



Top Stories

Iraq ballots to be audited due to voting "anomalies"

The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) has announced that it will audit the votes cast in this weekend's constitutional referendum in Iraq over what it sees as voting "anomalies".

Hurricane Wilma becomes stronger on its path toward Florida

Hurricane Wilma is picking up steam in its path towards Florida. Evacuation of the keys begins today.

Featured story

New York Times reporter Judith Miller breaks silence on Plame leak investigation

New York Times reporter Judith Miller broke her media silence by writing a column the newspaper published on Sunday. Her lengthy story recounted two testimonies, September 30 and October 12, she gave to a U.S. federal grand jury seeking information on the source of the Valerie Plame leak.

Wikipedia Current Events

- China reports 2600 birds have died of the H5N1 virus near Hohhot, Inner Mongolia.
- Russia reports outbreaks of the virus in Kurgan Oblast, west Siberia, and in Tula Oblast, western Russia.
- The European Union suspects a new outbreak has occurred in the Republic of Macedonia.

Wikipedia Current Events

- Hurricane Wilma goes through one of the most intense rapid intensification processes in hurricane history to become the third Category 5 storm of 2005. Its central pressure falls to 882 mb (hPa), becoming the most intense hurricane ever recorded in the Atlantic. To date, the 2005 Atlantic Basin Hurricane Season has seen 21 storms of tropical storm strength or greater and 12 hurricanes, both of which tie the records set in 1933 and 1969, respectively.
- Saddam Hussein goes on trial in Baghdad for crimes against humanity. The former President of Iraq is led into court with seven associates, charged with ordering the killing of 143 Shi'a men in the town of Dujail in 1982. If convicted, Hussein could face capital punishment.
- Liverpool City Council, UK, issued an apology for the destruction of the Welsh community of Capel Celyn in 1965 to create the Llyn Celyn reservoir, which supplies Liverpool and The Wirral with drinking water.
- Former Congressman Bob McEwen of Ohio is considering challenging incumbent Jean Schmidt in the 2006 Republican primary.

US stands alone against cultural diversity treaty

The United States has become increasingly isolated this week in its stance against a new Treaty designed to protect and promote

cultural diversity in the age of transnational media industries. The Treaty, called the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions, was sponsored by Canada and France and has been negotiated by government delegates from over 180 countries in a 2-year consensus process, and is expected to be approved tomorrow by the general assembly of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (w: UNESCO). Concretely, the treaty is a legal instrument designed to protect national cultural policy from 'free trade' agreements like the WTO/GATS, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, or bilateral trade negotiations. For example, the screenquota system in South Korea that requires Korean cinemas to show Korean films about 50% of the time, which supporters argue has nurtured the growth of the Korean movie industry, would likely be eliminated if audiovisual services were brought into the WTO - as the United States Trade Representative has proposed.

The US government is attacking the treaty on the grounds that it encourages trade protectionism and could serve as a justification for repressive governments to control their media systems. Condoleeza Rice wrote letters encouraging governments to oppose the Treaty in order to avoid an all-against-one result in the vote. The United States stands internationally isolated with this point of view, with for example the British ambassador to UNESCO

characterizing the draft as "clear, carefully balanced, and consistent with principles of international law and fundamental human rights".

The US only rejoined UNESCO in 2003 after an absence of 19 years, prompted by developing country demands for a restructured global information flow. Again there is talk of possible reprisals of the US administration, including the possibility of renewed US withdrawal from UNESCO. UNESCO draws 22% of its budget from the US. Since no apparatus to enforce the treaty has been set up, none of UNESCO's budget would be tied up directly through this treaty.

With an almost certain vote in favour of the treaty, the real test of the treaty will come later: whether it has an impact on trade negotiations, on domestic cultural policies, and on cultural diversity both within and between countries.

Hurricane Wilma becomes stronger on its path toward Florida

Hurricane Wilma strengthened on its projected looping path around Cuba, then onward towards central and south Florida. Wilma ties the record for the busiest hurricane season ever at 21.

NOAA's path prediction

As of 2 pm EDT Wednesday, 19 October (18:00 UTC), the center of Hurricane Wilma was located near 17°5' N 83°5' W or about 300 miles (480 km) southeast of Cozumel, Mexico. It is moving to the west-northwest at 7 mph (11 KM/HR) with maximum sustained winds of 165 mph (270 km/h), with higher gusts, making it a dangerous Category 5 hurricane on the Saffir-Simpson Scale, and

has a minimum central pressure of 900 mbar (26.58 InHg).

Rainfall accumulations are expected in amounts of 5 to 10 inches, with isolated areas of 25 inches over the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Haiti, and Cuba. Rains of 4 to 6 inches can be expected in areas of Honduras and Nicaragua.

At 5pm EDT the country of Mexico issued a Hurricane Watch for the Yucatan Peninsula from Punta Allen to Cabo Catoche.

