

Protesters end siege of U.S. Embassy in Baghdad

We scored a huge win, which no one had done before; now, the ball is in Parliament's court, says spokesperson of Shia militia

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAGHDAD

Pro-Iran demonstrators left the besieged U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on Wednesday after the Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary force ordered them to withdraw a day after their dramatic incursion.

Thousands of Iraqi supporters of the largely Iranian-trained Hashed had encircled and vandalised the Embassy compound on Tuesday, outraged by U.S. air strikes that killed 25 Hashed fighters over the weekend.

They marched unimpeded through the checkpoints of the usually high-security Green Zone to the Embassy gates, where they broke through a reception area, chanting "Death to America" and spraying pro-Iran graffiti on the walls.

Iraq's caretaker Premier Adel Abdel Mahdi called on the angry crowd to leave the Embassy but most spent the night in dozens of tents set



● REUTERS

up outside the perimeter wall. On Wednesday morning, crowds of men brandished the Hashed's colours, torched U.S. flags and hurled rocks towards the compound. Security personnel inside responded with tear gas, wounding at least 20 people, the Hashed said.

By the afternoon, the Hashed called on its supporters to leave the Embassy and regroup outside the Green Zone "out of respect for the state".

"You delivered your message," it said in a statement. AFP's photographer saw protesters dismantling their

tents and leaving the Green Zone. "We burned them!" they said, streaming back out of checkpoints they had breezed through on Tuesday. Kataeb Hezbollah, the group targeted in the U.S. raids, initially told AFP it would stay at the Embassy. But the group's spokesman

Mohammad Mohyeddin later said it had decided to abide by the Hashed's order. "We scored a huge win: we arrived at the U.S. Embassy, which no one had done before," he told AFP.

Spiralling tensions

"Now, the ball is in Parliament's court," Moyheddin added, referring to lawmakers' efforts to revoke the legal cover for 5,200 U.S. troops to deploy in Iraq.

Tuesday's Embassy attack was the latest episode in spiralling tensions between the U.S. and Iran since Washington abandoned a landmark nuclear deal with Tehran in 2018.

Many of those tensions have played out in Iraq, which has close ties with both governments.

U.S. forces have faced a spate of rocket attacks in recent months, blaming them on pro-Iran Hashed factions. Last week, one of those at-

tacks killed a U.S. contractor, prompting the retaliatory U.S. air strikes that killed 25 fighters from Kataeb Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades).

President Donald Trump and other US officials have blamed Iran for attacks on U.S. forces and the Embassy.

By Wednesday, Iraqi forces had reimposed normal security measures around the perimeter of the Green Zone, usually inaccessible without a badge.

U.S. officials were alarmed that protesters crossed checkpoints so easily on Tuesday.

An Iraqi special forces fighter assigned to guard the Green Zone told AFP his units had no orders to intervene. "If I had had orders to act, I could have fired and stopped the storming of the Embassy," he said. "But after what happened, our hands are tied. We can't prevent the situation from deteriorating," he added.

Kim promises to unveil a 'new strategic weapon'

North Korea ends test moratoriums

ASSOCIATED PRESS
SEOUL

Expressing deep frustration over stalled nuclear talks, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un warned of unspecified "shocking" action and that his country will soon reveal a new "strategic weapon" to the world as its bolsters its nuclear deterrent in face of "gangster-like" U.S. pressure.

Mr. Kim also said North Korea was no longer obligated to maintain a self-imposed suspension on the testing of nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, which President Donald Trump has touted as a major diplomatic accomplishment. But Mr. Kim gave no clear indication that a resumption of such tests was impending and appeared to leave the door open for eventual negotiations.

Diplomatic stalemate

Mr. Kim has used the diplomatic stalemate to expand his military capabilities by intensifying tests of shorter-range weapons. His arsenal is now estimated to include 40-50 nuclear bombs and various delivery systems, including solid-fuel missiles designed to beat missile-defense systems and developmental ICBMs potentially capable of reaching the U.S. mainland.

