



Top Stories

Israeli PM Sharon suffers 'mild stroke'



Hospital officials at Hadassah Ein Karem Hospital in Jerusalem announced that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a mild stroke Sunday evening.

Dick Cheney makes surprise Iraq visit



U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney made a surprise visit to Iraq today promoting the recent Iraqi election, amid the end to a lull in violence since recent elections. The vice presidents visit was so secretive even Iraqi prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari was unaware he was coming.

Featured story

Black vulture population targeted for reduction at Virginia boat launch



A Virginia recreation and fishing boat launch on the James River near the Dominion

Virginia Power plant at Dutch Gap is the scene of too many Black Vultures, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Virginia Department of Inland Game and Fisheries.

Wikipedia Current Events

- Evo Morales becomes the latest Leftist to win the Presidency of a South American nation after he claimed victory in the Bolivian Presidential Election.
- The Free Aceh Movement surrenders the last of its weapons following a peace agreement with the Government of Indonesia.
- Conflict in Iraq: An insurgent group broadcasts a video over the Internet of what they claim is the death of American Ronald Allen Schulz.
- Nazi Officer Ladislav Niznansky is acquitted of charges relating to three massacres of Slovaks during World War II.
- Governor Antonio Fazio of Bank of Italy resigns, after having been officially put under investigation for insider trading, and following a heavy pressure from both government and opposition.
- The Likud primary elections for the party's leadership between the candidates Benjamin Netanyahu, Silvan Shalom, Yisrael Katz and Moshe Feiglin were opened at 10:00 a.m.
- Knesset Member Benjamin Netanyahu is Likud's new leader, after winning 47 percent of the vote in the ruling party primaries, according to an exit poll of Kol Yisrael. According to this poll, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom came in second with 32 percent of the vote, Moshe Feiglin came in third with 15% and Yisrael Katz came in fourth with 6%.

Anti-racism rally in Sydney

A number of rallies were held in Sydney on Sunday to protest against what they describe as racism in the community. The National Union of Students organised an event at Town Hall, and the Ted Noffs Foundation held an event in Belmore Park later in the day. About 2,000 people marched through Sydney, and there were also gatherings in Newcastle, Brisbane, and Melbourne.

Lebanese Australian student Chadi Sankary rejected alcohol as an excuse for racist and violent behaviour. "People are not willing to admit that this is about racism," he said. "You can't be under the influence of alcohol and paint your massive banners with racial slogans on them or you can't make t-shirts while you're drunk so it can't be accepted as an excuse."

Matt Noffs, of the Ted Noffs Foundation, said that the solution to racism lies with the people, not politicians. He also criticised the weeks police operation, saying that it will not provide a long-term solution. "I don't feel that the responses that have been made during the week have actually helped the situation," he said. "They might have suppressed some of the violence that is sure to happen in these situations anyway but they certainly don't look at the solutions."

Tim Longhurst, one of the organisers, said that the rally

showed the true nature of Sydney as a tolerant city. "What we saw today wasn't new. Sydney has always been a place where people do get along, and today they came out in force to show that," Mr Longhurst said.

In a statement supporting the rally, Socialist Alliance linked the Cronulla riots to government policies and actions. "The riots reflect the rising racism in Australia, a tide that has been fostered by the Howard government's policies and propaganda that criminalise and lock up refugees, dehumanise and bomb the Iraqi people, and define all Muslims and Middle-Eastern Australians as potential terrorists."

One Sydney blogger criticised the rallies because they focused on racism against minority groups such as Lebanese, instead of racism in general. "They're picking on only one face of the disgusting racism that has come to a boil in this city recently, and tried to say they're taking a stand against racism," he said, calling the rally "the racist anti-racism protest."

Evo Morales wins presidential elections in Bolivia

The New York Times has reported that Evo Morales has won presidential elections in Bolivia. Morales ran on a campaign of restoring coca farming in Bolivia, in spite of the United States' program to wipe out coca growing (in an effort to reduce the cocaine business). Morales is an Aymara Indian and former coca farmer himself. Morales described his victory as a signal that "a new history of Bolivia begins, a history where we search for equality, justice and peace with social justice."

At 9pm last night Jorge Quiroga conceded defeat saying, "I congratulate Evo Morales." The National Electoral Court had yet to confirm the votes as of Sunday night, but Morales is expected to win easily. According to the Bolivian media based on exit polling, Morales is expected to receive 51 percent of the vote, compared to 30 percent for his nearest rival, Jorge Quiroga.

Evo Morales' government will be the first to be led by an indigenous president in the nation's history. Morales' left of center policies, especially his support for the coca industry will likely not make him a popular Latin American figure for the Bush administration in the United States, who might be afraid of a closer alliance between Morales, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Fidel Castro of Cuba, and even the more moderate but still left-of-center Luiz Lula da Silva of Brazil.

Morales has commented saying that under his administration there will be "zero cocaine, zero narco-trafficking but not zero coca." In addition to being against the U.S. policy of coca extermination, Morales is also against many of the neoliberal policies of the past Bolivian governments, including free trade agreements. However he might have some difficulty getting through his new programs as the Movement Toward Socialism party to which he is a member did not win control of the congress.

Black vulture population targeted for reduction at Virginia boat launch

A Virginia recreation and fishing boat launch on the James River near the Dominion Virginia Power plant at Dutch Gap is the scene of too many Black Vultures,

according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Virginia Department of Inland Game and Fisheries.

