

# NEWS IN brief

## Turkish forces kill 32 Kurdish militants

REUTERS, Diyarbakir  
Security forces killed 32 Kurdish militants in Turkey's mainly Kurdish southeast this weekend, the army and security sources said yesterday, escalating a conflict reignited by the collapse of a two-year ceasefire last summer. It was one of the bloodiest weekends since the three-decades-old insurgency resumed last July.

## Next round of Yemen peace talks postponed

AFP, Dubai  
The next round of peace talks between Yemen's government and Iran-backed Huthi rebels scheduled for next week have been postponed, Foreign Minister Abdel Malak al-Mekhlafi said Saturday. He said talks now will be held on January 20 or 23 "because the Huthis rejected the date of January 14."

## \$1.3b lottery jackpot up for grab in US

AFP, Washington  
The jackpot for the US Powerball lottery rose to a whopping \$1.3 billion (1.19 billion euros) on Sunday after organizers said there was no winner in the weekend draw. According to the rules, the winner can choose to be paid the full jackpot in annual instalments over 29 years or take a lower one-off payment in cash.

## Catalonia to elect regional president

BBC ONLINE  
Members of Catalonia's assembly are due to choose a new regional president after pro-independence parties reached an agreement to form a coalition. The anti-capitalist CUP party and the Junts pel Si (Together for Yes) alliance are expected to elect Carles Puigdemont as regional president. Earlier Catalan president Artur Mas stepped aside to avoid new elections.



Police use a water cannon during a protest march by supporters of anti-immigration right-wing movement PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) in Cologne, Germany, on Saturday. Cologne police said the number of cases filed over violence during New Year's festivities had reached 379, and that asylum seekers and illegal migrants made up the majority of suspects. PHOTO: REUTERS

# Finally, starving Syrian towns to get aid today

### Says aid agencies; rebel group casts doubt on peace process

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Images of emaciated bodies and hungry children have led to an international outcry over the use of siege tactics by all sides in the war. A big Syrian rebel group said it was unacceptable to talk about a political solution to the war as people die of hunger and bombardment and the best way to force Damascus toward a settlement was to give insurgents anti-aircraft missiles. Meanwhile, a statement from Islam Army (Jaysh al-Islam) underlines opposition concerns over a UN-led diplomatic effort to launch peace talks in Geneva on Jan 25. The opposition want goodwill measures including a ceasefire, a detainee release and the lifting of blockades on besieged areas before negotiations. UN envoy Staffan de Mistura is shuttling around the region to prepare for the talks, part of a plan endorsed by the Security Council last month to end the five-year war that has killed 250,000 people. The Syrian government told de Mistura on Saturday it was ready to take part in Geneva talks but stressed the need to see the names of the Syrian opposition figures who will take part. It regards most of the main rebel groups as terrorists.

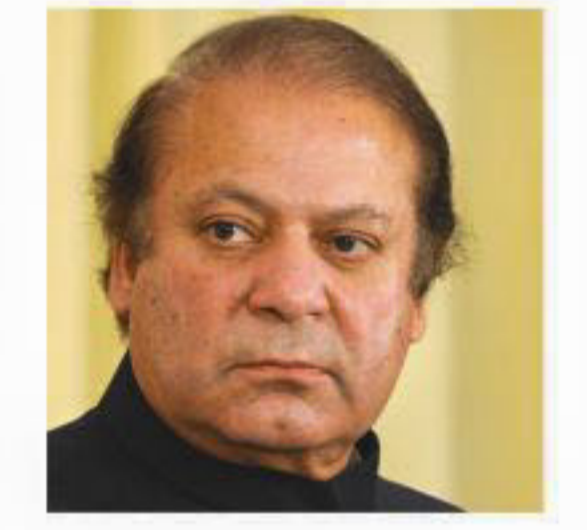
# Iran undermining regional security

### Accuses Arab League as Saudi-Iran spat grows

REUTERS, Cairo  
Arab foreign ministers yesterday accused Iran of interfering in the affairs of other Middle East states and undermining regional security, as officials met at an emergency Arab League session to discuss escalating tensions in the region. The crisis between the Sunni Muslim kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Muslim power Iran, both major oil exporters, started when Saudi authorities executed Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr on Jan. 2, triggering outrage among Shi'ites across the Middle East. In response, Iranian protesters stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran, prompting Riyadh to sever relations. Tehran then cut all commercial ties with Riyadh, and banned pilgrims from travelling to Mecca. Opening the emergency Arab League session in Cairo, United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan said the meeting "comes in light of a dangerous escalation". "Iran does not hesitate to exploit sectarianism as a way to gain control of the region," he added. Saudi Arabia said on Saturday after an extraordinary Gulf Cooperation Council meeting that it would take "additional measures" against Iran, but did not elaborate further. Arab League foreign ministers also agreed to condemn the attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran and accused the Tehran government of failing to protect them.

