



Top Stories

Bali Nine ringleaders sentenced to death



The ringleaders of the Bali Nine, Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, were today sentenced

to death by a Denpasar court.

New photos of Abu Ghraib prison abuse



Australian SBS program Dateline broadcast what it said were previously unpublished images of Iraqi prisoners in

Abu Ghraib prison.

Featured story

Evolution may occur faster than once thought, scientists claim



Physics student Peter Lu and the economist Motohiro Yogo claim to have

shown that evolution can happen much faster than previously thought

Wikipedia Current Events

• Italy: Italian ambassador Francesco Trupiano apologizes to Libya on behalf of Italian minister of Constitutional Reform Roberto Calderoli, who suggested Italy use "force against Muslims."

Wikipedia Current Events

•Indonesia: The final three defendants in the Bali Nine hearings in Indonesia, Australians, Matthew Norman, 19, Tan Duc Thanh Nguyen, 23, and Si Yi Chen, 20, are sentenced to life imprisonment.

•Palestinian Authority (PA): The United States and Israel deny a "destabilisation plan" of Hamas, winner of the January 2006 legislative elections, which was revealed on February 14 by the New York Times. However, they do acknowledge that they would cut off funds and transfers of tax-receipts to the Palestinian Authority. The aim of the "destabilisation plan" was to push the PA to organize new elections "U.S. and Israel Deny Plans to Drive Hamas From Power"

•Haiti: In a case of apparent electoral fraud, hundreds of ballot boxes are discovered in a garbage dump in Haiti, throwing the results of the elections there in doubt.

RU486 debate complicates with amendments posed in Australian House of Representatives

The ongoing debate over whether the Australian Health Minister Tony Abbott, or the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) regulate the abortifacient mifepristone (RU486) has complicated with a number of members proposing amendments to the Senate bill, now in the House of Representatives.

Jackie Kelly (Australian Liberal Party, Lindsay) has said that "There should be a transparent process in which the minister is accountable for his or her decision" on so-called restricted goods (of which RU486 is such a good) as listed in the TGA legislation. Kelly has proposed an amendment with points stating that "the Minister for Health and Ageing continuing to have the decision making role in relation to the approval of restricted goods...", "the Minister being required to obtain written advice from the Therapeutic Goods Administration prior to giving written approval or refusal to approve", "the Minister's decision being subject to disallowance".

In the debate on February 14, Andrew Laming (Liberal, Bowman) noted his intent to propose an amendment in the later consideration in detail stage, noting his views that the TGA process is "so far removed...from the concerns and the beliefs of the community" and that he is "unable to convince [himself] that completely leaving these decisions to the TGA is the right thing to do". His amendment loosely aims to propose a "disallowable instrument in Parliament where there is a disagreement with the findings of the TGA."

The introduction of amendments has caused confusion on procedural matters February 15 in the Questions to the Speaker period (that follows Question Time), where members can ask questions of the Speaker on

procedural and other technical matters. In the following vote on the proposed legislation, if one of the votes on the amendments succeeds, this has the effect of discontinuing the other amendment proposals, as each of the amendments proposed has the effect of being a complete alternative bill.

The RU486 debate will have precedence over all other matters in the House until it is dealt with. Voting is expected on Thursday.

New photos of Abu Ghraib prison abuse

An Australian TV station has shown new photos allegedly showing more of the prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison.

"Dateline", a current affairs programme broadcast on the SBS public network, claimed the images they displayed were examples of the range of abuses carried out at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and included previously unseen material such as killing, torture and sexual humiliation. The program also alleged that prisoners at Abu Ghraib had been killed when U.S. soldiers ran out of rubber bullets as they tried to handle a jail riot, and started to use live rounds.

Executive producer Mike Carey said Dateline had obtained a file containing hundreds of pictures, some known and others that show new abuses. However, he declined to say how the pictures came into their possession.

Some pictures appear to show U.S. soldier Charles Graner who had a leading role in the earlier Abu Ghraib abuse scandal. Many of the new images are more graphic than those previously published - these new photos

include prisoners performing sex acts and wounded/dead prisoners. SBS alleged the photographs of the dead bodies were of people who had died at Abu Ghraib during interrogation.

