



Top Stories

Indian Ocean tsunami, one year after



One year on from the Indian Ocean tsunami, the world's grief and compassion

returned to the tsunami-battered coastlines of the Indian Ocean, where at least 216 000 people lost their lives.

Haiti might have to postpone elections again



The first round of the presidential elections, currently

scheduled for January 8, 2006, might have to be delayed.

Featured story

Record companies subpoenaed over digital music pricing

On Friday, Warner Music Group announced that it had been subpoenaed by the office of New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer to provide information about digital music download pricing.

Wikipedia Current Events

- Indonesia's Free Aceh Movement formally disbanded their armed wing Reuters
- Andrei Illarionov, an adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin quits, saying Russia is "no longer

Wikipedia Current Events

free". (Washington Post)

- The government of Poland announces it will keep troops in Iraq until the end of 2006, longer than earlier planned. (Al Jazeera)
- A mass grave has been discovered in the predominantly Shia city of Karbala south of Baghdad, Iraqi police said. (BBC)
- The serial rape suspect accused of terrorizing two South Florida neighborhoods with attacks on victims ranging from elderly women to an 11-year-old girl was back in custody Tuesday, a week since his brazen jail escape, after a tipster recognized his face and called police. (AP via Yahoo! News)
- Rebels in Colombia kill 24 soldiers guarding coca eradication workers. (BBC)
- The Ugandan army kills seven civilians who had been protesting over the killing of a 15 year old boy. Sixteen others are injured.

Fire destroys a Social Security building in Brasilia



Brasília, Brazil - An building of the Social Security Ministry (INSS) in

Brasilia was struck by fire Tuesday morning.

Firemen report that the blaze was started by an electrical short-circuit.

The INSS building was old and contained a large collection of state documents.

At the time of the fire, there building was unoccupied except for security personnel. No one was injured during the blaze.

New Zealand Christmas road toll is at ten

The New Zealand Christmas road toll has climbed to only one fewer; than the 11 deaths in the entire period last year; after four people were killed today. The official Christmas-New Year road toll runs between 4pm on 24th December and 8am on 4th January

"There are 10 families now having to plan funerals and that's enormously tragic for all of those involved". Says National Road Manager; Superintendent Dave Cliff. He says that he is "disappointed with the high toll this far."

Road victims this Christmas 2005 include:

Today:
A 19 year old died when a car and a van collided at the intersection of SH60 and Harleys Rd, near Motueka.
One person killed on SH4,

southwest of Te Kuiti. after car hits a tree.

A 10-year-old boy killed yesterday, on SH30, after a 4WD rolls.

One person killed at the Kopu intersection. After a car and campervan collide.

Earlier in the week:

On Boxing day, a motorcyclist was killed on SH1 between Orewa and Waiwera.

On Christmas Day in Wanganui, a 15-year-old was killed.

Also on Christmas day; a 30-year-old man died in a crash on SH35, near Te Kaha

On Christmas Eve, two people died in a head-on crash on SH1 south of Kawakawa.

And on Friday, a driver was killed at a rail crossing near Sefton.

Data Retention Directive passed by EU Parliament

On December 14th, after a single reading, the EU Parliament passed the Data Retention directive. 378 parliamentarians voted in favour of the Directive, 30 abstained and 197 voted against.

The so-called "Big Brother" directive, highly controversial at least among those even aware of its existence, requires all internet and telecommunications service providers to log all traffic metadata (who called who, who visited what sites) in Europe for 6 to 24 months and turn the data over to police forces, secret services, and other organisations, as decided on by national governments. The law was drafted and passed in three months, an extraordinarily rapid process, and was heavily influenced by earlier UK legislation that failed to pass in Britain.

Significant aspects of this law are

the lack of special measures for security and privacy of the collected data, lack of any rule as to how costs are to be reimbursed. Such measures had been proposed as ammendments, but the block vote in Parliament (following a deal between the leaders of the two largest parties, the the Christian democrat-conservative European People's Party and the Party of European Socialists, and the European Commission) rejected these amendments.

All mention of "terrorism" was removed from the original text, so the approved law specifies these measures for "serious crime" only. The definition of "serious crime" is not specified.

Partially, the law harmonises existing practice, allowing police forces to rely on retention of data for their investigations. In certain countries, privacy laws that mandated the destruction of such data after six months have hindered investigations. Poland, following one such case, wanted a 15 year data retention period.

However, other influences have made the law much broader than this. Specifically, the requirement to log all subscriber information for Internet communications has raised serious concerns amongst ISPs, and technical analysts. The reason: the term "communication" is defined vaguely, as "all emails and Internet telephony". There exists no technical means of logging subscriber information for such communications, short of recording every TCP and UDP packet that is carried across a network connection. This would create such huge volumes of data that small to medium ISPs would be unable to operate, and large ISPs would have to increase their

prices considerably. All provisions in the law for reimbursement were removed - this is up to each country to decide.

Thus the Data Retention directive, while cracking down on anonymous public communications tools such as open wifi, cybercafes, pre-paid phone cards (and possibly even public phone booths), has ignored the use of web-based email, self-hosted mail servers, chat systems, VPNs, VoIP technologies, and so on. The premise that criminals will restrict themselves to the few simple protocols that can be monitored to extract "subscriber information" is weak at best.

