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continuous support of Iran's just cause on the nuclear issue."

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In a statement, the MDC remarked that "Ahmadinejad's visit is not only an insult to the people of Zimbabwe, but an affront to democracy and to the oppressed people of Iran."

New York man pleads guilty in New York City subway bomb plot

Zarein Ahmedzay, a man from New York, has pleaded guilty to conspiring to blow up subway trains in New York City along with two other men, in a plea entered in federal court in the city. He admitted to having flown to Pakistan in the summer of 2008 with two friends, one of whom has plead guilty, for training with al-Qaeda, where they met al-Qaeda leaders and offered their assistance in fighting US troops in Afghanistan. They were instead ordered to plan suicide-bombings in New York City similar to the 2005

London subway bombings.

The three men, Ahmedzay, Najibullah Zazi, and Adis Medunjanin, began planning their attack in time for Ramadan in September 2009, but their attack was foiled when Zazi's car was stopped entering New York City. Zazi had been testing the bombs in Denver, Colorado and was bringing them back to New York City. Ahmedzay plead guilty to conspiracy to use a weapon of mass of destruction against people in the United States; conspiracy to commit murder; and providing material support to a foreign rebel organization. He is expected to be sentenced in late July, and faces a maximum sentence of life in prison.

While Admedzay's defense attorney, Michael Marinaccio, declined to comment on whether his client was cooperating with the investigation, he did say that by pleading guilty to the charges, "[t]here's a potential benefit to him." Admedzay originally plead not guilty along with Medunjanin. Medunjanin's attorney Robert Gottlieb said Friday that Medunjanin intended to go to trial. "This case is much different as it pertains to Mr. Medunjanin," said Gottlieb.

In a written statement, United States Attorney General Eric Holder said the plot "makes clear we face a continued threat from al-Qaeda and its affiliates overseas. With three guilty pleas already and the investigation continuing, this prosecution underscores the importance of using every tool we have available to both disrupt plots against our nation and hold suspected terrorists accountable."

The leaders who ordered them to

plan the suicide-bombings, Saleh al-Somali, head of international operations for al-Qaeda, and Rashid Rauf, a key operative, were both killed in the past year in the Waziristan region of Pakistan by drone attacks.

Zeus botnet trojan horse is back

Trusteer, a web security company, reports that a trojan horse virus called Zeus can steal online banking details from infected computers. The virus has infected one out of every 3,000 computers of the 5,500,000 million which the company monitors in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The trojan can infect users of Mozilla Firefox and Microsoft Internet Explorer, it is multi-platform, and steals login information by recording keystrokes when the machine connects to certain websites, usually banks or other financial institutions. The stolen data is transmitted to a remote server and sold to cyber-criminals. "We expect this new version of Zeus to significantly increase fraud losses, since nearly 30% of Internet users bank online with Firefox and the infection is growing faster than we have ever seen before," said Amit Klein, chief technology officer at Trusteer, to BBC.

The trojan has also affected Wikinews users, including Brian McNeil, who is the founder of Wikinewsie, a restricted-access wiki used to collaborate on sensitive news reports. McNeil reported on his userspace: "On Saturday [April] 17, a Windows-based PC in the house issued a cry for help, the Avira package running on the system had just detected a piece of malware; full scans indicated several known pieces of malware and numerous hidden files. Additional scans revealed that all but one of the USB memory sticks and portable hard drives in the house were infected with something. The Zeus botnet, as it turned out." E-mail accounts for accredited

reporters have also been affected.

Somali al-Shabaab group seizes three towns

According to witness reports, three towns in the Galgudud region of Somalia have been taken over by the counter-government group al-Shabaab, taking them from a rival group, the pro-government Ahlu Sunna.

The three taken towns were El Der, Galad, and Masagaway; they were taken over without any resistance from Ahlu Sunna. All three are on the road to the Somali capital Mogadishu.

Senior al-Shabaab official Sheik Yusuf Kabokudukade commented that "[w]e have overrun the militants who tried to stop the efforts to spread Islam in Somalia. With the power of Allah we have taken control of three districts in Galgadud region. We will not stop until we take control of the whole region from the enemy of Allah."

The al-Shabaab group controls large portions of southern central Somalia, and part of of Mogadishu.

Belgian prime minister offers resignation

Belgian prime minister Yves Leterme has offered to resign amid a political dispute, the press office of the Belgian parliament reported on Thursday.

