

NEWSIN brief

Stop 'adding fuel to fire' Iran warns Saudi as tense standoff threatens regional instability

AGENCIES Iran warned Saudi Arabia to stop working against it yesterday as their diplomatic crisis intensified despite efforts to defuse a row that has raised fears of regional instability. In the latest salvo in a dispute that has seen Saudi Arabia and some of its Sunni Arab allies cut ties with Tehran, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Riyadh must end its prolonged efforts to confront Iran. "For the past two-and-a-half years, Saudi Arabia has opposed Iran's... The row between Saudi Arabia, the main Sunni power, and Shia-dominated Iran erupted following Riyadh's execution on Saturday of prominent Shia cleric and activist Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. Nimr, one of 47 men executed on Saturday, was a driving force behind 2011 anti-government protests in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. His death sparked Shia demonstrations in many countries including Iran, where protesters stormed and set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the kingdom's consulate in second city Mashhad.



diplomacy," Zarif said at a joint press conference in Tehran with Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. "Saudi Arabia has moved against our efforts and, unfortunately, they opposed the nuclear agreement," Zarif said. "This trend of creating tension must stop. We need to stand united... and stop those who are adding fuel to the fire." The spike in tensions comes after Iran last year secured a historic nuclear deal with world powers led by the United States, causing major concern in longtime US ally Riyadh.

DEVELOPMENTS Tehran says escalation to affect Syria peace talks Caught in the middle, Iraq offers to mediate crisis IS threatens to destroy Saudi prisons after militants' executions

Jaafari, speaking in Tehran with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif, said the row could have "wide-ranging repercussions". Analysts said Baghdad was particularly worried about anything that could disrupt its campaign against Islamic State militants. There was no immediate reaction from Saudi Arabia to the Iraqi mediation offer. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who leads his divided country with a Shia-dominated government, has expressed "intense shock" at the execution of Nimr, condemning it as human rights violation. But analysts say he has resisted pressure from Iranian-backed Shia militias, politicians and protesters to close the newly reopened Saudi embassy in Baghdad. In another development, Islamic State yesterday threatened to destroy Saudi Arabian prisons holding jihadists after Riyadh's execution of 47 people including 43 convicted al-Qaeda militants. The militant group, which has claimed responsibility for attacks in the kingdom and stepped up operations in neighbouring Yemen, singled out the al-Ha'ir and Tarfiya prisons where many al-Qaeda and Islamic State supporters have been detained.

'Let's begin 2016 with THRILLING SOUND'

North Korea leader celebrates with 'H-bomb test' AFP, Seoul North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un personally signed the order three weeks ago authorising Pyongyang's latest nuclear test, calling for 2016 to kick off with the "thrilling sound" of a hydrogen bomb explosion. The North yesterday said it had conducted its first "successful" miniaturised hydrogen bomb test -- a shock announcement that drew condemnation from its neighbours including its major ally China. The news was broadcast on state television, which also showed a copy of Kim's initial signed order dated December 15. "Let's begin the year of 2016 ... with the thrilling sound of our first hydrogen bomb explosion, so that the whole world will look up to our socialist, nuclear-armed republic and the great Workers' Party of Korea!" Kim wrote in a handwritten message next to his signature. The television also showed a second order dated January 3 in which Kim signed off his final approval for the test to be conducted on January 6. Kim, who took over after the death of his father Kim Jong-Il in December 2011, also presided over the country's third nuclear test in February 2013. Kim had suggested last month Pyongyang had already developed such an H-bomb -- a claim that was largely dismissed as exaggerated rhetoric at the time. Experts say, with the surprise test two days before his birthday, Kim Jong-Un has once again asserted his personal control over the hermit state. When he came to power after Kim Jong-Il's death in December 2011, the younger Kim was considered untested, vulnerable and likely to be manipulated by senior figures. But he has proved his metal in dealing harshly -- sometimes brutally -- with any sign of internal dissent, even at the highest levels, while maintaining an aggressively provocative stance with the international community.



WHAT EXACTLY H-BOMB IS?

Both atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs are kinds of nuclear bombs, meaning that the energy comes from nuclear reactions. The big difference is that atomic bombs use nuclear fission, which splits a bigger atom into two smaller ones, to create their energy. Hydrogen bombs use fusion, which is done by fusing two or more atoms into a bigger one. An atomic bomb works as the trigger to set off the hydrogen bomb. The two explosions are almost simultaneous. As opposed to the atomic bomb, the kind dropped on Japan in the closing days of World War II, the hydrogen bomb, or so-called "superbomb" can be far more powerful - experts say, by 1,000 times or more.

IS N KOREA'S CLAIM TRUE?

Experts broadly agree that the country probably carried out some kind of nuclear explosion but are sceptical over the "hydrogen" assertion. The first due that something happened came with reports of a 5.1 magnitude earthquake near the North's nuclear test facility. North Korean state television later announced that it was a hydrogen bomb test. But Australian nuclear policy and arms control specialist Crispin Rovere said that "the seismic data that's been received indicates that the explosion is probably significantly below what one would expect from an H-bomb test".

