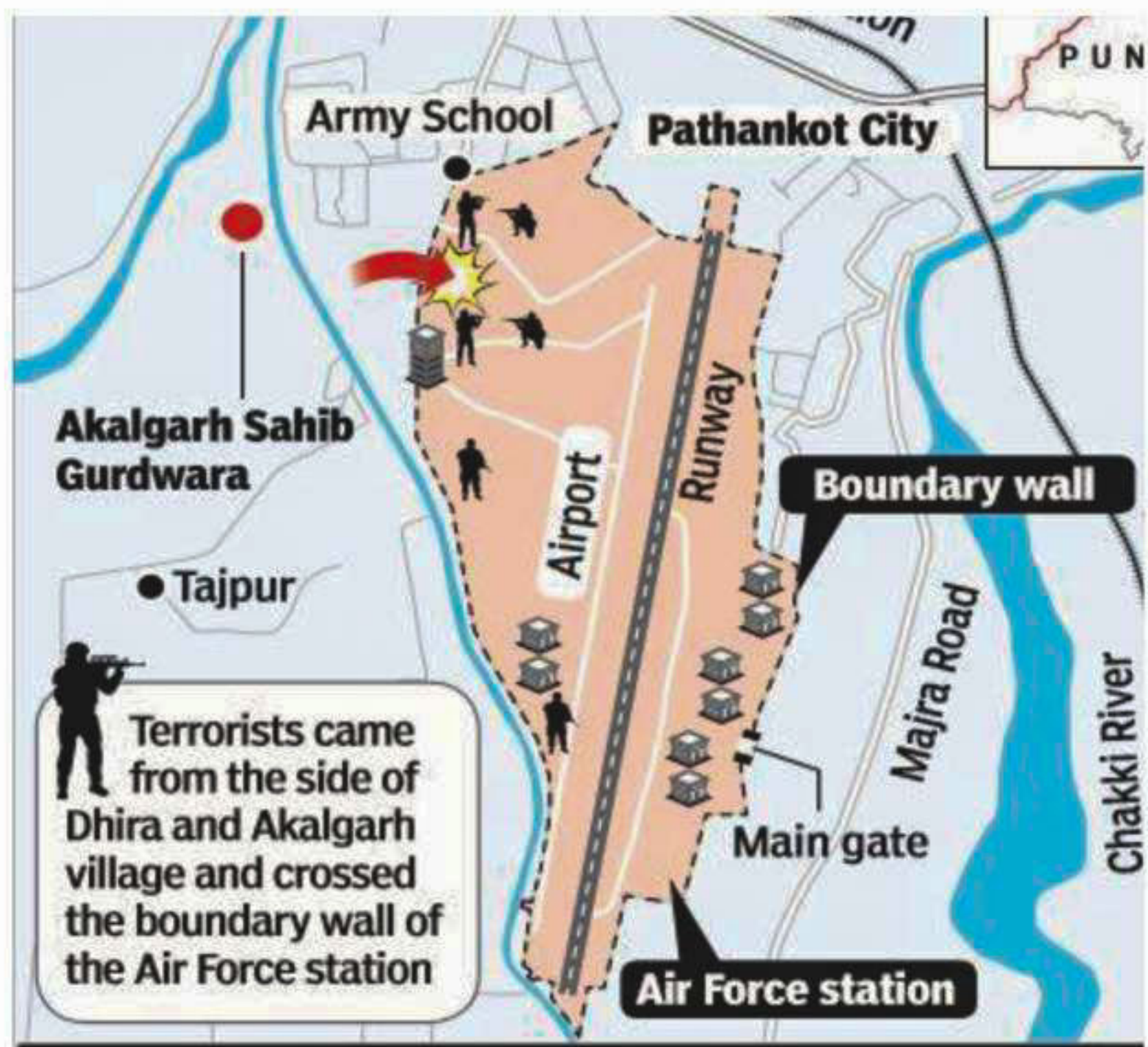
The Pakistan Army and ISI, this time around, kept aside their preferred agent Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the 2008 26/11 strikes on Mumbai, and chose Jaish-e-Mohammed, an ISI asset less in the news, to hit Pathankot.

This, they felt, would ensure more deniability. Headed by Maulana Masood Azhar, one of three terrorists swapped to end the IC-814 hostage crisis of 1999, Jaish is being resurrected over the past few years.

The Pathankot attackers were part of the Bahawalpur group of Jaish and spoke in Multani dialect, common to south Punjab, during phone calls with their Pakistan-based masterminds.