The Belgian king, King Albert II, has not yet accepted the prime minister's offer. He and Leterme met on Thursday's afternoon, the office said. The king said that the resulting political turbulence from the resignation "seriously threatens" the country's standing in the European Union.

"[He] had no other choice than to inform us that he would go to the king immediately to tender the government's resignation," said Belgium's health minister, Laurette

Onkelinx.

The Belgian palace commented on the issue in a written statement. "The king and the prime minister jointly underlined that [...] a political crisis would be inopportune and would seriously damage both the economic and social well-being of the citizens and the role of Belgium in Europe."

Leterme also resigned as prime minister in late 2008 over a banking scandal. He returned to office last November when former PM Herman van Rompuy gave up the post to become the first, full-time head of the European Union.

This latest resignation is a fallout of Belgium's long-term power struggle between the country's French-speaking Walloons and Flemish-speaking majority.

The latest disagreement centers on special rights for Walloons living near Brussels; specifically, the location of electoral boundaries around the capital. A key coalition member, the Flemish liberal Open VLD Party, pulled out of the government, frustrated over the failure to resolve the dispute. Party chairman Alexander De Croo said that "[w]e have not agreed on a negotiated solution and therefore Open VLD no longer has confidence in the government."

Without the VLD, the other four government parties have 76 of 150 lower house seats in the parliament, although governing with such a small majority would be hard, Al Jazeera says.

US state of Arizona signs into law controversial immigration bill

In a move that has already ignited protests around the United States, Arizona governor Jan Brewer yesterday signed into law a bill that would crack down on immigration across the Mexican border.

Widely regarded as the harshest measure against illegal immigration

in the US, the bill would allow police to legally question and detain anyone if they have "reasonable suspicion" to do so, as well as as making the failure to carry immigration papers a crime. Critics say that the bill would lead to discrimination and harassment against Hispanic people, whether or not they are legal citizens. The bill will enter into effect in mid-August of this year, 90 days after the current state legislative session ends.

The bill has been widely criticized both within Arizona and across the country. The most prominent criticism has come from President Obama, who said that the bill will "threaten to undermine basic notions of fairness that we cherish as Americans, as well as the trust between police and their communities that is so crucial to keeping us safe." The clause allowing police to demand documents was compared to Nazism by the Catholic cardinal in Los Angeles.

The law is expected to face several court challenges as soon as it enters into effect, and President Obama has already ordered the US Justice Department to determine the legality of the bill.

Speaking in support of the bill, Governor Brewer said that the law would represent "another tool for our state to use as we work to solve a crisis we did not create and the federal government has refused to fix." She said that she agreed with sponsors of the bill, who said that it would be an important asset in the fight against illegal immigration, particularly as Arizona is a major crossing point on the US-Mexico border. She said that Arizona had been "more than patient waiting for Washington to act. But decades of inaction and misguided policy have created a dangerous and unacceptable situation."

Greece formally asks for EU-IMF loans

Greece has formally asked for rescue loans by the European Union and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to be activated, aimed at helping the country recover from an economic crisis.

Under the plan, countries in the Eurozone will provide up to 30 billion euros in loans in the first year, while the IMF will contribute ten billion euros.

"The moment has come," said Greek prime minister George Papandreou. He stated that it is "a national and pressing necessity for us to formally ask our partners for the activation of the support mechanism, which we jointly created in the European Union." The prime minister added that "several days will pass before money can start being drawn."

Under the bailout, Greece's borrowing needs for the immediate future will be covered, so it can avoid default and keep servicing; the request needs to be approved by all fifteen countries using the euro, and will be reviewed by the European Central Bank.

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Illinois Fair Map Amendment could die before appearing on ballot

The Fair Map Amendment, a citizen-led initiative in Illinois to reform the state constitution's procedures on legislative redistricting, may not gather enough signatures to be presented before voters during the next election. As of last Friday, organizers have collected only 120,000 of the 279,000 votes needed to bypass the state legislature and have the issue decided on solely by the voters in the November 2 election.

The current process of redistricting, or redrawing district lines every ten years following the nationwide

census, is in the hands of the state legislature, or the General Assembly. The maps are often drawn by party leaders, allowing incumbent legislators to minimize and discourage opposition in their districts and perpetuate the leading party's dominance statewide.

