



### Top Stories

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#### Dick Cheney makes surprise Iraq visit



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### Featured story

#### Australia's Howard calls for nativity scenes



Australia's Prime Minister John Howard has made a plea to restore the religious meaning of Christmas. Mr Howard said he had "contempt" for arguments that the religious side of the Christmas season should be toned down...

### Wikipedia Current Events

- Extinct mammoth DNA decoded.
- The Democratic Republic of the Congo holds its first national democratic poll in 40 years.
- The Bolivian presidential election, 2005 takes place in Bolivia, with Evo Morales and Jorge Quiroga as front-runners. Morales is expected to win a plurality of votes but not an absolute majority. If no candidate wins a majority, the election of the President will be by vote in the National Congress, also elected today.
- 42 people die following a stampede in the Indian city of Madras.
- Bono, Melinda Gates and Bill Gates are named Time's Persons of the Year.
- Vice President Dick Cheney is on a trip to various countries including Oman, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He made a surprise stop to Iraq today.
- Philippines clinched 5th place in 2005 ASEAN Para Games in Manila, Philippines. Thailand is on the top with 84 golds, followed by Malaysia.
- São Paulo Futebol Clube wins the FIFA Club World Championship
- President George W. Bush defends the Iraq War in a rare primetime Oval Office address. He said, "Not only can we win the war in Iraq — we are winning the war in Iraq."

#### Dick Cheney makes surprise Iraq visit

Vice President Dick Cheney made a surprise visit to Iraq today promoting the recent Iraqi election, amid the end to a lull in violence since recent elections. The Vice President's visit was so secretive even Iraqi prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari was unaware he was coming.

Mr. Cheney met with military commanders and Iraqi politicians as he was shuttled between locations in a group of eight armed helicopters.

Cheney commented on the recent elections, stating that "I think what started here in Iraq will have an enormous impact through the region," and "We're, as Americans, very proud to be part of that."

Later, Cheney took questions from 30 troops in a large tent. "From our perspective, we don't see much as far as gains," Marine Cpl. Bradley Warren told Cheney. I was wondering what it looks like from the big side of the mountain -- how Iraq's looking." "Well, Iraq's looking good," Cheney responded. "It's hard sometimes, if you look at just the news, to have the good stories burn through. Part of it is that what we're doing here, obviously, takes time from our perspective, looking back, as I say, to a year and a half ago, I think it's remarkable progress. I think we've turned the corner, if you will. I think when we look back from 10 years hence, we'll see that the

year '05 was in fact a watershed year here in Iraq."

Cheneys visit was marred by a surge in violence after a relatively quiet period after the elections. Nearly two dozen people, including two police officers, died Sunday in a combination of suicide bombings and insurgent attacks.

### **Kwaśniewski to end his term within 5 days**

Aleksander Kwaśniewski, a post-communistic ex-leader of the Alliance of the Democratic Left (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej), will end his term as the president of Poland within 5 days. His successor, conservative Lech Kaczyński, from the Peace and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), is going to take the reins on December 23rd. This comes as the result of the October 9 elections and the October 23 run-offs, when he defeated liberal Donald Tusk by 54% to 46%.

Although Kwaśniewski has quite a good reputation in Polish society, he has often been called irresponsible and very static. That was said by some, especially from nationalistic and populist parties, such as Peace and Justice, and Self-Defense and League of Polish Families, candidates in the last elections (both parliamentary and presidential), who had been promising people a strengthening of the position of Polish president.

The last weeks of Kwaśniewski's second term were marked by the issuing of some pardons to people related to the post-communistic left.

Kwaśniewski, who took over the presidency after the election of 1995, and then was re-elected in 2000, is the successor to Solidarity

movement leader Lech Wałęsa. He was unable to stand for re-election again as the Consitution of Poland states that the Polish president can be only be re-elected once.

### **Israeli PM Sharon suffers 'mild stroke'**

Hospital officials at Hadassah Ein Karem Hospital in Jerusalem announced that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a mild stroke Sunday evening.

"Our tests have shown that the prime minister had a mild CVA," (stroke) said Dr. Yuval Weiss, a spokesman for the hospital. Sharon did temporarily suffer some minor physical symptoms including slurring of speech and loss of some motor control.

