



Top Stories

Striking NYC transit workers will return to jobs

Under an agreement reached on Thursday, striking New York City transit workers will return to their jobs in 12-24 hours.

Greenpeace activists clash with Japanese whaling fleet in Southern Ocean

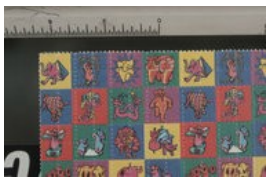


The environmental activist group Greenpeace has attempted to

disrupt Japan's Southern Ocean scientific whaling fleet.

Featured story

Drug website surveys LSD users and culture



Erowid, a website with the stated mission of "Documenting the Complex

Relationship Between Humans & Psychoactives" has over the past few months been gathering data through a series of surveys about the drug LSD to present at the LSD Symposium, scheduled for January 2006 in Basel, Switzerland.

Wikipedia Current Events

•Acetylene and hydrogen cyanide, precursors to life's basic ingredients (DNA and proteins), are found around a star in the constellation Ophiuchus.

Wikipedia Current Events

•Judge Richard Fred Suhrheinrich of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit rules that the US Constitution does not include "a wall of separation between church and state," denying a claim by the ACLU and approving the continued display of the Ten Commandments in a Kentucky courthouse.

•The 2005 New York City transit strike is halted as strikers agree to return to work when negotiations resumed.

•India's most advanced INSAT-4A telecommunication satellite is successfully launched by the EADS SPACE Transportation generic rocket, Ariane 5, from the spaceport of Kourou in French Guiana.

•Tony Blair makes a surprise visit to Basra in Iraq, to address 4,000 British soldiers and discuss withdrawal. He states that "we can eventually draw down our own capability" once the Iraqi forces "build up their own strength".

Former Australian defence chief's son to be discharged from the Army

Private David Cosgrove, 22, the son of celebrated former defence chief General Peter Cosgrove will be discharged from the Army after going Absent Without Official Leave (AWOL) and breaching standing orders.

David Cosgrove was placed in

Holsworthy military prison in October, 2005 for up to 14 days after going AWOL from his Singleton barracks. When released he is alleged to have breached "unit standing orders" and was administratively warned he was "unsuitable for service". It is believed that he will leave the Army by March, 2006.

David Cosgrove's indiscretions have upset the military at the senior level. Senior army figures were furious with The Australian newspaper for reporting the incident.

It is also thought to be an embarrassment for General Cosgrove who led a much celebrated 40-year military career before retiring to become an executive at Qantas.

It has also been learned that another of General Cosgrove's sons, Phillip, will be voluntarily leaving the Army following service in Iraq where he was injured.

First charges laid over riot text messages

Strike Force Enoggera, the group of detectives poised with investigating the recent racially motivated violence across Sydney, has laid its first charges against a man alleged to have forwarded SMS messages encouraging further violence.

New South Wales Police allege that a 33 year-old Matraville man, who was arrested at 9:30PM

Wednesday, forwarded "offensive and inciting" text messages following the violence at Cronulla. The man was taken to Maroubra Police Station where he was charged with using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence and a count of print, publish to incite or urge the commission of a crime. He was granted bail and is to appear in Waverley Local Court on 1 February 2006.

It is alleged that the messages were to incite people to turn out at Cronulla on December 18, 2005 for another round of violence.

Strike Force Enoggera commander Dennis Bray has indicated that more arrests will follow. He also said that arrests will not only be made for organising the events but for the "more serious criminal offences" committed during the violence.

The investigations into the violence have been extended further with the Australian Surveillance and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) conducting their own investigation into groups thought to have used the violence to promote their own political agenda.

Australian woman wins right to have dead husband's baby

An Australian woman has won the right to be impregnated with sperm from her husband, who died seven years ago. The sperm was taken from the man shortly after his death in a car accident, and frozen. The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal ruled that the woman should be permitted to take the sperm to New South Wales. Posthumous conception is illegal in Victoria, where the sperm is currently stored.

Australian States to launch high court battle against IR reforms

After months of threats from the states to take the federal government of Australia to the High Court of Australia over it's Work Choices Act, New South Wales has formally lodged a writ with the High Court. Other states have indicated that they will follow the New South Wales government's lead.