NLD to join Myanmar House on Feb 1

Members of Aung San Suu Kyi's victorious pro-democracy party will take their seats in parliament on February 1, Myanmar's speaker said yesterday, beginning a new era for a nation under army rule for decades. But the new government will take office slowly under the complex political system -- it can only be formed after current President Thein Sein steps down on March 31.

Syria's chemical arms '100% destroyed'

Syria's declared chemical weapons arsenal has been completely destroyed capping more than two years of work, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said Tuesday, amid concern sarin gas is still being unleashed in the country's complex civil war. After years of denials, the regime caved to international pressure in September 2013 and agreed under a US-Russia deal to hand over its toxic stockpile to the OPCW for destruction.

US soldier killed in Afghan mission

A US soldier has become the first American killed in Afghanistan in 2016 while two more were wounded in an operation in Helmand province, where Afghan troops are battling Taliban insurgents, US and Nato officials said. The troops had come under fire while conducting a mission Tuesday with Afghan special operations counterparts in Marjah, Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said.

UK House to debate Trump ban this month

Britain's parliament will this month debate whether to ban outspoken US politician Donald Trump from entering the country, the legislative body's petitions committee said on Tuesday. Almost 570,000 Britons signed an online petition calling for Trump to be barred from Britain for "hate speech" after his controversial comments targeting Muslims, Mexicans and others. British lawmakers are obliged to consider for debate any petition on the government's official petitions website that reaches 100,000 signatures.

Sanjay Dutt set to be released from jail

Bollywood actor Sanjay Dutt will be released from prison next month after serving a sentence for possessing weapons supplied by gangsters behind the 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts, reports said yesterday. The disgraced star will walk free from Yerwada Central Jail in the western state of Maharashtra on February 27, slightly ahead of schedule, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

Charlie Hebdo publishes special edition

French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo published a special edition yesterday on the eve of the anniversary of a jihadist attack that wiped out most of its staff, prompting protests from the Vatican over a cover lampooning God. In typical Charlie Hebdo fashion, the special edition features a bloodstained, bearded God-figure in sandals with a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder under the headline: "One year on: the killer is still at large."

GUN CONTROL MEASURES Republicans blast Obama's move

President Barack Obama's critics Tuesday savaged his gun control steps as an unlawful assault on Americans' constitutional rights, with Republican White House hopefuls pledging to immediately repeal the orders if they are elected in November. Obama, wiping away tears as he pleaded for citizens and lawmakers to be more resolute in tackling gun violence, announced measures to tighten federal background checks for gun sales, require those in the business of selling guns to be licensed or face criminal prosecution, and expand mental health treatment. Republicans, in the heat of a presidential campaign, immediately balked, with White House candidate Jeb Bush



warning that Obama was "trying to do an end-run" on the US Constitution despite an increased terrorism threat. "When I am president of the United States, I will repeal Obama's anti-gun executive orders on day one of my administration," he added. Republican hopeful Marco Rubio pledged the same, while long-shot candidate Mike Huckabee offered a stinging rebuke to Obama, linking the gun control fight to another hot-button battle in America's culture wars: abortion. Former business executive Carly Fiorina slammed Obama's move as "lawless unconstitutional overreach," while retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson warned the president was merely "advancing his political agenda." Critics including the top Republican in Congress accused him of intimidation that undermines American's right gun rights. "No matter what President Obama says, his word does not trump the Second Amendment," House Speaker Paul Ryan said in a tweet as Obama unveiled his executive actions. Several Democrats spoke out in support of Obama's plans, including the three candidates running for their party's presidential nomination. Frontrunner Clinton took to Twitter to thank Obama "for taking a crucial step forward on gun violence. Our next

YEMEN WAR Centre for blind people hit by Saudi-led strikes

Air strikes led by Saudi Arabia have hit a care centre for blind people, residents have said. Three people are believed to have been wounded at the Noor Centre for the Blind on Tuesday, according to Saba news agency. The capital's Chamber of Commerce and Industry was also hit in the strikes, although no casualties were reported. The strikes were targeted at Houthi forces, an ally of Iran, in Yemen's capital Sanaa, the port city of Hodaida and the city of Taiz. On 2 January, Saudi Arabia announced that a cease fire, which began on 15 December following United-Nations backed peace talks, had ended. It came on the same day the kingdom executed a Shia cleric convicted of "terrorism", which has seen tension grow between Saudi Arabia and Iran. So far, the Yemen war has killed 2795 civilians, according to the UN. Of the fatalities, around 60 per cent are the result of air strikes. DOZENS KILLED IN SYRIA CAPITAL In Syria, government and rebel bombardment killed up to 26 civilians and wounded dozens in the capital and a nearby opposition bastion yesterday, state media and a monitoring group said. More than 260,000 people have been killed since Syria's conflict erupted in 2011 with protests against President Bashar al-Assad's government.



