



Top Stories

Forest fires continue to rage in Spain

Four people have died in forest fires raging in the northern Spanish region of Galicia. Police suspect the fires were intentionally started by arsonists.

Australian government to introduce electronic Medicare rebates

Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced that the federal government will introduce an electronic system enabling patients to receive Medicare rebates electronically without having to visit a Medicare office.

Featured story

H5N1 bird flu confirmed in the Netherlands

The Dutch government has confirmed its first H5N1 bird flu case in the country.

Wikipedia Current Events

- Three successive explosions in south Baghdad kill 20 people and injure more than 70.
- Israeli ministers endorse the UN Security Council resolution calling for an end to fighting in southern Lebanon.
- Kofi Annan announces that a ceasefire will commence on August 14 at 8 a.m. Israeli-Lebanese time (0500 UTC).
- Iran says disarming Lebanese Hezbollah would be "illogical".
- Jiji Press reports that Japan

Wikipedia Current Events

Ground Self-Defense Force uniform officers examined enshrining troops in Yasukuni Shrine in the event of their death during their non-combat mission in Iraq. Critics accuse the examination of being against Japanese constitutional separation of state and religion.

• Japanese foreign minister Taro Aso suggests the Diet pass a law making the Yasukuni Shrine secular.

Most Tokyo power restored after blackout

A power outage hit large amounts of Tokyo, and Chiba, Japan. The electrical blackout occurred during an industrial accident, in which a crane damaged some power lines accidentally at 7:40 AM local time (2240 UTC).

At least two elevators stopped with an unknown number of people inside, said a fire official in Tokyo. Some train services were halted. The number of passengers was lower than normal due to a holiday. 800 thousand locations were without power during the blackout.

Power was restored to most areas within hours.

Forest fires continue to rage in Spain

Several forest fires which have ruined well over ten thousand hectares of land are continuing to burn in the Spanish region of Galicia today.

Four people have perished so far in the blazes which the government says were started intentionally by arsonists over a week ago. Police have arrested twenty-four people on suspicion of starting the fires. Among those being detained is a ninety-four year-old man.

"Those arrested are people who knew exactly what they were doing, knew they were committing crimes and went up into the hills to start fires, sometimes more than one," said the president of Galicia's regional government, Emilio Perez Tourino.

Four hundred troops are currently in the northwestern county guarding densely-populated areas, airports and power stations. Spain's President, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, said earlier this week that an additional 1,200 army personnel would be sent to the area to assist the fire service.

Yesterday, flames continued to threaten Galicia, but the number of fires said to be out of control reportedly dropped thanks to the vigorous efforts of firefighters, soldiers and volunteers.

Alfredo Canal, a Galician rural agency chief, told Reuters yesterday: "We have a situation that is noticeably better than in recent days."

South Africa sets deadline in land transfer scheme

The South African government has set a six-month deadline for some white farmers to agree on sale

prices for their farms. The government will be requiring them to sell the farms as part of its land redistribution programme.

Agriculture and Land Affairs Minister Lulu Xingwana said that if no agreement is reached in 6 months, the government could expropriate farmlands. Stating that negotiations have been too slow, in some cases taking many years, Xingwana said that some farm owners were seeking "unrealistic prices". Land owners claim they are not offered market value for their property.

The government has identified about 350 farms for which, if no deal is reached, the government will force a mandatory sale at current market prices identified by the government.

Officials said that expropriation is only a measure of last-resort and that farmers can appeal the decision in court.

The land reform programme aims to hand back land or give financial compensation to black South Africans who were forcibly removed from their ancestral homes and lands under apartheid rule. The programme was a key promise made by the African National Congress (ANC) as it came to power in 1994 and remains an emotive and politically charged issue.

Currently, about 4% of South Africa's farm land is owned by blacks, who number 42 million out of the nation's 47 million population. President Thabo Mbeki's government has set a target of transferring 30% of land to blacks by 2014. About 89% of the nearly 80,000 claims have been settled so far, and the government has spent some R2.5bn (\$368m) purchasing farms

from white owners. The National Land Claims Commission is entrusted with carrying out the transfers.

The reform programme had so far followed a "willing-buyer willing-seller" principle. The process had to contend with land owners challenging the validity of some claims, negotiating sale prices with current owners, and settling competing claims over the same piece of land—sometimes by tracing family trees of claimants when other documents supporting the claim did not exist.