The 30-page Statement of Claim lodged by NSW Industrial Relations Minister John Della Bosca and Solicitor-General Michael Sexton claims that the Work Choices Act is unconstitutional as the act extends the commonwealth's powers beyond what the constitution has given them. The Howard government has argued that they have such powers under the corporations provision of the constitution. Mr Della Bosca argues that the corporations provision is there to protect individuals from corporations.

Mr Sexton said "The heart of the Commonwealth legislation is its reliance on the corporations power, and the question is whether that is valid in these circumstances. In other words, whether it's possible to legislate in effect about industrial relations simply because the employer is a trading or financial corporation".

The Howard government's plan effectively collapses the state's industrial relations systems, which differ greatly from the new system.

Calpine declares bankruptcy, cites natural gas prices

Electrical power generator Calpine

Corporation declared bankruptcy on Tuesday. The San Jose, California based company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in U.S. Federal Court, to facilitate debt restructuring and to allow for normal operations to continue. Calpine has obtained secured debtor-in-possession financing from Deutsche Bank and Credit Suisse First Boston totaling \$2 billion. The company announced that some of its Canadian subsidiaries would also file for creditor protection under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act. Calpine operates natural gas and geothermal electricity generating plants in 21 U.S. states and 3 Canadian provinces.

The recent rise in natural gas prices due to Hurricanes Rita and Katrina has pushed Calpine's cost significantly above the locked in selling price for its long-term contracts. Calpine has asked the court to void eight long term contracts, including a 20-year contract entered into with the State of California's department of Water Resources and Pacific Gas and Electric Company in 2001.

The company received permission on December 21 from the Federal Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of New York to use \$500 million of its financing to continue operating and paying its employees salaries and benefits.

Striking NYC transit workers will return to jobs

Striking New York City transit workers will return to their jobs in 12-24 hours under an agreement reached today. While no final contract agreement has been reached, transit work will resume as negotiations continue. At 2:40 pm EST, the TWU board voted to end the strike. By 3:00 pm, the

TWU Local 100 website had posted a notice to workers to return to work.

Mediator Richard Curreri announced the union is "taking steps" to immediately restore transportation to the city. "We have requested the leadership of the TWU to take the actions necessary to direct its membership to immediately return to work and they have agreed to take such actions," Mr. Curreri told reporters.

Thirty-four thousand Transport Workers Union Local 100 members walked off the job December 20 after working months without a contract when negotiations broke down over disagreements concerning pensions, health benefits, and pay. The strike has affected an estimated 7 million commuters in the city.

Station staff on the London tube to take industrial action over staffing levels

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) has called for industrial action on New Year's Eve over staffing levels on the London Underground. Union members voted more than five to one in favour of the strike.

The vote for industrial action is because of "back-door attempts to displace hundreds of safety-critical station staff under spurious cover," said Bob Crow, RMT General Secretary, to the BBC. "The RMT will not accept any dilution of safety standards either for our members, or Tube users and we hope that the travelling public will join us in calling on London Underground to step back from the brink and start talking to us seriously."

Following the vote, the RMT called for a 24-hour strike beginning at noon on New Year's Eve, and if necessary a second 24-hour action to begin 6:30 p.m. Sunday, 8 January. Transport for London announced a meeting with the RMT at ACAS(The Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service) after the results of the vote were announced.

The London Underground responded to the move, pointing to the agreement made last year with the RMT which agreed to shorter working weeks so long as there is no additional cost to Tube fare payers. "There are no staff cuts across the Tube network," the spokesperson said.

"There can be no justification for the RMT now renegeing on its agreement and trying to ruin New Year's Eve for thousands of Londoners," London Mayor Ken Livingstone said.

HIV vaccine trial ready to roll in Thailand

With first world countries such as Canada reluctant to engage in trials of a vaccine for HIV, Thailand has completed recruitment of volunteers for Phase III of a clinical trial. Over sixteen thousand selected volunteers from a pool of 65,000 will receive the experimental vaccine combination, ALVAC and AIDS Vac.

The trial is concentrated in the provinces of Chon Buri and Rayong and will be monitored over a period of three years to assess the effectiveness of the experimental vaccination.

In Canada questions were raised regarding the safety of conducting wide-scale trials of a vaccine. It was strongly suspected that

participants in a trial might be encouraged to engage in unsafe behaviour when, due to the double-blind nature of the clinical trial, they may have received a placebo in place of the vaccine.

