

Violent protests rock Iraq over PM pick

President says he is ready to resign rather than put forward a candidate rejected by protesters

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAGHDAD

Iraq's President said on Thursday he was "ready to resign" rather than put forward the candidate of a pro-Iranian coalition for the post of Prime Minister, deepening the country's political crisis. Barham Saleh's announcement came as anti-government protesters blocked roads and bridges in Baghdad. In the southern city of Nasiriyah, demonstrators set the provincial government building ablaze overnight for a second time since the protests began. Protesters also torched the new headquarters of a pro-Iran militia in Diwaniyah.

In a letter to Parliament, Mr. Saleh said he wished to guarantee the "independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity" of Iraq. But he cited the Constitution, which obliges the President to task the candidate put forward by Parliament's biggest bloc with forming a government.



Sticking to their demands: Anti-government activists walking with a national flag at a makeshift roadblock in the southern city of Basra late on Wednesday. • AFP

"With all my respect to (Basra Province Governor) Mr. Assaad al-Aidani, I decline to put him forward" for the post, Mr. Saleh wrote. As that could be seen as violating the Constitution, "I place before members of Parliament my readiness to resign from the position of

President", Mr. Saleh added. Mr. Aidani is considered as the candidate of Iran, which protesters accuse of meddling in Iraqi affairs. **'Independent PM'** Weeks into a protest movement that has rocked Baghdad and Iraq's south, leaving

hundreds dead, Parliament is in deadlock over the selection of a replacement for previous Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi. He resigned last month in the face of massive demonstrations over official corruption, economic woes and poor infrastructure despite the country's oil

wealth. The demonstrators oppose the entire political class and have vented their anger against leaders who are negotiating to nominate an establishment insider as the next Prime Minister. Pro-Iranian factions have touted outgoing Higher Education Minister Qusay al-Suhail for the post, later opting for Mr. Aidani after the President rejected Mr. Suhail's nomination. Both are unpopular choices with protesters, who also have slammed Mr. Aidani for crushing previous demonstrations in Basra province last year. "We don't want Assaad the Iranian!" said protesters in the southern city of Kut. The protesters want a technocratic premier who has had no involvement in the political system set up after the U.S.-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003. "The government is hostage to corrupt parties and sectarian divisions", said an activist in Nasiriyah.

Russian authorities raid Alexei Navalny's office

Move was linked to criminal investigation, say officials

REUTERS
MOSCOW

Russian authorities raided the Moscow headquarters of Opposition politician Alexei Navalny on Thursday, using power tools to gain entry before dragging Mr. Navalny out by force and confiscating technical equipment such as laptops. Mr. Navalny and his allies said the raid on his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) was carried out by the Federal Bailiffs Service and was connected to his refusal to delete a video investigation which levelled graft allegations against Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and billionaire businessman Alisher Usmanov. The Federal Bailiffs Service said it was carrying out investigative activities at Mr. Navalny's foundation as part of a criminal investigation. It said it had not detained



Alexei Navalny sitting outside his office during the raid on Thursday. • REUTERS

anyone during the raid. Mr. Usmanov brought and won a defamation lawsuit against Mr. Navalny in 2017. **'Won't delete video'** That case ended with a court ordering Mr. Navalny to delete within 10 days all references to the allegations in his video, which Mr. Medvedev and Mr. Usmanov said were utterly false. Mr. Navalny said on

Thursday he would not delete the video, which has been watched over 32 million times on YouTube since it was first posted in March 2017. The raid occurred a day after Mr. Navalny said that the forcible military conscription of one of his allies to a remote air base in the Arctic amounted to kidnapping and illegal imprisonment. Allies said Mr. Navalny, who was barred from running in a presidential election against Vladimir Putin last year, had been due to present his own show, which is critical of the authorities, on his online TV channel later on Thursday. Mr. Navalny's foundation, which specialises in publishing exposes on the alleged corruption of state officials, is the subject of a separate criminal investigation into alleged money laundering.

ELSEWHERE



Italian coalition hit as Minister quits

ROME Italian Education Minister Lorenzo Fioramonti said on Thursday that he had resigned, dealing a blow to the country's four-month-old coalition government. Mr. Fioramonti, of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, wrote on Facebook that he resigned because his demand for a minimum level of funding had not been met. • AFP

Typhoon Phanfone kills at least 16 in Philippines

MANILA Typhoon Phanfone swept across remote villages and popular tourist areas of central Philippines on Christmas day claiming at least 16 lives, authorities said on Thursday. Tens of thousands of people in the mostly Catholic nation were also forced to evacuate their homes, they added. • AFP