Xingwana called on established farmers to form partnerships with new landowners and to transfer skills to new farmers, to ensure productive use of transferred lands. One criticism of the programme is that some of the transferred farms have fallen in production due to the inexperience and lack of capital among the new owners.

The government has rejected comparisons of the programme with that initiated in Zimbabwe under President Robert Mugabe.

Dead British soldier named

The Ministry of Defence has named the British soldier who died in Afghanistan yesterday.

Twenty-six year-old Lance Corporal Sean Tansey, from the Household Cavalry Regiment, was killed whilst mending a damaged Scimitar tank near Sangin in Helmand province. An inquiry into his death will now be conducted.

"Always smart, always hard working, he was a very experienced reconnaissance soldier, who was not only respected professionally but was also a charming individual, hugely popular among his peers," said Lt

Col Edward Smyth-Osbourne, Commanding Officer of the Household Cavalry regiment. "With his death the Household Cavalry has suffered the loss of another exceptionally talented member of the regiment."

He is the nineteenth British soldier to die in Afghanistan since operations began in 2001.

Firefighters tackle industrial blaze in Manchester

Over fifty firefighters are damping down after a tanker exploded at an industrial unit in Salford in Greater Manchester. At one point, thick smoke could be seen drifting across Manchester city centre.

According to Greater Manchester Ambulance Service, no one has been hurt as a result of the explosion.

A fire service spokesman said a Heavy Goods Vehicle and a nearby building were engulfed in flames.

Greater Manchester Police are telling people to stay away from the Pendleton area. A spokesman said: "Officers are currently at the scene along with several fire engines including an aerial appliance. The fire has caused a large plume of smoke to form but at this stage it has not been established whether it is hazardous. It appears the fire has caused a number of small explosions within the building. As a precaution people are asked to stay away from the immediate area and those living in the immediate vicinity are being advised to stay indoors and keep all windows and doors shut as a precaution. There are no reports of any injuries."

Recuperating Castro shown in Cuban media

New photos of a recuperating Fidel Castro have been published in the Cuban media. There has been international speculation on the state of the Cuban leader's health since he temporarily relinquished power two weeks ago prior to undergoing intestinal surgery. Castro had not been seen in those two weeks, and there were rumours that he was dead or nearing death.

The pictures released today by the Juventud Rebelde (Rebel Youth) newspaper show Castro speaking on the phone and holding Saturday's edition of the Communist Party newspaper Granma.

Castro also released a statement on his 80th birthday today saying that his health had improved but that his recovery would take more time.

"To say that objective stability has improved considerably is not to invent a lie. To affirm that the period of recovery will last a short time and that there is no longer any risk would be absolutely incorrect."

"I ask you all to be optimistic and at the same time to be ready to face any adverse news," said Castro, who also thanked the Cuban people for their love and support during his health crisis. The statement was the first from the Cuban leader since undergoing surgery.

Granma reports that Castro is now "up" and "working". The official newspaper reported that according to an unnamed friend of Castro "the leader of the revolution, after receiving some physiotherapy, took his first steps in the room,

then, sitting on a coach, talked vividly".

Though most official celebrations of Castro's birthday have been postponed, three thousand well-wishers have gathered today for a five-hour birthday concert on Havana's Malecon seafront boulevard.

International AIDS conference begins in Toronto

Twenty-four thousand delegates from over 132 countries are expected to attend the 16th International AIDS Conference in Toronto this week

Delegates include scientists, politicians, health care workers, government and non-governmental officials, people with AIDS and celebrities. In attendance will be Bill and Melinda Gates, Bill Clinton, Richard Gere, Olympia Dukakis and Sandra Oh.

The theme of the conference is "Time to Deliver" and is meant to focus attention on the need to meet past promises to increase funding for treatment, care and prevention. The conference began on August 13th and is scheduled to end on August 18th.

There is growing frustration with the failure of developed countries to provide drugs to combat the AIDS crisis in the developing world, particularly Africa.

"What the Western world has to do is deliver on its promises, which it never does. It always betrays the people of Africa," Stephen Lewis, the UN secretary general's special envoy for HIV-AIDS in Africa, told CBC News.