Sharon was reportedly returning to his ranch in the Negev desert when he told aides he was not feeling well. He was rushed to hospital and admitted shortly after 8pm (18:00 UTC). The later statement of Dr Weiss stated that no invasive procedures were necessary.

Sharon's stay in the hospital is likely to be brief, some reports suggest he may be released in the morning although his personal physician, Boleslav Goldman has stated the stay may be three or four days. Despite hospitalisation, he is continuing to maintain full control of events in Israel.

Sharon has not previously suffered major health difficulties, although the BBC suggests his stressful life and position may have contributed to the incident and surrounding scare.

### **German hostage freed in Iraq**

The German archaeologist

Susanne Osthoff, who was abducted in Iraq on November 25th, has been freed.

Her brother told n-tv that she had been brought to the German embassy in Baghdad and is well. Foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier confirmed the reports and said that her Iraqi driver, who was abducted along with her, is still in the hands of the kidnappers but they have promised to release him as well.

How she was freed, whether ransom was paid, or even which group abducted her is still unknown at this time. Steinmeier declined to answer any questions on the topic.

The captors demanded that the German government breaks off diplomatic relations with Iraq, which it has refused to do.

Osthoff had been living in Iraq since 1991. She is a converted Muslim and married to a Jordanian. Her 12-year old daughter is living in Germany. In recent years Osthoff became more and more involved with delivering aid to the Iraqi people. She was featured on the front page of the New York Times in 2003 [1] and appeared in a series about her work in the German daily Süddeutsche Zeitung.

### **Approval down for President Pacheco**

According to a poll taken by Demoscopia and published in the Costa Rican newspaper Al Día, 53% of respondants say they disapprove of the presidency of Abel Pacheco. This is an increase in 21 points since the last poll taken in August of this year.

Costa Rica is the only Central

American country yet to ratify the Central American Free Trade Agreement (or CAFTA). Pacheco has sent the bill to the legislative branch for ratification but they are not expected to approve until April of 2006. CAFTA was supposed to go into effect on January 1, 2006.

### **London bomb survivors launch campaign for public inquiry**

Survivors of the London Bombings have urged the British public to write to their MPs, and set up an online petition calling for an independent Public Inquiry into the attacks.

52 people were killed and hundreds more injured on July 7th 2005 when four suicide bombers blew themselves up on three separate London Underground trains and a public bus.

Earlier this week the British government rejected calls for a Public Inquiry, arguing that such an investigation would be too expensive, take too long, and be a distraction from their efforts to combat terrorism. Instead, the government has offered to put together a "narrative of events".

But survivors of the attack argue that a fully comprehensive investigation could teach valuable lessons which may help reduce the likelihood of future attacks, and improve the response capabilities of the emergency services.

Some survivors, such as Rachel North (a pseudonym), who has been active in organising a support group for her fellow victims, have been angered by the government's alternative proposal of a "narrative". Writing on the weblog she started to help her, and others, come to terms with the aftermath of July 7th, Ms

North says:

"Even if you don't like the questions, don't like the answers, think you know the answers already, Mr Blair, it is us, not you, who are paying the cost for this... If the cost of answering questions makes you squirm, then too bad... We run the risks on the trains, the buses, the streets each day... How dare you presume you know our questions and how dare you presume that they can be answered by a 'narrative of what happened', as if we are children to be placated with a story. I know what happened, I want to know why."

Ms North also quotes a number of other survivors:

"We are constantly reminded that this is the worst peace time bombing London has ever seen, for something that bad there should be an inquiry. People died, families lost someone they loved and hundreds are still suffering. You can't put a price on that but apparently the government can." - "Fiona"

"If nothing else, an enquiry would make sure some of these lessons were learnt in case, God forbid, anything like this happened again. I thought there were plans in place for emergencies such as this. Whilst the emergency services did a fantastic job on the day, I have been stunningly underwhelmed by the support offered to victims since." - "Pauline"

An anonymous survivor, writing on the "Yorkshire lass" website, says:

"When I watched the Al-Qaeda video declaring Jihad against the UK I was haunted by the familiarity of the voice, it was my voice, my accent, my dialect. This

is not a man who was recruited and trained in some far off country that I have barely heard of, this was a man who was recruited and trained while he lived 20 minutes from my mother's home where I was born and raised. The words he spoke of are words similar to what I have heard many times from disillusioned young men that I studied for my A Levels with. They are the words of hatred I overheard when I worked as a support worker at my local college. They were words of students who were educated... when someone follows through with the actions of those opinions to the detriment of others, questions need to be asked why preventions were not put in place and this needs to be done by public inquiry for peace of mind. I have been told that I am looking for justice in the wrong place and in some way that is right. However, I want some sort of justice, some manner of peace of mind, some questions answered and resolutions made. I don't want others to have to go through what myself and hundreds of other commuters did on that Summer's day."