The Guardian cites an unnamed US defense official saying that the Army had reviewed the pictures posted by SBS and confirmed that they were among those that are subject to the Freedom of Information Act request made by the ACLU. The American Civil Liberties Union has been granted access to pictures in possession of the army that had not been publicly released by a U.S. federal court in September, but the U.S. government appealed the decision.

Pentagon spokesperson Bryan Whitman stressed it is U.S. policy to treat all detainees humanely. He further said that "The abuses at Abu Ghraib have been fully investigated," and that "When there have been abuses, this department has acted upon them promptly, investigated them thoroughly and where appropriate prosecuted individuals."

Saleh al-Humaidi, a Yemeni journalist, told Reuters "This is truly American ugliness that no other country in the world can compete with... the Americans ought to apologize to mankind for their government's lie to the world that it is fighting for freedom and that it came to Iraq to save it from Saddam Hussein's oppression."

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld testified that not all known photographs of the abuses at Abu Ghraib had been publicly released at the Senate Armed Services Committee inquiry in May 2004. Mr Rumsfeld said, "beyond abuse of prisoners, there are other photos that depict incidents of

physical violence toward prisoners, acts that can only be described as blatantly sadistic, cruel and inhuman."

German Constitutional Court prohibits shooting down hijacked passenger planes

The Bundesverfassungsgericht has declared legislation which would have allowed the German Air Force to shoot down hijacked passenger planes unconstitutional.

The Luftsicherheitsgesetz (literally: Aviation Safety Act) was passed in January 2005 and mainly dealt with uncontroversial matters concerning the safety at airports. One provision however allowed the minister of defense to order the Air Force to shoot down a hijacked plane as a last resort if it could be presumed that that plane would be used as a weapon to kill people on the ground.

The court based its decision to strike down that provision on three considerations:

1) It found that the federal government lacks the legislative competence for that part of the act under the Basic Law, the German constitution, which gives the states the main authority to fight disasters and thus, as the court, implied terrorism. Only the federal cabinet acting as a whole could overrule that in certain cases and as the act specifically gives only one minister, the defense minister, that authority it is unconstitutional.

2) The court also found that the act is incompatible with the constitutional right to life and the human dignity. The act would make passengers and crew of a hijacked plane, victims themselves, to "objects" not only to the terrorists but also to the state, which does not have the authority to kill innocents. If their deaths

would be used to save others they would be reduced to mere "things" at the pleasure of the state. Further, the court believes that the arguments of the federal government, saying that passengers in such a situation would die anyway, are invalid as human lives deserve protection regardless of the expected duration of their existence and that it is impossible to fully assess the situation leading to an eventual invocation of the act. 3) The third consideration concerned planes manned solely by terrorists. Shooting down those would not violate the right to life and human dignity as in 2), however as described under 1) the federal government lacks competence to pass such legislation.

Reactions

Gerhart Baum, a former interior minister and one of the plaintiffs, hailed the decision as "historic" and said were it not for that ruling "we would have martial law while fighting crime".

Defense minister Franz Josef Jung said "it is our duty to protect the citizens from terrorism". He announced that he would consider lobbying to change the Basic Law.

The ruling is expected to also have bearing on current discussions to extend the mandate of the Bundeswehr (German military forces) to help police large events like the upcoming soccer world championship in Germany, as it implicitly reaffirms the separation of armed forces and the police.

Evolution may occur faster than once thought, scientists claim

Two graduate students at Harvard claim to have shown that evolution can happen much faster than

previously thought. Physics student Peter Lu and his former roommate, economist Motohiro Yogo, decided to apply an economics model to a well-known marine fossil record in order to predict how fast life can adapt to changes in the environment. The technique, vector autoregression, is used to predict the stock market based on its historical behavior.

Initially their model confirmed previous analysis that life was slow to adapt. However, fossil-preserving rocks from some periods are more commonly found than from others. When they compensated for this, the lag disappeared. So far as could be seen from the geological record, the biosphere seemed to respond immediately to changes. This would mean that life could rapidly recover from large extinctions; it was previously thought such recovery would take millions of years.

U.K. soldiers arrested over Iraqi abuse video

Three British soldiers have now been arrested by military police in connection with the video showing abuse of Iraqi civilians by U.K. troops. One of them is reported to be the cameraman.