# Taliban peace talks to begin in Pakistan

REUTERS, ISLAMABAD  
Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States are set to begin talks today aimed at restarting the Afghan peace process and eventually ending 14 years of bloodshed fighting the Taliban insurgents. Officials from the four countries will meet in Islamabad, Pakistan foreign office sources said, in what they hope will be a first step towards resuming stalled negotiations. The Taliban are not expected to attend the talks. The Islamist militants have stepped up their violent campaign in the last year to oust the government in Kabul. High-profile suicide attacks in the capital and major territorial losses in southern Helmand province have underlined how far the country remains from peace without major Taliban factions on board. A previous fledgling peace process last year was stopped over Taliban founder Mullah Omar's death throwing the militant group into disarray and factional fighting.



# Probe will 'bring out the truth'

Pakistan tells US on Indian base attack  
REUTERS, Islamabad  
Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has told US Secretary of State John Kerry his country is swiftly investigating who was behind last week's attack on an Indian air force base, and that it would "bring out the truth". The assault on the base near the Pakistan border has thrown into doubt diplomatic talks planned for later this month between the nuclear-armed rivals. Kerry, speaking to Sharif by telephone, said he hoped the attack would not derail the talks that he said were in the interests of regional security, according to a statement from the Pakistani prime minister's office late on Saturday. "The Prime Minister told Secretary Kerry that we are swiftly carrying out investigations in a transparent manner and will bring out the truth," it said. "The world will see our effectiveness and sincerity in this regard." A meeting between the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan had been scheduled for Jan 15, but it is unclear if it will still happen, after six militants launched an assault on Jan 2 against the base and killed seven security personnel. India has called on Islamabad to take "prompt and decisive" action against militants it blames for the assault, which only ended after a four-day operation to secure the base.

# Prince who is playing with fire

### German intel warns of regional chaos in ME

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK  
At the end of last year the BND, the German intelligence agency, published a remarkable one-and-a-half-page memo saying that Saudi Arabia had adopted "an impulsive policy of intervention". It portrayed Saudi defence minister and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman - the powerful 29-year-old favourite son of the ageing King Salman, who is suffering from dementia - as a political gambler who is destabilising the Arab world through proxy wars in Yemen and Syria. Spy agencies do not normally hand out such politically explosive documents to the press criticising the leadership of a close and powerful ally. The agency was swiftly slapped down by the German foreign ministry after official Saudi protests, but the BND's warning was a sign of growing fears that Saudi Arabia has become an unpredictable wild card. The BND report made surprisingly little impact outside Germany at the time. It was the execution of the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and 46 others on 2 January that, for almost the first time, alerted governments to the extent to which Saudi Arabia had become a threat to the status quo. It appears to be deliberately provoking Iran in a bid to take leadership of the Sunni and Arab worlds while at the same time Prince Mohammed bin Salman is buttressing his domestic power by appealing to Sunni sectarian nationalism. The BND lists the areas in which Saudi Arabia is adopting a more aggressive and warlike policy. In Syria, in early 2015, it supported the creation of The Army of Conquest, which won a series of victories against the Syrian Army in Idlib province. In Yemen, it began an air war directed against the Shia Houthi movement, which shows no sign of ending. None of these foreign adventures initiated by Prince Mohammed have been successful or are likely to be so, but they have won support for him at home. The BND warned that the concentration of so much power in his hands "harbours a latent risk that in seeking to establish himself in the line of succession in his father's lifetime, he may overreach". The overreaching gets worse by the day. At every stage in the confrontation with Iran over the past week Riyadh has raised the stakes. The attack on the Saudi embassy and consulate in Iran might not have been expected but the Saudis did not have to break off diplomatic ties. Then there was the air strike that the Iranians allege damaged their embassy in the Yemeni capital. To assure the world, Prince Mohammed, in an interview with The Economist, said Saudi Arabia does not and intend not a war with Iran. But fears remain. There is also a sense that Prince Mohammed is an inexperienced gambler who is likely to double his stake when his bets fail. This is the very opposite of past Saudi rulers, who had always preferred to bet on all the horses. A main reason for Saudi Arabia acting unilaterally is its disappointment that the US reached an agreement with Iran over Tehran's nuclear programme. Again this looks naive: close alliance with the US is the prime reason why the Saudi monarchy has survived nationalist and socialist challengers since the 1930s. Aside from the Saudis' money and close alliance with the US, leaders in the Middle East have always doubted that the Saudi state has much operational capacity. And this is true of all the big oil producers, whatever their ideological make-up. This is the second area in which Prince Mohammed's interview suggests nothing but trouble for the Saudi royal family. He suggests austerity and market reforms in the Kingdom, but in the context of Middle East autocracies and particularly oil states this breaches an unspoken social contract with the general population. People may not have political liberty, but they get a share in oil revenues through government jobs and subsidised fuel, food, housing and other benefits. Greater privatisation with no accountability or fair legal system means a licence to plunder by those with political power. This was one of the reasons for the uprising in Syria and Libya. Oil states are almost impossible to reform and it is usually unwise to try. Such states should also avoid war if they want to stay in business, because people may not rise



