Inside the 8 January edition

Sectarian tensions rise in Middle East; the mystery of the menopause; in defence of stormtroopers

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So 2016 is off and running, and it didn't take long for events in the Middle East to shake the world out of its post-holiday slump. The execution of a Shia cleric in Sunni-led Saudi Arabia has brought Muslim sectarian conflict back to the boil. As Saudi-Iranian relations plummet to a new low, veteran Middle East correspondent Brian Whitaker takes in the bigger picture on our front cover this week.

A particularly severe El Niño weather event has been causing havoc in various parts of the world, ranging from flooding to drought. We look at the potentially alarming outcomes and ask why this cyclical meteorological phenomenon still seems to leave scientists guessing.

In the US, Barack Obama enters his final year as president determined to defy the Republican-dominated Congress on both climate issues and gun control - we catch up with his efforts on both fronts. There's also the final dispatch from Chris McGreal's compelling series on life in the US's poorest towns, as he travels to the Native American community of Blackwater, Arizona.

In India, a new archaeological site could reveal clues about the mystery of the ancient Indus civilisation, while back in the present day a border peace initiative with Pakistan is on a knife edge after several recent terror attacks.

This week's Comment pages consider ominous signs of a rightwing political revival in Poland. Meanwhile the Eyewitnessed picture spread includes a terrific image of the colossal, 36-metre high golden statue of Chairman Mao being constructed in a Chinese field – a feature guaranteed to brighten up any back garden!

The longer-read Review section carries an important piece about the confusing and much-misunderstood science of the menopause. We also find out about the practical challenges of trainspotting in the vastness of China, while Discovery considers how drones can make agriculture more efficient.

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From Paris, an exhibition unearths beautiful photographs from the time of the Cuban revolution. Books looks at the identity of America's South Asian, Arab, Muslim and Sikh immigrants in the current climate of Islamic terror.

Notes & Queries debates the defensive properties of the body armour worn by stormtroopers, the immaculately turned-out but hapless foot soldiers of the Dark Side. There's also a particularly poignant Good to Meet You this week, from a group of international readers who unite each week in Austria to tackle the Quick Crossword.