Mr. Kim has also strengthened his negotiating position, moving the diplomacy closer to an arms reduction negotiation between nuclear states rather than talks that would culminate in a unilateral surrender of the weapons he sees as his strongest guarantee of survival.

Strategic weapons usually refer to nuclear-capable delivery systems such as ICBMs, but North Korea oth-



Kim Jong-un

erwise has been vague about what new arms it would display. It announced in December that it performed two "crucial" tests at its long-range rocket launch site that would further strengthen its nuclear deterrent.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the U.S. was deeply disappointed by North Korea's threat to resume nuclear missile tests but wants peace rather than confrontation with Pyongyang.

"If Chairman Kim has reneged on the commitments he made to President Trump it's deeply disappointing," Mr. Pompeo said after North Korean leader declared an end to moratoriums on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests.

"We have lived up to our commitments. We continue to hold out hope that he will live up to his," the top U.S. diplomat said.

"President Trump has taken an approach where we have tried to create a diplomatic pathway. We hope that the North Koreans will reconsider, that they will continue down that pathway.... We want peace not confrontation." Mr. Kim's comments were made at a meeting of the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee. (With AFP inputs)

Don't foresee a war with Iran, says Trump

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PALM BEACH

U.S. President Donald Trump on Tuesday said he does not foresee war with Tehran, after pro-Iranian demonstrators stormed the U.S. embassy in Iraq.

"I don't see that happening," Mr. Trump said at his holiday retreat in Florida when a reporter asked about the possibility of war with the Islamic republic.

"I like peace," the President said before heading in to New Year's celebrations.

U.S. officials said there were no plans to evacuate the mission, and no U.S. personnel were reported in-

jured. Ambassador Matthew Tueller, who had been on holiday, was on his way back to the Embassy.

The U.S. reinforcements "got in there very quickly," Mr. Trump said. "I think it's been handled very well."

Earlier, Mr. Trump blamed Iran for the Embassy attack. "Iran will be held fully responsible for lives lost, or damage incurred, at any of our facilities," Mr. Trump said on Twitter.

"They will pay a very BIG PRICE! This is not a Warning, it is a Threat," wrote Mr. Trump, adding "Happy New Year!"

Iran's Khamenei condemns U.S. 'malice' over Iraq strikes

U.S. had carried out airstrikes on Hashed al-Shaabi militants

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESS
TEHRAN

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday condemned U.S. air strikes on a militant group in Iraq.

"The Iranian govt & nation & I strongly condemn the U.S.'s malice," Mr. Khamenei said in a Tweet, referring to Sunday's deadly U.S. strikes on the Hashed al-Shaabi militants.

The U.S. carried out the strike in western Iraq in retaliation for rocket fire that



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

killed an American civilian contractor at a military base in northern Iraq on Friday.

In a tweet on Tuesday, U.S. President Donald

Trump accused Iran of "orchestrating" that day's storming of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

In response, Mr. Khamenei said: "That guy has tweeted that we (the United States) see Iran responsible for the events in Baghdad & we will respond to Iran".

"First, you can't do anything. Second, if you were logical - which you're not - you'd see that your crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan... have made nations hate you," he tweeted.

IN BRIEF



Will create a prosperous country for all: Gotabaya

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, in his New year message, said that he would create a prosperous country for all communities to live in peace, adding that development is the answer to issues faced by the Tamils. PTI

Netanyahu to seek immunity in graft case

Jerusalem Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday said he will ask Parliament to grant him immunity from corruption charges, a step that is expected to delay his trial for months. AP

Tear gas fired at Hong Kong protesters during march

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
HONG KONG

A huge New Year's Day pro-democracy rally in Hong Kong ended in mass arrests and police firing tear gas at hardcore protesters, as demonstrators sought to carry their movement's momentum into 2020.

The Civil Human Rights Front, the umbrella group which organised the march, claimed that more than a million people participated in Wednesday's rally, which had approval from the authorities.