The video, filmed January 2004 in the town of Amara north of Basra and made public on Saturday, shows the troops punching, kicking and beating four Iraqi teenagers with batons just inside their compound. A leering commentary is provided by the cameraman.

Earlier footage showed an explosion in the compound, reportedly from one of three hand grenades thrown by Iraqi protesters. The marines then ran outside, apprehended these four

Iraqi youths and brought them inside the walls, where the abuse took place.

The provincial council in Basra has suspended relations with the British forces in response to the footage, which has been widely shown in the Arab media. Two Iraqis claiming to be among the abused youths have come forward demanding compensation, and the abuse has been condemned in Britain and across the Middle East.

Last three Bali Nine smugglers jailed for life

The remaining three members of the Bali Nine have been sentenced to life in prison by a Denpasar court. Matthew Norman, 19, Si Yi Chen, 20, and Tan Duc Thanh Nguyen, aged 27 were found guilty of exporting narcotics. The court found that the heroin they had been caught with was the same as that found strapped to the bodies of the four others arrested at Denpasar airport.

The Australian Federal Police have been criticised for allowing the Bali Nine to travel to Indonesia, where it was known they could face the death penalty. All nine have now been found guilty and sentenced, with seven receiving life in prison, and the two ringleaders being sentenced to death yesterday.

Verdicts

Rena Lawrence - Life in prison
 Scott Rush - Life in prison
 Michael Czugaj - Life in prison
 Martin Stephens - Life in prison
 Matthew Norman - Life in prison
 Si Yi Chen - Life in prison
 Tan Duc Thanh Nguyen - Life in prison
 Andrew Chan - Death
 Myuran Sukumaran - Death

All verdicts are consistent with the recommendations of the

Indonesian prosecutors, except for Renae Lawrence. In her case prosecutors requested 20 years imprisonment.

Warner Music sees large growth digital music revenue

Warner Music Group first quarter earnings rose sharply mostly from growth in digital music sales offsetting falling CD sales. Warner Music sells digital music to several online services including Apple's iTunes at wholesale. The company's first-quarter revenue from digital music sales doubled to \$69 million, accounting for 7% of overall revenue. Madonna, Green Day, and James Blunt are signed to subsidiary labels of Warner.

Warner Music has undergone restructuring after being sold in 2004 by former parent company Time Warner. Cutting costs, exploiting current assets, and digital music has been the company's focus since going public in May.

The Tel Aviv Magistrates Court sentences Omri Sharon

On February 14, 2006, the Tel Aviv Magistrates Court sentenced Omri Sharon, son of the comatosed Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, to a nine month prison term, a nine month suspended sentence, and a 300,000 Shekel (USD 63,500) fine. Omri's lawyers have already stated they will appeal a "exceptionally harsh verdict". Ariel Sharon has not been charged so far.

Judge Beckenstein decided to delay his prison sentence six months due to the current health of his father. Beckenstein was quoted as saying: "This is a swamp of political corruption and it must be dried up." In addition Gavriel Manor, an accomplice of Omri, was sentenced to a nine

month suspended sentence for his involvement.

Omri was indicted on August 28, 2005 over a fundraising scandal relating to his father's 1999 election. At the time Omri was exempt from prosecution due to parliamentary immunity but decided to stand trial.

According to Israeli prosecutors Omri received over \$1,300,000 in contributions and donations from Israeli and other companies between July 1999 and February 2000. This violated the amount allowed by party finance laws. He was then charged of investing the funds into a corporation called Annex Research.

On November 14 Omri Sharon plead guilty in a plea bargain with prosecutors. He later resigned from the Israeli Knesset on January 3.

Today in History

1249 - Louis IX of France dispatched Andrew of Longjumeau as his ambassador to the Mongols.
1804 - Lt. Stephen Decatur led a raid to destroy the captured USS Philadelphia in Tripoli of the Barbary States, denying her use to the enemy in the First Barbary War.

1857 - Gallaudet University, the world's only university for hearing-impaired students, was established in Washington, D.C..
1923 - Howard Carter unsealed the burial chamber of Tutankhamun, a Pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt.
1978 - The first computer bulletin board system, CBBS, was established by Ward Christensen during a blizzard in Chicago, Illinois.

February 16 is Statehood Day in Lithuania (1918)

Quote of the Day

"Politics, as a practice, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds." ~ Henry Adams

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