Australian academic study supports nuclear power

A group of Melbourne scientists has released a study of the energy problems confronting Australia in the future. The study endorses the use of nuclear energy and attacks some of the data used by anti-nuclear campaigners.

The scientists from the University of Melbourne say their research shows that the benefits of nuclear energy have been underestimated and concerns about nuclear waste overplayed.

The six month study compared the environmental impact, health risks, economic effects and social implications of the use of fossil fuels, renewable energy sources such as wind and solar energy, and nuclear power.

According to the Melbourne University, the investigation will significantly impact the nuclear debate in Australia, with findings showing that hundreds of times more uranium could be available than was predicted in a widely quoted European study.

Associate Professor Martin Sevier, of Melbourne University's school of physics, claims the recent study bolsters the case for Australia to invest more in nuclear energy. Sevier says his research into nuclear waste disposal should help dispel many environmentalists' fears.

"One thing that's perhaps not always realised is that the amount

of waste that comes out of a typical plant is around 30 tonnes a year, he said. "The amount of waste that comes out of a coal-fired power plant is around 1,000 tonnes a day."

Prof Sevier says his study has exposed flaws in the European study into the limits of the uranium industry. "This previous research overestimated the energy costs and carbon emissions generated by the construction of nuclear power plants and for mining uranium," Prof Sevier said.

The Australian Conservation Foundation's (ACF) nuclear campaigner, Dave Sweeney, says the study appears flawed and does not provide a sound argument for the use of nuclear energy.

"It glances over some really key concerns of proliferation, key areas of reactor safety are not delved into too deeply and they have direct links to industry websites for further information," said Mr Sweeney. "I'm not sure it's altogether appropriate or altogether balanced to be referring people to the nuclear industry's own websites for further information on such matters as radioactive waste, nuclear weapons and nuclear reactor safety."

The six-month study found Australia has more uranium than was previously thought. "We have enough uranium in Australia to power the country for thousands of years," said Prof Sevier.

Friends of the Earth nuclear campaigner Dr Jim Green said nuclear power should never be considered as an energy source. He said greenhouse emissions saved by switching to nuclear power were only about 5 per cent

of total emissions and could only be achieved if thousands of reactors were installed globally.

Dr Green said an energy debate in Australia was necessary, but it had to go beyond just the nuclear alternative.

Couples Thrashed for sitting in a Park in Meerut

Mayhem erupted on Wednesday in Meerut, north-east of New Delhi, as scenes of women cops beating and pulling the hair of helpless women whose only fault was walking in a park with male partners were telecasted on News Channels.

People crowded the streets to protest against the actions which the local police termed as law enforcement.

'Operation Majnu' as it was termed was aimed at breaking up frolicking couples at Company Gardens on Monday afternoon. Chief of Police Meerut said that the police entrusted to enforce a drive against Obscenity had clearly gone overboard.

Two policewomen have been suspended and an internal inquiry has been ordered. The two were named as Inspector Madhu Malati and sub-inspector Mamata Gautam who were most active in the physical assault carried out on the women.

The targets of the assault were not satisfied. One of the women, aged 25, was taking a walk in the park with her brother when Inspector Madhu Malati descended on her calling her a whore and beating her up. Priyanka was kicked in the chest and slapped numerous times on her face just like dozens of other women who,

after being beaten up were dragged to vehicles waiting to take them to the police station where their parents were called. They were later released after warnings.

Students spilled onto the streets of Meerut shouting "Down with Police Dictatorship" and set fire to effigies of cops.

After the public humiliation of being beaten up, abused and dragged to the police station to make statements, several couples did not make their way back home and are still reported to be missing.

Members of Parliament said this was the sign of a sick mind. News reports have quoted the Meerut Police range DIG as admitting to extreme and excessive treatment by the police in Operation Majnu carried out in the company gardens on Monday.

One angry student protester said that this is a sign of hypocrisy and that India cannot be the country with the second largest population in the world if people sitting together in this country is such a sin.

US Senate blocks Alaska refuge drilling

By a narrow vote late in the evening on December 21st, 2005 the US Senate blocked opening the nation's oil reserve in National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska . This vote delivers a victory to environmentalists and denies the Bush administration their top energy priority. Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) attached the drilling plan to a measure to fund ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the Senate late last night agreed to pass the defense bill, without

the drilling provision.