Relatives of the dead have also been very critical. Quoted on the BBC's website, Saba Mozakka, the daughter of Behnaz Mozakka, who died in the Piccadilly Line explosion, said:

"The families will be campaigning for there to be a full public inquiry... A narrative of events will not satisfy anybody. This is not something we will go away on."

Marie Fatayi-Williams, whose son Anthony was killed in the attack, told the BBC: "I ask myself - if there is really nothing to hide then why shy away from a public inquiry? It is the only real way

that we can truly get things discussed and see for ourselves what happened and what lessons can be learnt and whether we are better prepared now than on 7 July... I have a son who was killed and is never going to come back. Nobody is going to tell me that [an inquiry] is a waste of police time."

The survivors' petition has so far gathered over 100 signatures. The British government has given no response as yet.

### **Australia's Howard calls for nativity scenes**

Australia's Prime Minister John Howard has made an impassioned plea to restore the religious meaning of Christmas.

Mr Howard said he had "contempt" for arguments that the religious side of the Christmas season should be toned down by removing Christmas trees and symbols and nativity scenes. He said he had been saddened by the removal of Christmas trees and nativity scenes from public places.

It is thought that the reason behind the removal of traditional Christmas scenes was so that non-religious people and those of other faiths were not offended. Mr Howard said "You don't win tolerant brownie points by pretending to be something that you're not".

Backing Mr Howard, Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane John Bathersby said "We are a Christian country. If minorities are to integrate, they need something to integrate into. I don't think there is any intolerance in saying, 'This is who we are'".

The president of the Islamic Council of Queensland, Abdul

Jabal, said "We don't celebrate Christmas but we support others doing so. It's a time of peace and sharing".

Opposition leader Kim Beazley used Mr Howard's comments to attack the government's industrial relations policy saying "I would say this to John Howard and to the Australian people about it, the biggest threat to Christmas in this country is John Howard's extreme industrial relations law". He added that people who wished to take time off work to celebrate Christmas have no rights to do so under the government's industrial relations reforms.

### **President Alvaro Uribe asks Washington to stop meddling**

Alvaro Uribe, president of Colombia, reportedly told the United States on Friday to stop meddling in the affairs of his country. The U.S. ambassador to Colombia asked the president to take steps to fight corruption that have plagued Colombian regional elections. Uribe stated that "the Colombian government does not accept the meddling of foreign governments, even if it is the United States."

U.S. ambassador William Wood gave a speech in which he claimed that many regional, including mayoral, races had gone unopposed due to bribery and intimidation. The ambassador blames rightist paramilitary groups for most of the offenses. Wood suggested that groups who continue to commit offenses despite the peace deal they signed should be stripped of the benefits they have received through that deal.

Uribe has been criticized by many human rights groups for going soft

on paramilitary organizations. President Uribe's father was killed by leftist guerrillas.

Uribe is a conservative politician and one of the United States closest allies in the region. The ambassador, William Wood, apologized for confusion made by his comments saying that "there was no intention to interfere in any way with Colombian elections, but rather to support the democratic, free, open and impartial process."

A former ambassador, Myles Frechette, suggests that because the president is up for re-election in May, he might want to demonstrate to the country that Colombia is a sovereign nation.

### **Today in History**

1972 - Eugene Cernan, Ronald Evans and Harrison Schmitt aboard Apollo 17 returned to Earth. No human has visited the Moon since.

1974 - An early PC, the Altair 8800, went on sale.

1984 - The Peoples Republic of China and the United Kingdom signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration, agreeing to transfer sovereignty of Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997.

1998 - The U.S. House of Representatives passed articles of impeachment against President Bill Clinton over the Lewinsky scandal.

### **Quote of the Day**

"It is better to die for an idea that will live, than to live for an idea that will die." ~ Steve Biko

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