In the week leading up to the conference, Microsoft founder and philanthropist Bill Gates

announced a donation of US\$500 million spread over five years to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Gates and former US President Bill Clinton will be sharing the podium during this week's conference.

International AIDS conferences have usually been attended by world leaders, particularly the leader of the host country. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been criticized for snubbing the conference by sending his health minister, Tony Clement, to attend in his place. The prime minister, who is touring Canada's far north this week, officially declined his invitation to attend three weeks ago.

"It's a dreadful mistake in political judgment, and it's not excusable," said Lewis, who was Canada's Ambassador to the United Nations in the 1980s. "It's a lost opportunity to tell the world how Canada feels about this pandemic.

"The Arctic sovereignty issue will still be there on August 18 (when the AIDS conference ends)," said Lewis. "Forty million people worldwide carry this virus, and most will die preventable deaths. What greater scourge is there than that?"

This is the second major international event Canada has hosted which Harper has snubbed. Last month, he did not appear in Montreal for the 2006 World Outgames, a celebration of elite gay, lesbian, and transgendered athletes.

The AIDS conference is expected to be the largest in history and will be ten times the size of the first which was held in Atlanta in 1985. It has become a biennial event and is convened by the

International AIDS Society (IAS), an independent association of HIV professionals, with more than 7,000 members from 153 countries.

Australian government to introduce electronic Medicare rebates

The Australian federal government has announced that it will be introducing an electronic system for Medicare rebates within the next twelve months. Under the new system, patients will be able to receive their Medicare rebates electronically without having to visit a Medicare office.

During an interview in Sydney today, Prime Minister John Howard, along with his human services minister Joe Hockey and health minister Tony Abbott, announced that patients who pay for the services of a doctor using their credit cards will be able to receive their rebates electronically within 24 hours. Under the current system patients must visit a Medicare office to receive their rebates.

John Howard said the 80,000 people per day who queue at Medicare offices will no longer need to spend their lunch break in line at Medicare.

According to the government, doctors who bulk-bill their patients through Medicare will benefit through faster payments and reduced paperwork. "If it's a bulk bill transaction; all they do is hand over their Medicare card," said Mr Hockey.

"The Medicare card is swiped in the EFTPOS device, all is done."

"Doctors will be rebated within 24 hours."

"Currently doctors are rebated up to 14 days for bulk bill claims."

The government claims that electronic rebates will be less expensive to process—costing only a few cents, compared to an estimated AUD \$3.50 for an over-the-counter transaction. Despite this, patients who still wish to visit a Medicare office to receive their rebates will still be able to do so.

The minister for human services was quick to assure Australians that Medicare offices would remain open saying that over the past twelve months they have taken on an "expanded role" with the Family Assistance Office's services being provided in Medicare offices.

H5N1 bird flu confirmed in the Netherlands

The Dutch government has confirmed its first H5N1 bird flu case in the country. The case was found in 2 dead young owls in a zoo in Rotterdam. A lab in Lelystad confirmed that the bird flu was first discovered after a routine test by the Wild Life Health Centre and found traces of H5N1. Further tests will be carried out due to be released in a few days.

Netherlands has never had a reported case of H5N1 before.

As bird flu can only spread by close contact, the zoo will remain open, but restrictions will be in place to protect visitors, staff and other animals.

The source of the bird flu is unknown. Staff have been given prophylactic medication.

Today in History

1385 - Forces under João I defeated the Castilians in the Battle of Aljubarrota , ending the 1383–1385 Crisis in Portugal.

1842 - Seminole Indians were forced from Florida to Oklahoma, ending the Second Seminole War.

1941 - After a secret meeting aboard warships in a secure anchorage near Argentia, Newfoundland, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt issued the Atlantic Charter.

1980 - Lech Wałęsa and colleagues at Gdańsk Shipyard began strike actions, which subsequently led to the founding of the Solidarity movement in Poland.

2003 - Widescale power blackout occurred in the northeast United States and in central Canada.

August 14 is Independence Day for Pakistan (1947)

Quote of the Day

"Usually, terrible things that are done with the excuse that progress requires them are not really progress at all, but just terrible things." ~ Russell Baker

Word of the Day

wear one's heart on one's sleeve;

1. To be extremely transparent, open, or forthright about one's emotions.

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