Two key Republicans, Lincoln D Chafee (R-R.I.) and Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), joined Democrats in opposing the drilling. Senator Lieberman (D-Conn) said yesterday that Stevens was to blame for holding up money for the military. By including the drilling measure in the defense spending bill, it was hoped to twist the senators' arms into voting for both provisions together in the scramble to finish the important business before the Senate's Christmas break.

Destroyed Kelso High School to be rebuilt

The future direction of Kelso High School has become a little clearer following an announcement by the New South Wales government that the school will be rebuilt on it's former site as a year 7 to 12 secondary school.

The original school built in 1978 was destroyed by fire on August 18, 2005. The cause of the fire remains a mystery. Following the fire, students were receiving lessons at a number of locations around Bathurst, but have since returned to the Kelso High School site where they are housed in demountable buildings on the school's oval. The ruins of the former school lay behind.

A report made following a series of community meetings into the replacement of the school earlier this month said that the community wished for Kelso High School to be rebuilt at its former site as a secondary school. The report also said that the community wished for Kelso and Bathurst High Schools to pool HSC resources by sharing subjects and allowing years 11 and 12 students

to study across both campuses.

A number of models were proposed at the meetings. These included:

Rebuilding Kelso High School as a senior high school only (years 10 through 12) near Charles Sturt University and Bathurst TAFE. Under this plan Bathurst High School would cater for years 7 to 9.

Rebuilding Kelso High School as a middle school from years 6 to 9. Rebuild Kelso High School as both a primary and secondary school, incorporating Kelso Public School. Rebuilding Kelso High School as it was on it's former site.

The proposal to rebuild Kelso High School as a secondary school and share HSC resources with Bathurst High School was made at the community meetings. Under this system, both schools will have seperate principals and identities with a college director co-ordinating HSC activities between the two campuses. If one school does not offer a subject the student is interested in they will be able to take that subject at the other campus.

Bird flu resistant to anti-viral drug

In an article in the December 2005 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM), researchers from Oxford University report that two recent avian flu fatalities in Vietnam were patients who had been treated with the anti-viral medication Tamiflu. There has been one other reported case of Tamiflu-resistance in Vietnam.

The NEJM report documents that during treatment of H5N1-infected patients with Tamiflu there can be selection for mutant virus variants that are Tamiflu-resistant. This is

also been observed with other more common flu virus types. The chances of Tamiflu-resistance arising during H5N1 infections might be enhanced by two properties of H5N1; its ability to replicate rapidly and its ability to infect the gastrointestinal tract. In such cases, higher doses of Tamiflu and longer course of treatment may be needed. Combination treatment with other anti-viral drugs is a common strategy for dealing with viruses that become drug resistant.

Japanese whaling ship to dock in Hobart

A Japanese whaling ship, the Keiko Maru, will be docking in Hobart on December 24 to transfer a sick crew member to hospital. The crew member is suffering from appendicitis.

Greenpeace has called on the Australian government to prevent the ship from refuelling. The government stated it is opposed to commercial whaling, but that taking such action would be "counter-productive". Greenpeace CEO Steve Shallhorn said that it is an opportunity for Australia to demonstrate its opposition. "The Australian Government does have control over port authorities and we believe it does have the possibility to refuse to allow the ship to be refuelled," he said.

Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell supports the intention of Greenpeace activists, but believes that such a protest would not be helpful. "In some respects it can be counter-productive although I share the passion, I share their objective, we share of the objective of trying to stop whaling," he said.

Japan claims that its whaling

activities in the Southern Ocean are for scientific purposes, and reject suggestions that the catch is commercial. "Anti-whaling proponents have tried to label the research catch as commercial whaling in disguise, but this is a tactic to discredit the research effort," says the Question and Answer section of the Japan Whaling Association website.

Greenpeace activists clash with Japanese whaling fleet in Southern Ocean

The environmental activist group Greenpeace has attempted to disrupt Japan's Southern Ocean "scientific" whaling fleet. After searching for the whaling fleet for nearly a month, the Greenpeace ships, MY Esperanza and MY Arctic Sunrise, are floating alongside the Japanese mothership in Australia's Antarctic territorial waters, directly south of Tasmania.