Over 16,000 complaints filed over Afghan polls

KABUL More than 16,000 complaints have been filed to Afghan election authorities over the handling of this year's presidential polls, officials said on Thursday, days after preliminary results gave President Ashraf Ghani a slim 50.64% majority. If the numbers hold following these investigations, the result is enough for Mr. Ghani to avoid a run-off, after he easily beat his long time rival Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, who won 39.52% votes. • AFP

China, Russia and Iran to hold naval drills in Gulf of Oman

'An attempt to deepen cooperation between the three navies'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

China, Russia and Iran will hold joint naval drills starting Friday in the Gulf of Oman, Beijing and Tehran said, at a time of heightened tensions since the U.S. withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal with Tehran. Set to take place from December 27 to 30, the military exercises aim to "deepen exchange and cooperation between the navies of the three

countries", Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Wu Qian told reporters on Thursday. Mr. Wu said the Chinese navy would deploy its Xining guided missile destroyer – nicknamed the "carrier killer" for its array of anti-ship and land attack cruise missiles – in the drills. For Iran, the drill's purpose was to bolster "international commerce security in the region" and "fighting ter-

rorism and piracy," said senior armed forces spokesman Brigadier General Aboldazl Shekarchi. The exercise would "stabilise security" in the region and benefit the world, state news agency IRNA quoted him as saying on Wednesday. China's Foreign Minister said the exercises were part of "normal military cooperation" between the three countries.

Netanyahu faces party leadership challenge

Election results are expected today

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
JERUSALEM

Israel's embattled premier Benjamin Netanyahu faced a challenge on Thursday for the leadership of his Likud party from a longtime rival, former Interior Minister Gideon Saar. Likud's roughly 1,16,000 eligible voters have until 11 p.m. to choose between Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Saar, with the result expected by early Friday morning. A defeat for Mr. Netanyahu, 70, would be a shock, but even a relatively close result could weaken his influence over the conservative party he has dominated for 20 years. After a decade in power,



Benjamin Netanyahu

Mr. Netanyahu is Israel's longest serving premier but he has been weakened by a series of corruption indictments. After months of political stalemate, he faces a third general election within 12 months early next year – but only if he first defeats his challenger.

Pakistan files review petition in army chief's extension case

'Several legal gaps in verdict, govt. wants their rectification'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD

The Pakistan government on Thursday filed a review petition against the Supreme Court's decision about legislation on the extension of service of Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa. A three-member Bench headed by then Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa on November 28 granted a six-month extension to Gen. Bajwa after being assured by the government that Parliament will pass a legislation on the extension/reappointment of an army chief within six months. The ruling came in the



General Qamar Javed Bajwa

nick of time as Gen. Bajwa, 59, was set to retire at midnight on November 28. In the review petition filed by Attorney General Anwar Mansoor, the government has urged the top court to form a larger Bench to hear the case and set

aside the earlier judgment. It also requested the court to keep the proceedings in-camera. Firdous Ashiq Awan, the Special Advisor to the Prime Minister for Information and Broadcasting, said the review petition was filed "because our legal team thoroughly, comprehensively, and closely reviewed all aspects of the decision and concluded that there are several legal gaps in the verdict. "With due respect to the judiciary, the government wants rectification of the faults and thus decided to file the review petition," she said.

17 civilians killed in attack on Yemen market: UN

Third incident in same area in a month

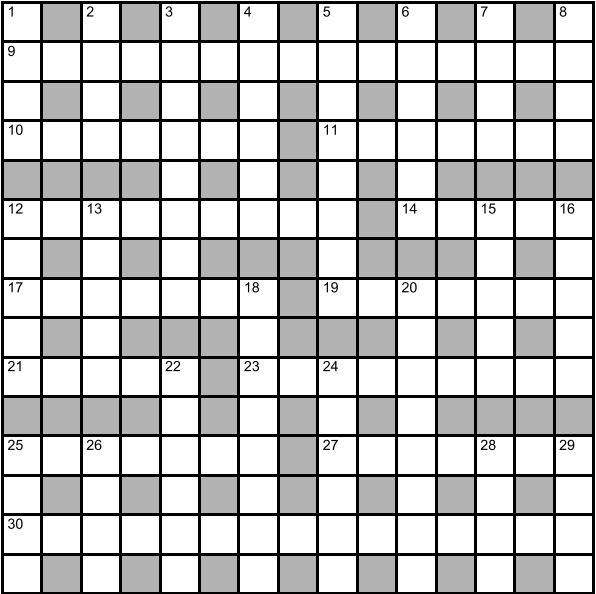
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SANAA