But after a peaceful start, violence erupted within hours, with police and masked protesters facing off in several neighbourhoods



● REUTERS

on the city's main island.

Police used pepper spray, tear gas and water cannon, while hardcore protesters lobbed petrol bombs, built makeshift barricades and vandalised property belonging to businesses they con-

sider pro-Beijing - including Starbucks and banking giant HSBC.

Police said around 400 people were arrested for offences, including "unlawful assembly and possession of offensive weapons".

16 inmates die in Mexican prison fight

REUTERS
MEXICO CITY

Sixteen inmates were killed and five were wounded in a prison fight in the northern Mexican state of Zacatecas, authorities said, in one of the worst outbreaks of violence in the country's troubled penal system since President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took power.

The fight broke out around 2:30 p.m. on Tuesday afternoon at the Regional Center for Social Reintegration in the town of Cieneguillas.

An inmate was arrested with a firearm, and three more guns were found in the prison, as well as various knives.

Pope sorry for slapping devotee

Woman yanked him towards her, almost causing him to fall

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
VATICAN CITY

Pope Francis apologised on Wednesday for slapping a woman, who had grabbed him as he greeted a crowd of devotees, shortly before he delivered a speech denouncing "every form of violence against women."

The image of a visibly annoyed Pope Francis slapping his way free from the clutches of an admirer as he walked by Catholic faithful on New Year's Eve instantly went viral on social media.

An apology followed. "We lose patience many times," the Pope confessed.

"It happens to me too. I apologise for the bad example given yesterday," the head of the Catholic church



● AFP

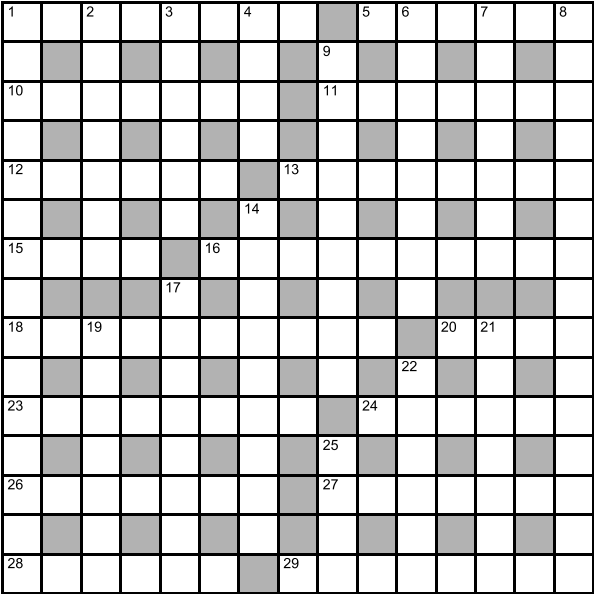
said before celebrating Mass at the Vatican.

The Pope was greeting children before the Nativity scene on Saint Peter's

square and was turning away when a woman cried out something, yanked his hand and almost caused him to fall.

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12822

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ACROSS

- 1 State that keeps one away from Congress? (8)
- 5 Grandmother has setback in French town (6)
- 10 A half-proud star recreated computer images (7)
- 11 Rail crashes - in a bit of emergency, there's another transport (7)

- 12 Bug good bright child (6)

- 13 Trained cadet due for reposting (8)

- 15 Vex a hill dweller in Assam (4)

- 16 Pitilessly batters ear of homeless child (6,4)

- 18 This old man is an annual figure appearing on the dot (6,4)

- 20 Turkish ruler overwhelms five of a group (4)

- 23 Facility - one working in part of building (8)

- 24 Swordsman is one who is undecided (6)

- 26 Beg with one politician for a different role (7)

- 27 One is held to entertain for a long period (7)

- 28 More irregular to go after new one signalling approval (6)

- 29 Engineer considered to be rescued (8)

DOWN

- 1 With this, the hemline may go up or down (8,7)

(set by Gridman)

- 2 Mother, suffering a setback, has zest. Wonderful! (7)

- 3 The endless chat about roofing material (6)