National Assembly employees remove from the building pictures of late President Hugo Chavez, in Caracas, yesterday. Venezuela's opposition yesterday launched an offensive against President Nicolas Maduro at its first full session in control of the legislature, having vowed to oust him within six months. PHOTO: AFP

'IS lost third of its territory' Coalition says 'about 2,500' militants killed last month

AGENCIES The Islamic State group has lost around a third of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria, according to figures provided Tuesday by the US-led coalition. "In Iraq, it's about 40 percent," said Colonel Steve Warren, spokesman for the international coalition which carries out daily air raids against IS and also provides training and weapons to local forces fighting the group. "In Syria... we think it's around 20" percent, he said. When the size of the so-called caliphate IS proclaimed 18 months ago was at its largest, Iraq accounted for a slightly bigger part of it than Syria, reports Reuters. "Taking together Iraq and Syria... they lost 30 percent of the territory they once held," Warren told reporters in Baghdad. He said that since coalition air strikes began in August 2014, the IS group had lost as much as 22,000 square kilometers (8,500 square miles) -- or about 40 percent -- of the territory it once held in Iraq, and about 10 percent, or 2,000 square kilometers, of the land it claimed in Syria. The coalition air strikes also killed about 2,500 jihadists last month in Iraq and Syria, Warren added yesterday. In a new development, it has been revealed that IS scientists and weapons experts have developed sophisticated new weaponry capable of shooting down passenger jets. Newly emerged footage shows militants at the group's Syrian base in Raqqa creating a homemade thermal battery, for use in decommissioned military surface-to-air missiles. Experts say terror groups have had access to such weapons for decades - but storing them and creating the thermal battery vital to the missile's function is very difficult without advanced knowledge. It is not known whether IS has mastered that art or not. If they do, IS could potentially be capable of recommissioning thousands of disused missiles which will be huge concern for forces that fighting the militants.



NYE SEX ASSAULTS Merkel under fire over 'migrants' role

German Chancellor Angela Merkel came under mounting pressure yesterday for her welcoming stance toward migrants, which opponents have linked to a shocking rash of apparently coordinated sex attacks in Cologne on New Year's Eve. Police in the western city told AFP they have received more than 100 complaints by women reporting assaults ranging from groping to at least one reported rape, allegedly committed in a large crowd of revellers during year-end festivities outside the city's main train station and its famed Gothic cathedral. Victims blamed men of "Arab or North African" appearance, enflaming a heated public debate about Germany's ability to cope with the nearly 1.1 million asylum seekers the country took in 2015. Authorities have said there is no concrete indication that the perpetrators were asylum seekers. However critics of Merkel's liberal refugee policy charged that the Cologne assaults proved she was playing with fire without clear plans. Late Tuesday 200-300 people gathered in front of Cologne cathedral calling for more respect for women. One female demonstrator held a sign reading: "Mrs. Merkel, what are you doing? This is scary".

Historic deal stumbles over a statue

AFP, Seoul A landmark deal between South Korea and Japan to end a decades-old feud over wartime sex slaves is struggling to overcome a diminutive but daunting obstacle in the form of the small statue of a teenage girl. But Seoul says it only promised to look into the possibility of moving the bronze and called in a senior Japanese embassy official to protest what it called Kishida's provocative comments. South Korea's foreign ministry has also stressed that because the statue was put up by civic groups, it has no right to order its removal. And the group that spearheaded the campaign to create and erect the bronze is adamant that it isn't going anywhere. The statue cannot be "a condition or means of any agreement," the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan said in a statement on its website. "I am here to defend the peace monument," 22-year-old Jung Woo-Ryung defiantly declared, as she stood guard Tuesday beside the seated bronze figure that was erected on the pavement opposite the Japanese embassy in Seoul in 2011. Depicting a young, barefoot woman, dressed in a traditional Korean hanbok dress and with her fists clasped tight in her lap, the statue is both a symbol of the suffering endured by so-called "comfort women" forced to work in Japanese military brothels during World War II, and of their struggle to extract a formal apology and compensation from Tokyo. "And the Korean government cannot mention anything about the removal or moving of the monument," it added.

WWII SEX SLAVE ROW



ISI behind India air base attack

Says former White House official PTI, Washington Pakistan's powerful intelligence agency ISI is behind the attack on Pathankot airbase in Punjab using a terrorist group it created 15 years ago, a former top White House official has said. Bruce Riedel, who worked in the National Security Council of the White House and was among the few present at the Bill Clinton-Nawaz Sharif meeting in 1999 during Kargil war, said the attack is designed to prevent any detente between India and Pakistan after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise Christmas Day visit to Pakistan. In an article in the Daily Beast, Riedel said the attacks in Pathankot and on the Indian consulate in Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan was the handiwork of Pakistani terrorist group Jaish-e-Muhammad which the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) created 15 years ago. He quoted "well-informed press and other knowledgeable sources" for his assessment. "Any diminution in tensions with India might risk the army's lock on its control of Pakistan's national security policy," he said.