Election statistics indicate that incumbents are successful in their reelection 98 percent of the time, and that Democrats have dominated legislative elections since they were able to draw the redistricting map in 2001. The Democratic Party has successfully reinforced their dominance through "spoking", which involves extending districts in Chicago — a Democratic stronghold — out into the more Republican-leaning suburbs. In addition to allowing more Chicago residents to become legislators, this method severely weakens the strong Republican presence in the suburbs. Republicans, if given the chance to draw the maps, could overturn this trend by keeping key Republican-leaning suburban and downstate communities intact within their districts.

The Fair Map Amendment, supported by Republicans and good-government groups such as the League of Women Voters of Illinois, would take the redistricting process out of legislators' hands and instead give that task to an independent, nine-member commission. The amendment would apply to the redistricting of only state legislative districts, not US congressional districts. The General Assembly would still have to approve the commission's suggested map, however.

Proponents initially aimed to collect the required signatures by April 1, but their inability to do so forced them to push their deadline to last Friday. Even then, organizers were still unable to meet their goal, and they now have until May 3 to send the necessary paperwork to the Illinois Secretary of State's office.

"We're not having so much trouble; it's two weeks before we have to file," says Jan Czarnik, a member of the League of Women Voters.

Czarnik suggests that the petition low number of signatures is due in part to not having "enough people circulating petitions in such a short amount of time." As Kent Redfield of the Institute of Government and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois–Springfield commented, "If you've got basically volunteers circulating petitions rather than, say, political parties, people that are normally used to doing this, you're going to have to have a larger margin of error." Another possible setback is that public opinion may not carry as much fervor as for other previously proposed amendments.

Republicans, who hold the minority in the legislature, have proposed the amendment through more conventional means — via the General Assembly — but have been unsuccessful. Legislators also have considered other ways to reform the redistricting process. A few Republican party leaders' campaign funds have donated cash to the group organizing the petition, and House Minority Leader Tom Cross has asked the governor to call a special session on legislative redistricting. Some Democrats support the amendment, including Sheila Simon, her party's candidate for Lieutenant Governor.

Other Democrats, however, strongly oppose the proposal. Senator Martin Sandoval from Chicago warns that "Hispanics will not see a proportionate and fair increase in Hispanic-majority districts," and the Mexican American Legal Defense & Educational Fund wants assurances that minority rights will not be curtailed.

Two children killed in fire in Derbyshire, England; man arrested

Two children were killed in a

"suspicious" house fire in Buxton, Derbyshire, England, on Friday evening. Police arrested a 17 year old in the early hours of Saturday morning.

During the fire, which occurred in the town of Buxton at approximately 2245 UTC on Friday, 23-year-old Fiona Adams and an eight-month-old baby successfully escaped through a first floor window, jumping down onto a child's trampoline. Both mother and child are currently in a hospital, having suffered from severe burns. The two children killed have been identified as five-year-old Niamh and two-year-old Cayden.

Assistant Chief Constable Steve Cotterill stated that police attended the house, following reports of nuisance and noise in the garden. Nothing was found, and the area has now been cordoned off as investigations continue. Cotterill said that incident had been referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, and that "[s]omeone on the estate may well know any particular intelligence that we're after, or information which may assist us in this case. And I would offer for them to come forward to us in full confidence."

Flowers and teddy bears have now been placed at the house where the fire occurred, with one tribute reading: "Sleep with the angels little darlings. God bless." Karen Jackson, a resident of one of the nearby houses, spoke out about the family. "They were brilliant, a lovely family," she commented. "Everyone liked them, everyone. They didn't have any enemies. It's heartbreaking, I'm still in shock now. I just feel numb."

US indicts eleven alleged pirates from Somalia

Eleven suspected Somali pirates have been indicted in the US in connection with recent attacks on two US navy ships off the coast of Africa.

The men were brought to a

courthouse in Virginia on Friday, to face piracy charges after being detained on US ships as the cases against them were being prepared.

A first group of five suspected pirates was indicted in connection with what authorities say was a firefight on March 31st between the USS Nicholas and their vessel in the Indian Ocean.

The six other defendants were charged with an alleged April 10th attack on the USS Ashland in the Gulf of Aden near Djibouti. If convicted, they will face life in prison.

Until recently, pirates detained in international operations off the African coast were generally tried in Kenya. Kenyan authorities, however, recently indicated they needed more international financial help for this; Voice of America reports that Kenyan courts are becoming overloaded with piracy cases.

Commons Picture of the Day



An adult female European Grass Snake (Natrix natrix). Public domain by: Wilder Kaiser

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