Seventeen civilians were killed in an attack in a market in Yemen's northern Saada governorate, the United Nations said, the third deadly assault on the same location in just over a month. The attacks come despite relative calm in Yemen, where large-scale combat between government troops – backed by a Saudi-led military coalition – and the Iran-aligned Houthi rebels has largely subsided. The UN said 12 Ethiopian migrants were among the 17 civilians killed in the incident on Tuesday at the Al-Raqw market in Saada go-

vernorate, a Houthi rebel stronghold. At least 12 people were wounded, it said, without saying who was responsible or what weaponry was used. The Saudi-led coalition acknowledged on Thursday it had carried out an operation in Monabbih, a Saada district where the market is located. The coalition did not provide further details. An attack on Al-Raqw market on November 22 killed 10 civilians, again including Ethiopian nationals, and just days later, at least another 10 civilians were killed and 22 wounded in a second such incident.

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12817

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■ ACROSS

- 9 No actor got this kind of movie (8,7)
- 10 Actively lead revolutionary struggle before harsh treatment (3,4)
- 11 By and large, UK, for one, is outside EU, at last (7)
- 12 Spooner's sped past packs of Arctic animals (4,5)

(set by Hypatia)

- 14 Gruff Arctic dog (5)
- 17 Mark Twain's plot changed show (7)
- 19 Exactly near main tourist location (4,3)
- 21 Supply, it can crawl without support (5)
- 23 Place for visitors to check out? (9)
- 25 Curtail banter to ban fool? (7)
- 27 Walking outfit (7)
- 30 Take out drawing tip near Joan Miro, perhaps (8,7)

■ DOWN

- 1 Just softly pushed out loud couple (4)
- 2 Fight with woman's outlook (4)
- 3 What one on trial should do – lose one's temper? (4,1,3)
- 4 Feel sick, going through doctor's prescription? It's a natural reaction! (6)
- 5 Wretched queen blamed nurses (8)
- 6 Bear hugging river duck (6)

- 7 Shout in Hindi, started by parliamentarian (4)
- 8 Resent messenger delivering nothing (4)
- 12 Is A, B...C possibly this? (5)
- 13 Dull if not drunk (5)
- 15 Charge that woman picked up for Japanese food (5)
- 16 Long story about earth (5)
- 18 Plebiscite re-held suppressing rising dissidents (8)
- 20 Encourage boring 1 playing ordinary broken chord (8)
- 22 Say artist picked up prize (6)
- 24 Chaplin didn't finish playing dictator (6)
- 25 Wife left cereal in microwave (4)
- 28 Hypatia? Not otherwise keen! (4)
- 29 Crow over clothing (4)

SUDOKU



Solution to puzzle 12816								
M	S	A	O	P	O	K		
C	O	P	O	F	O	R	A	S
S	U	R	O	F	O	C	I	
S	Q	I	R	R	E	L	P	L
U	N	A	I	O	L	H		
M	I	S	T	A	K	E	N	
T			E	A	T			
C	O	M	P	A	C	T	A	L
H	A	A						
A	F	A	I	R	A	E	A	N
N	O	V	E	N	A	S	U	F
W	O	T	H	U	I	A		
D	E	P	U	T	I	S	E	
R	I	T	D	O	E	G	E	

FAITH

Compassionate to a fault

The Lord is hailed as not only the abode of all auspicious qualities, but also as ever free of any doshas whatsoever. If at all He has any dosha it might be said that it is His magnanimous nature that makes Him compassionate to a fault when He does not see any doshas in His devotees, pointed out Kalyanapuram Sri Aravamudhachariar in a discourse. While both the Lord and His consort are the very embodiment of compassion, there is even a subtle competition between them and Sri is seen to be a cut above Him. For, when it comes to disciplining the erring jivatmas, while the Lord is stern in His dealings, Sri adopts only soft measures that would transform each one by gradually eliminating the tendency to err that is inherent in beings. Yet it is interesting to note that Periazhwar in one of his hymns presents an imaginary exchange between Goddess Sri and the Lord when she informs Him that the same Vibhishana whom He accepted in His fold had cast aspersions on her. This is a reference to the Hitopadesa section in Valmiki Ramayana when Vibhishana calls her a poisonous serpent tied to Ravana's neck. But the Lord justifies His act with the firm assertion, "My bhakta will not err or commit any mistake on any count," says the azhwar. This is His firm stance even if Goddess Sri raises a complaint against any devotee which is only a purely hypothetical situation. In the Vishnu Sahasra Nama, the term 'Avignatha' has a special significance. The literal meaning is not being aware. When applied to jivatmas it indicates their ignorance of the true nature of their Self; but when applied to the Lord it refers to His tendency to not heed any fault in His bhaktas. The upkeep and welfare of the universe and all beings is the prime concern for the divine couple.