The Japanese whaling fleet has an expected catch of over 900 minke whales – more than double its previous catch. The fleet - owned by Kyodo Senpaku and part-owned by Nissui, Japan's second-largest marine products firm - is also targeting endangered fin whales for what they claim is a scientific program. Fin whales are the second largest creatures on earth.

Greenpeace say they have asked the whalers to stop whaling immediately and return to Japan, but have received no response from the vessels. In inflatables carrying banners which read "defend the whales" and "stop the whaling," crew from the two ships declared their intention to stop the hunt.

Leader of the Greenpeace expedition, Shane Rattenbury said their eight small boats have begun

to "interfere" with the whaling process.

"We positioned our two ships to the stern of the Japanese mother ship in order to prevent the whale being transferred on to the ship and we were successful in stopping that process for about 45-minutes," said Mr Rattenbury, describing a capture boat ramming the Greenpeace ship in an attempt to push it clear.

He said the Japanese boat fought back with water cannons and one of several Greenpeace inflatables capsized in the wash. All crew were retrieved without injury.

"We're going to do everything we can over the coming weeks to interfere with the whaling process, and stop the whales being killed," he said, "our small boats will be putting themselves between the harpoon and the whale.

In a radio call to the whaling vessels, from the bridge of the Arctic Sunrise, Yuko Hirano, of Greenpeace Japan called upon the whalers to stop killing whales "and leave the internationally recognised Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary." Japan's scientific whaling has been the subject of repeated criticism by the International Whaling Commission.

The Japanese Institute of Cetacean Research, claim the amount of scientific data gathered by Japan's research program (JARPAII) is extensive and that Japan's whale research programs are conducted in accordance with the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. The Institute of Cetacean Research say their research does not involve illegal whaling.

Greenpeace say over the next 2

years 40 more fin whales will be added to the annual kill, along with 50 humpback whales.

"This whale hunt is unnecessary, unjustified, and unwanted," said Rattenbury. "Once the whales have been measured and weighed by the 'scientists' the butchers get to work and the whales are cut up and boxed for market. This is all about money and not science."

The area in which the Japanese fleet is hunting has been designated as the Antarctic Whale Sanctuary, in an effort to allow whale populations to recover after stocks were depleted during the commercial whaling of the last century.

Seventy crew and campaigners from 19 countries are on board the two Greenpeace vessels, including the UK, Netherlands, Canada, Australia, Ghana, Russia, Norway, Denmark, USA, France, Italy, Japan, Ireland, India, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, Austria and Argentina.

Japan's whaling program is expected to kill nearly one thousand whales this season.

Technology Brief for December 22, 2005

Seagate Technology has said it intends to buy rival company Maxtor for \$1.9 billion. Both companies produce hard drives. The deal, priced at 60% of Maxtor's closing share price, is intended to acquire Maxtor's customers, not its technology.

Seagate, which also makes drives for Microsoft's Xbox 360, will have over 40% of the hard drive market share. The Scotts Valley, California, based Seagate had 30% of the hard drive market.

Provided the deal makes it past regulatory committees, Maxtor shareholders will receive .37 of a share of Seagate common stock for every 1 share of the Milpitas based company.

Today in History

1823 - A Visit From St. Nicholas, attributed to Clement Clarke Moore, was first published.

1947 - The transistor (pictured), invented by John Bardeen, Walter Brattain and William Shockley, was first demonstrated at Bell Laboratories.

1954 - The first successful human organ transplant: Drs. Joseph Murray and J. Hartwell Harrison transplanted a kidney to a patient from his twin brother.

1972 - Pittsburgh Steelers running back Franco Harris made the Immaculate Reception of the football passed "to" him by quarterback Terry Bradshaw near the end of a playoff game.

1990 - The Republic of Slovenia voted to secede from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

December 24 is The Emperor's Birthday in Japan; Ziemassvetki in Latvia; the traditional date of Festivus.

Quote of the Day

"Many Christmases ago, I went to buy a doll for my son. I reached for the last one they had, but so did another man. As I rained blows upon him, I realized there had to be another way . . . out of that a new holiday was born . . . a Festivus for the rest of us!"

~ Jerry Stiller as "Frank Costanza" in Seinfeld, on the origins of Festivus.

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