Four calls were made in the intervening night of Friday and Saturday, three to terrorists' Pakistan-based Jaish handlers and one to a family member of a fidayeen. The calls were intercepted by the agencies.

While one of the fidayeen has been identified as Nasir, the two handlers who were heard instructing the attackers to



blow up aircraft at Pathankot airbase were called Maulana Ashfaq and Haji Abdul Shaqur. In 2008, the 10-member LeT attack module, including Kasab, was instructed in a similar way by their handlers from a control room in Karachi.

Sources said the objective of the Pathankot attack was to cause damage to air force base assets and technical assets and kill as many personnel as possible. This, some senior officers of the intelligence establishment feel, was meant to provoke the Indian defence establishment and political opposition to retaliate -- undo India-Pakistan peace dialogue and so scuttle the foreign secretary-level talks less than a fortnight away. This would also help bring back focus on Pakistan military propaganda painting their country a

victim of terrorism, facing an aggressive eastern (India) neighbour and an India-influenced Afghanistan.

The possible involvement of Pakistan-based militants in the latest raid could be a setback for peace overtures between the nuclear-armed rivals, who have fought three wars since independence in 1947.

Modi Saturday termed the attackers as "enemies of humanity" but did not blame Pakistan. Islamabad, meanwhile, moved quickly to condemn the attack which it described as a "terrorist incident".

The US State Department termed the assault "a heinous" terrorist attack and urged the two rivals to work together to hunt down those responsible.

Toddler becomes first 2016 migrant casualty

Turkey rescues 57 stranded refugees

AFP, Athens

A drowned two-year-old boy became the first known migrant casualty of the year on Saturday after the crowded dinghy he was travelling in slammed into rocks off Greece's Agathonisi island, the coastguard said.

The other 39 passengers, including a woman who had fallen overboard, were rescued after local fishermen raised the alarm. Ten of the survivors were taken to hospital to be treated for hypothermia. The rubber vessel had set off from Turkey in the early morning in windy weather.

The charity Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), which helps save migrants and refugees at sea, deployed its fast-rescue Responder boat to help bring the stranded passengers to safety in a joint operation with the Hellenic coastguard.

The toddler's body was pulled out of the water by fishermen, according to the coastguard. The migrants, including the child's mother, were taken to the port of Pythagorio on Samos, the nearest island, which is 50 kilometres away.

There was no immediate information about their nationalities. "Nothing can prepare you for the horrific reality of what is going on. Today we came face to face with one of the youngest victims of this ongoing refugee crisis. It is a tragic reminder of the thousands of people who have died trying to reach safety in miserable conditions," said MOAS founder and US entrepreneur Christopher Catrambone in a statement.

Three-year-old Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi, whose limp body was photographed washed up on a Turkish beach in September, became a heartbreaking symbol of the refugee crisis.

Meanwhile, Turkish coastguards rescued 57 migrants seeking to reach EU member Greece by sea after they were stranded on a rocky islet in the Aegean Sea, official media said yesterday.

The migrants were trying to reach the Greek island of Lesbos but their boat hit trouble after leaving the resort of Dikili in Izmir province on Turkey's Aegean coast.



NEWS IN brief

Sri Lanka pledges land for war victims

AFP, COLOMBO

Up to 100,000 people still living in camps six years after the end of Sri Lanka's brutal ethnic war will be given land to build homes within six months, President Maithripala Sirisena told AFP yesterday. "It is an ambitious target, but I will see that all the internally displaced people are given land to build homes," the president said in an interview. "I am setting up a mechanism to complete this process within six months."

RSS gather in India for massive rally

AFP, Pune

More than 150,000 Hindu hardliners, all dressed in khaki shorts, white shirts and black hats, put on a massive show of strength at an elaborate rally in western India yesterday. It was the largest ever gathering of the controversial Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a group seen as the ideological parent of Indian ruling Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, officials said.

Mexican mayor killed hours into job

AFP, Cuernavaca

Several gunmen burst into the home of a newly elected Mexican mayor and shot her dead on Saturday, just hours into her tenure, police said. Gisela Mota, 33, a left-of-centre former member of Congress, was gunned down barely 24 hours after taking her oath of office in the city of Temixco, which is about 90 kilometers from the capital Mexico City.

Bill Clinton to stump for Hillary today

AFP, New York

Bill Clinton will hit the campaign trail today for his wife Hillary -- his first appearance on the stump for the former first lady's 2016 White House bid. The former president's visit to New Hampshire in support of his wife, who leads polls for the Democratic nomination, comes with Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump sharpening his attacks on both Clintons.