The technical inadequacy of this law is extreme, and is probably due to its rushed progress through the legislative system. The main driver for this rushed process appears to be a number of national governments that are keen to increase surveillance of their own citizens, and wish EU "backing" for such acts. Note that the Commission and Council do not represent an elected body but are composed of the national governments and professional civil service, and there is considerable tension between these bodies and the elected Parliament. It is plausible that the Data Retention directive was just the first of several laws that will pass through this new "fast track" process.

The Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure, a lobbying association, expects, early in 2006, to see a new attempt to "harmonise patent legislation", the so-called "Community Patent Directive", which will introduce software patents by the back door. Note that a previous attempt by the

Commission and Council to impose software patents (the "Computer Implemented Inventions directive") was rejected by Parliament in June 2005.

Other commentators have noted that the EU produces vast numbers of directives, about ten per month, and most of these get passed into national law only very slowly. Ireland and Germany have stated that they will take this directive to the European Court of Justice. However, that will not prevent other countries from implementing it in a more or less severe form.

Italy has, in the last few months, been closing cybercafes that do not keep strict records of the identity of every user. It is such indicators that have convinced many privacy advocates that this law is not about terrorism at all, but about monitoring and controlling civil society.

Japan's population declines

Japan's population declined by 19,000 in 2005 according to the government census, marking the first time it has shrunk since 1899, when it began keeping records. The decline is caused by the low birth rate of 1.29 children per woman. The declining birth rate has been a concern for the island nation for the last few decades as it supports a larger elderly population; 20% of Japan's population is 65 or older. As of October 1, the population was recorded at 127,757,000.

Actor Vincent Schiavelli dies in Sicily at age 57

The well-known character actor, Vincent Schiavelli has died at his home in Polizzi Generosa, Sicily.

He was 57.

Schiavelli appeared in more than 120 films and television shows including the movie "Ghost" where he played opposite Patrick Swayze. He was selected in 1997 by Vanity Fair as one of the best character actors in the United States.

Record companies subpoenaed over digital music pricing

On Friday Warner Music Group announced that it had been subpoenaed by the office of New York Attorney-General Eliot Spitzer to provide information about digital music download pricing. It has been reported that Sony BMG Music Entertainment and Vivendi Universal have also received subpoenas.

The subpoenas are thought to be connected to an antitrust investigation being carried out by New York Attorney-General Eliot Spitzer. The investigation is believed to be looking at whether Warner, Sony BMG, EMG and Universal have colluded to set wholesale song download pricing.

Will Tanous, speaking on behalf of Warner Music group said "As part of an industrywide investigation concerning pricing of digital music downloads, we received a subpoena from Attorney General Spitzer's office as disclosed in our public filings. We are cooperating fully with the inquiry."

It is also thought that the investigation may be due to the music industry wishing to renegotiate pricing with Apple over its iTunes online store. The record companies have indicated that they wish to begin variable pricing on music downloads. Apple currently sells songs for \$US0.99

each.

In September, Warner CEO Edgar Bronfman told an investor conference that "not all songs are created equal ... There are some songs for which consumers would be willing to pay more and some we'd be willing to sell for less".

Australia's richest man dies aged 68

The Nine Network has announced the death of one of Australia's richest men, Kerry Packer, aged 68.

Announcer Richard Wilkins said on the Today Show that he had just been handed official confirmation of Mr Packer's death at 68.

He said a statement from Tony Ritchie, Nine head of news, said: "Mrs Kerry Packer and her children James and Gretel sadly report the passing last evening of her husband and their father Kerry. He died peacefully at home with his family at his bedside".

Packer was the major shareholder in Publishing and Broadcasting Limited (PBL) which owns the Nine television network and Australian Consolidated Press, the producer of many Australian and New Zealand magazines.

Packer was also involved in the gambling and tourism industries and owned the Crown Casino in Melbourne.

In the 1970s, his World Series Cricket revolutionised cricket, bringing One-day cricket to the fore by introducing things such as coloured uniforms, white balls & day/night matches.

Business Review Weekly magazine

estimated Packer's net worth at AU\$6.5 billion in 2004. Another famous rich Australian media magnate, who may have lost his Australian nationality, is Rupert Murdoch.

Falwell called for boycott of stores using 'Happy Holidays' in place of 'Merry Christmas'

Before the holiday started, Jerry Falwell has asked that Christians across America boycott Target Corporation department stores for their refusal to include "Merry Christmas" in advertisements or store decore, instead opting to use the more inclusive phrase, "Happy Holidays."

Target was not the only recipient of criticism, as Costco and several other stores have used similar greetings during the 2005 holiday season. Falwell and the American Family Association have threatened to boycott Target and Costco for not using the phrase "Merry Christmas" explicitly.

In a similar debate, the decorated spruce at Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. was known as a "Holiday Tree" earlier this year, but was renamed "Christmas Tree" after objections by Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert (R-IL).

Today in History

1065 - The Westminster Abbey, built by Edward the Confessor between 1045 and 1050, was consecrated.

1835 - Osceola led his Seminole warriors in Florida into the Second Seminole War against the U.S. Army.

1879 - The Tay Rail Bridge in Dundee, Scotland collapsed as a train passed over it, killing all on board.

1895 - History of cinema: Using

their cinematographe, the Lumière brothers showed motion pictures to a paying audience for the first time.

1999 - Saparmurat Niyazov was proclaimed President for Life in Turkmenistan.

December 28 is Proclamation Day in South Australia (1836); Day of the Holy Innocents in Iberoamerica.

Quote of the Day

"It is not the facts which guide the conduct of men, but their opinions about facts; which may be entirely wrong. We can only make them right by discussion." ~ Norman Angell

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