A hurricane warning remains in effect from San Felipe to Tulum on the Yucatan peninsula...including Cozumel and nearby islands. A Hurricane is also in effect for Swan Island. A tropical storm warning is in effect from south of Tulum to Chetumal Mexico. A hurricane watch remains in effect for the east coast of the Yucatan peninsula from south of Tulum to Punta Gruesa. A tropical storm warning is in effect for Belize from the border With Mexico southward to Belize City. A hurricane watch remains in effect in Cuba for the provinces of Matanzas westward through Pinar del Rio...and for the isle of Youth. A tropical storm warning remains in effect for Honduras from the Honduras/Nicaragua border westward to Cabo Camaron. Residents of the Florida Keys and the peninsula should monitor the progress of the storm.

Evacuations have begun in the Florida Keys this morning. 1,000 people have already died due to heavy rain in Central America and Mexico.

Irish Guardian journalist reported missing in Iraq

Rory Carroll, an Irish citizen working in Iraq for the Guardian

newspaper, has been reported missing, amid fears that he has been kidnapped.

33-year-old Carroll had been in Iraq for nine months, having previously worked as the Guardian's Africa correspondent. While in that post he wrote a series of groundbreaking stories, including an exposé of an alleged coup plot by British and South African mercenaries against the government of Equatorial Guinea.

Last month, Carroll wrote an article focussing on the dangers faced by his colleagues in Iraq, particularly local journalists. Earlier this week he penned a report highlighting claims that a US air strike had killed "dozens of women and children". The left-leaning Guardian newspaper, which opposed the Iraq war and has been critical of the British and US-led occupation, is urgently seeking confirmation of Carroll's whereabouts.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists has called for Carroll's immediate release:

"We are deeply concerned about the safety of our colleague Rory Carroll, an independent journalist who has covered all aspects of the conflict in Iraq," the CPJ's Executive Director Ann Cooper said in a statement.

According to the CPJ, 34 journalists have been kidnapped in Iraq since April 2004, with all but six being released unharmed.

Google changes Gmail to Google Mail in the UK

Following a dispute with a company based in the United Kingdom, Internet company Google Incorporated has dropped

the use of its "Gmail" name for their free email service. All other countries (except Germany, where a similar dispute also resulted in a name change) will continue to use the Gmail name and domain (gmail.com).

The change took place on Wednesday, when all new Gmail accounts created from a UK IP address will use the @googlemail.com domain, instead of the former @gmail.com. As the service is still "invite-only", invitations for the service will also be made for the @googlemail.com domain.

Former UK Gmail users will continue to use the @gmail.com domain for the near future.

Australian "terror laws" face backlash

One day after Jon Stanhope, the Australian Capital Territory Chief Minister, posted a confidential draft of the proposed Australian anti-terror bill to his website, Attorney-General Philip Ruddock claims that modifications have been made. Prime Minister John Howard denies that the changes are more than "minor", and denies that the legislation is "draconian". The legislation, which will only be debated in Parliament for one day, has come under attack by members of parliament (including Senator Bob Brown), civil libertarians, Muslims' rights advocates, the Law Council of Australia and members of the community.

Advocates of the proposed legislation claim that the laws are an extension of the existing criminal code. They also claim that Australia is in danger of a terrorist attack, such as the 7 July London bombings. Mr Howard said "we

need to take these extraordinary measures to deal with what is no doubt an extraordinary period of time in our history,".

Prime Minister Howard defended the proposed legislation. He claimed that the laws had "minor" modifications (to the "leaked" document) but they were essentially the same.

"What is going to be in that legislation is what I announced and the states agreed to – no more, no less," Mr Howard said.

"I announced that we were going to have preventative detention, I announced that we were going to have control orders, I announced that we would be expanding the sedition offence to include incitement of violent behaviour against the community."

"Given the circumstances in which we live, they're not draconian. They are unusual but we live in unusual circumstances."

Waleed Kadous of the Australian Muslim Civil Rights Advocacy Network spoke against the proposed laws. He expressed concern that the proposed "shoot to kill" laws were too permissive, and could allow an innocent suspect to be such.

"Frankly we are disappointed, because while the Prime Minister said there would be lots of safeguards, there don't appear to be that many."

"We are concerned police can shoot to kill without a crime being committed and that you can be held in preventative detention for 24 hours before you even see a judge."

Today in History

1740: Maria Theresa (pictured) assumed the throne of Austria, following the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713.

1827: An allied British, French, and Russian naval force destroyed a combined Turkish and Egyptian fleet at the Battle of Navarino, a decisive moment in the Greek War of Independence.

1968: Former U.S. First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy married Greek shipping business magnate Aristotle Onassis.

1973: Sydney Opera House in Sydney, Australia, was formally opened by Queen Elizabeth II.

1991: The Oakland Hills firestorm killed 25 people and destroyed 3,469 homes in Oakland, California, United States.

October 20 is

Quote of the Day

"I think for it to be unhip to be idealistic is weird, you know? I mean, even all the best rebels to me had some sense of hope in them." ~ Tom Petty

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