Mohammed bin Salman

# TENSION IN KOREAN PENINSULA OVER NORTH'S NUKE TEST

# US flies B-52 over South Korea

### Trump praises Kim Jong-un for how he 'wipes out' political opponents

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The United States deployed a B-52 bomber on a low-level flight over its ally South Korea yesterday, in a show of force following North Korea's nuclear test last week. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un maintained that Wednesday's test was of a hydrogen bomb and said it was a self-defensive step against a US threat of nuclear war. North Korea's fourth nuclear test angered both China, its main ally, and the United States, although the US government and weapons experts doubt the North's claim that the device was a hydrogen bomb. The B-52, based in Guam and capable of carrying nuclear weapons, was flanked by two fighter planes, a US F-16 and a South Korean F-15, in a low flight over Osan Air Base, before returning to Guam, the US military said in a statement. Osan is south of Seoul and roughly 100 km (62 miles) from the North Korean border. The flight was "in response to recent provocative action by North Korea", the US military said. The United States is also considering sending a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to waters off the Korean peninsula next month to join a naval exercise with Seoul. Meanwhile, US presidential hopeful Donald Trump on Saturday praised North Korea's despotic leader Kim Jong-un, saying the way he executes his political opponents shows "he's the boss". Speaking at a Republican rally in Iowa, Trump had few nice words for the unpredictable North Korean leader. "You've got to give him credit," Trump said. "How many young guys - he was like 26 or 25 when his father died - take over these tough generals, and all of a sudden - you know, it's pretty amazing when you think of it. How does he do that? "Even though it is a culture, and it's a cultural thing, he goes in, he takes over, he's the boss. It's incredible. "He wiped out the uncle, he wiped out this one, that one. This guy doesn't play games and we can't play games with him. Because he really does have missiles and he really does have nukes." Trump has a track record of praising the leadership qualities of controversial



# Lanka govt proposes new charter to devolve power

AFP, Colombo  
Sri Lanka's new government yesterday presented its plan for a new constitution aimed at devolving power and preventing the sort of ethnic tensions that led to a long and bitter civil war that ended in 2009. The move comes as reformist President Maithripala Sirisena's administration takes some steps to promote post-conflict reconciliation and address alleged war crimes committed during the 26-year conflict between government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels. Sirisena, who unseated former leader Mahinda Rajapaksa in a bitterly contested poll last year, promised a new constitution to strengthen democracy and fundamental rights. According to the document presented to parliament on Saturday, the government intends to strengthen democratic rights, promote national reconciliation and establish a political culture that respects the rule of law. The new constitution will also guarantee fundamental rights and freedoms that assure human dignity and promote responsible and accountable government, it said. "The main idea is to devolve power to the grassroots level and strengthen democracy in order to prevent another war," a ruling party legislator who is close to the president told Reuters, asking not to be named. Some opposition members, however, have alleged that the new constitution has been drafted to please some Western nations and to dilute the main religion, Buddhism, in Sri Lanka. The government has rejected such accusations.



Maithripala Sirisena

# India teen gang-raped, shot, dumped in well

AFP, New Delhi  
An Indian teenager held captive for two weeks by a gang of men said in an interview broadcast that she was repeatedly raped before being shot twice and dumped in a well on the outskirts of New Delhi. The victim, reportedly aged 14, was allegedly abducted on November 22 while walking to a market in western Delhi, in the latest case of sexual violence in the Indian capital. Speaking of her ordeal to the NDTV news network, the teenager said she was held in a "dark room" where three attackers took turns to rape her over a two-week period. "After a fortnight of repeated abuse, one night they said they will let me go. They put me in the car and drove to a store to buy alcohol and then parked the car near a well," the girl said in the interview. "They told me they will let me go but as I took a few steps back, they fired two shots". She woke shivering and wet inside the well where she said she had been left for dead. Nearby villagers pulled her out on December 6 after hearing her screams, before she was rushed to hospital. Several men have been arrested over the attack, according to local media reports.