IS attack on Iraq police trainees kills 12

AFP, Tikrit

Suicide attackers from the Islamic State group killed at least 12 Iraqi forces yesterday in a brazen attack on police training at a military base, officials said. A commando of fighters equipped with rifles and suicide vests snuck into Speicher base, near the city of Tikrit, in the middle of the night.

Vatican accord with Palestine takes effect

REUTERS, Milan

An agreement signed last year making the Vatican's de facto recognition of Palestine in 2012 official has come into effect, the Holy See said on Saturday.

The Vatican signed its first treaty with the "State of Palestine" last June when it called for moves to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and backed a two-state solution.

"... the Holy See and the State of Palestine have notified each other that the procedural requirements for (the accord's) entry into force have been fulfilled, the Vatican said in a statement on Saturday.

The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution in 2012 recognizing Palestine as an observer non-member state. This was welcomed at the time by the Vatican, which has the same observer non-member status at the United Nations.

In October 2014, Sweden acknowledged Palestine, a decision that drew condemnation from Israel and led to tense relations between the two.

Obama, Hillary created IS: Trump

CNN ONLINE

Donald Trump on Saturday said the policies of President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton "created ISIS," the furthest the GOP front-runner has gone in tying the Obama administration's policies to the rise of the terror group.

Trump offered no evidence for his claim here at the Mississippi Coast Coliseum, in which he also said escalating tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia were signs that the Islamic Republic wanted to take over the longtime US ally in the Middle East.

"They've created ISIS. Hillary Clinton created ISIS with Obama," Trump said.

He couched his hit in a brief discussion of the Iranian protests outside the Saudi embassy in Tehran, which erupted after Saudi Arabia executed 47 people, including a dissident Shiite cleric.

"In Tehran, they're burning down the Saudi embassy, you see that?" Trump said as he opened his remarks. "Now, what that is Iran wants to take over Saudi Arabia. They always have. They want the oil, OK? They've always wanted that."

Trump has blamed both Democrats and former President George W. Bush when talking about unrest in the Middle East, particularly citing the 43rd president's decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

In recent weeks, he's been particularly aggressive in going after Clinton, the Democratic presidential front-runner, and her record leading the State Department.

Two of Trump's 2016 competitors, Carly Fiorina and Rick Santorum, said in November that Clinton and Obama were to blame for ISIS.



IRAN MISSILE PROGRAMME

More work needed before any sanctions

Says White House

REUTERS, Honolulu

The White House expects Iran to finish work needed to trigger implementation of an international nuclear deal in the coming weeks, but Washington needs more time to prepare sanctions over its ballistic missile program, a US official said on Saturday.

The administration had additional diplomatic and technical work to complete before announcing any new sanctions related to the missile program, but the delay was not a result of pressure from Tehran, said deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes.

"We have additional work that needs to be done before we would announce additional designations, but this is not something that we would negotiate with the Iranian government," Rhodes told reporters in Hawaii, where President Barack Obama is on vacation.

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

China rejects Vietnam protest over flight test

AFP, Beijing

Beijing has rejected a protest from Vietnam after a Chinese plane landed on a contested reef in the South China Sea, saying the operation took place within Chinese territory.

A Chinese "test flight" landed on Fiery Cross reef, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said in an online statement late Saturday. Vietnam also claims the reef.

China has asserted its claim to almost all of the South China Sea by rapidly building artificial islands including airstrips said to be capable of hosting military jets.

It began work in 2014 on a 3,000-metre runway on Fiery Cross reef in the Spratly island group, around 1,000 kilometres from China's island province of Hainan.

Hua said the test flight was civilian in nature, adding that the "relevant activity falls completely within China's sovereignty".

Hanoi earlier strongly protested at the flight, labelling it a violation of sovereignty which "influences peace and stabil-

ity in the South China Sea".

"Vietnam resolutely protests China's above-mentioned action, asking China to immediately end while not repeating similar move," said foreign ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh in Hanoi.

Vietnamese officials also said they had asked Beijing to investigate the ramming and sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat by a suspected Chinese boat.

The fishermen were around 60 nautical miles from Con Co Island in central Quang Tri province on Friday when a foreign boat crashed into their craft.

The 11 crew members were rescued but the boat sank, the fishermen told the VNExpress news site. The captain was quoted as saying that he saw Chinese characters on the foreign boat.

Ha Le, deputy head of the Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance Department, told AFP China officials had offered to check on the report if more details became available.

Relations between the communist neighbours have grown tense in recent years over the disputed Spratly and Parcel island chains.