- 4 Mission teacher's first query (4)

- 6 Evil rot settles in Chennai, for example (8)

- 7 Knotty party game? (7)

- 8 Date that remains unchanged by girl (6,9)

- 9 Reveries that may still occur at night? (9)

- 14 Immediately, one working with editor is posted (9)

- 17 Thoroughly cooked! Congrats! (4,4)

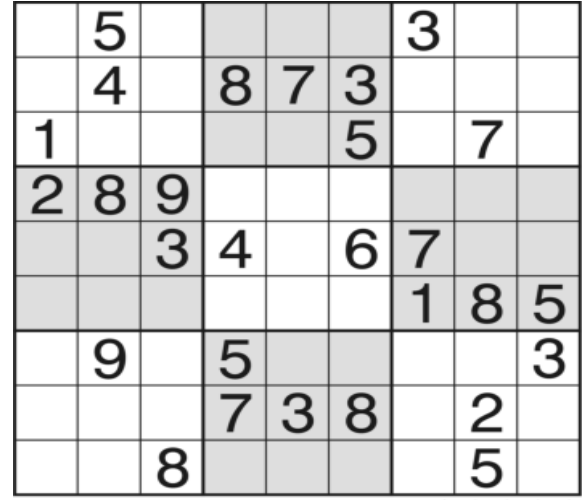
- 19 Stumbled but gave information about ruler (7)

- 21 Announce: former wife's about to destroy mail (7)

- 22 The French notice to temporary owner (6)

- 25 That woman has nothing that goes on foot (4)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to puzzle 12821

ALEWITFEP RANCER
DENSOR S A B A A
V E R S O T O R M E N T E D
E A N O O T T H I
R E P O R T C A R D C O M A
B T A A T I S L T
A A T H I R D U M P I R E
C O N N O I S E U R
G O T T N E T S S
R U E D E R G O M A N I A C
E L T V C L R
D R O P A H I N T E X I L E
I P U C E C U E
T H E A T R E T A K E S O N

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

5 1 8 9 2 4 3 6 7
6 4 2 7 1 3 8 9 5
7 9 3 8 5 6 4 1 2
1 6 5 3 7 2 9 4 8
2 3 9 4 8 5 1 7 6
4 8 7 6 9 1 2 5 3
8 7 4 2 6 9 5 3 1
3 2 1 5 4 7 6 8 9
9 5 6 1 3 8 7 2 4

FAITH

Bhooma came as Andal

The Lord is anxious to save jivatmas and grant them moksha, but this anxiety is even greater in His Consort, said M.A. Venkatakrishnan, in a discourse. When Rama is exiled to the forest, Sita insists on accompanying Him. She says She will walk in front on Him, and will trample down any thorns in the path, thus making the way smooth for Him. While this is certainly a mark of Sita's devotion to Lord Rama, it also has a symbolic meaning. She is indicating that She will soften the hearts of people, so that they become ready to receive Him.

With this characteristic anxiety for jivatmas, Bhooma Devi asks Lord Varaha to suggest some easy ways of reaching His feet. He has already given the world many ways of reaching Him. But these are too difficult for most people. So Bhooma Devi wants something easier. In reply to her question, Lord Varaha says that there are two easy ways of reaching Him - one is singing about Him; the other is to surrender to Him. But Goddess Earth is not content to merely know the answer to Her question. She aims to inform the world about what the Lord told Her in private. She wants to make the secret of liberation public, so as to benefit all mankind. So, She takes the avatara of Andal. Anantazhvan, a disciple of Ramana-jacharya, wrote a work titled Goda Catusloki, which records the greatness of Andal. Anantazhvan says that the Lord's Consort came as Andal, with the quickness of an arrow shot from a bow. Bhoo Devi's Gayatri mantra says She is dhanurdharAyai, that is the One who has a bow in Her hand. Anantazhvan must have had this in mind, when he described Andal's speedy descent to the earth. Andal's Thiruppavai contains the essence of the Vedas, and recitation of Her verses takes us nearer God.



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