In 2002, more than 350 Black vultures were killed at Dutch Gap in an effort to reduce their numbers to a level of a couple dozen birds. But they made a quick come back in the area, and during this past week a hundred of the birds have been disposed of by a shot to their head with a pellet gun.

The USDA reports that both Black Vultures (*Coragyps atratus*), along with their close relatives called the Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*), are experiencing population increases stretching well over the last 10 years.

The species is increasingly a problem by growing into being a nuisance, as well as a threat to health and safety concerns. The presence of the birds in large numbers, at places they roost, can cause damage to property as they peck and claw at construction surfaces, and cause unsanitary human health conditions from the defecation and regurgitation of the birds. Their presense at landfills, often in near proximity to airports, is a problem for airplanes during take-off and landing.

At the entrance to the Dutch Gap boat launch parking lot, a large yellow warning sign is posted that reads: "Please be aware of possible damage to vehicles and trailers due to the large Black Vulture population currently inhabiting this parking area. Because the Black Vulture is a federally protected species, Chesterfield County is working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Virginia Department of Inland Games and

Fisheries to resolve the problem. You can help by disposing of all litter (even non-food items such as cigarette butts) in trash barrels. Thank you for your cooperation." The vultures reportedly perch on vehicles and scratch the paint, and for some reason are going after windshield wiper blades.

Vultures have shown an ability to adapt to residential and business settings. The bird, with a 4-foot adult wing span, can be seen gliding through the air at virtually any time of day in Chesterfield and Prince George counties in central Virginia.

President Bush defends NSA domestic intercepts

In a radio speech from the White House on 17 December 2005, President Bush acknowledged that in the weeks following 9/11 he had "authorized the National Security Agency [NSA], consistent with U.S. law and the Constitution, to intercept international communications of people with known links to al Qaeda and related terrorist organizations."

President Bush said that the government establishes a clear link to terrorist networks before intercepting these communications, adding that the purpose of the program is to "detect and prevent terrorist attacks against the United States and our allies."

Pointing out that terrorists inside the United States were communicating with terrorists abroad before the 9/11 attacks, President Bush said that the authorization he gave the NSA "helped address that problem in a way that is fully consistent with my constitutional responsibilities and authorities."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that established procedures requiring court approval were simply not quick and flexible enough to respond to the urgency of the terrorist threat, and to allow the administration to eavesdrop on highly mobile targets in order to disrupt potential plots.

Before Bush's secret order, such wiretaps were obtained through the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) of 1978. It prescribes procedures for requesting judicial authorization for electronic surveillance and physical search of persons engaged in espionage or international terrorism against the United States on behalf of a foreign power. FISA also allows the Attorney General to grant permission for emergency wiretaps without a warrant, with retroactive application being made within 72 hours. Historically, the vast majority of applications are accepted without modifications by FISA. For example in the 2004 report of FISA to Congress it is noted that the number of approved warrants with substantive modifications was 94 out of a total of 1758 while 5 applications were rejected.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Peter Hoekstra defended Bush's authorization of the surveillance program and to bypass the FISA. Chairwoman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Senator Susan Collins announced a call on the NSA for a "full briefing" about the program, and said that the program's authority needs to be clarified. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said Bush's radio address raised "serious questions as to what the activities were and whether the

activities were lawful."

The President noted that the NSA activities are reviewed "approximately every 45 days." He added: "During each assessment, previous activities under the authorization are reviewed. The review includes approval by our nation's top legal officials, including the attorney general and the counsel to the president." All people involved in the periodic review are members of the executive branch.

Bush also said that NSA's activities under this authorization are thoroughly reviewed by the Justice Department and NSA's top legal officials, including NSA's general counsel and inspector general, adding that "leaders in Congress have been briefed more than a dozen times on this authority and the activities conducted under it." Members of Congress from both parties are now calling for congressional hearings to learn more.

The president concluded by saying that "this authorization is a vital tool in our war against the terrorists. It is critical to saving American lives. The American people expect me to do everything in my power under our laws and Constitution to protect them and their civil liberties."

Public services shutting down in New South Wales, Australia due to lack of money

Some public services in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, are shutting for extended periods over Christmas and New Year in an effort to save money.

Public hospitals are cancelling elective surgery for periods of up to six weeks. The University of

Newcastle has forced all staff to take annual leave and has ceased its core functions of research and teaching for three weeks.

A NSW Health spokesperson has defended its decision to keep quiet about the shutdowns, saying "They [NSW Health] don't want to release any more information - we are telling the public enough." The NSW president of the Australian Medical Association, John Gullotta, disagrees saying "We are losing up to three months of the year in shutdowns." He went on to say "A lot of it is about cost savings - they will blame the holidays, but it is about reining in costs."

According to the University of Newcastle its shutdown "is, at this stage, a one-off event." Further, "the primary objective of the Christmas close down is to reduce leave accruals." Earlier in the year the University laid off 412 staff in an effort to reduce costs.

Today in History

1803 - As part of the Louisiana Purchase, New Orleans was transferred from France to the United States.

1860 - South Carolina seceded from the United States, leading to the American Civil War.

1917 - Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky founded the Cheka, the first Soviet secret police.

1995 - The NATO-led IFOR began peacekeeping in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1999 - Portugal transferred sovereignty of Macau to the People's Republic of China.

Quote of the Day

"For most of human history we have searched for our place in the cosmos. Who are we? What are we? We find that we inhabit an insignificant planet of a hum-drum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people. We make our world significant by the courage of our questions, and by the depth of our answers."

~ Carl Sagan

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