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Canadian annual seal hunt begins amid controversy

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Czech PM calls Obama's rescue plan a 'road to hell'

Mirek Topolánek, the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic and the head of the European Union, called United States President Barack Obama's plan to spend almost US\$2 trillion to revive the country's faltering economy a "road to hell".

Four-storey building collapses in Lagos, Nigeria; two dead

A residential four-storey building collapsed in Lagos, Nigeria on Tuesday. At least two people have died, and another fourteen people have been rescued from the debris.

Wikipedia Current Events

September 30, 2010.

- A United States Air Force F-22 Raptor crashes near Edwards AF Base in California.
- India's Board of Control for Cricket will relocate the 2009 Premier League to South Africa.
- North Korea prepares a Taepodong-2 ballistic missile for a launch between April 4 and 8.

U.S. Postal Service running out of money

Tensions are running high at the U.S. Postal Service as it faces an enormous budget shortfall. Even after announcing it was cutting 3,000 jobs, the beleaguered government agency is still quickly running out of money.

Postmaster General John Potter asked the United States Congress for help on Wednesday, once again bringing up the possibility of reducing mail delivery from six to five days a week. The service reduction would save approximately \$3.5 billion this year.

Another way to cut costs could include changes to how it pays for its employee retirement plan, which would save a further \$2 billion. Closing small and rural post offices is another possibility that has been discussed.

Many measures have already been taken to stem the agency's losses. Construction of new facilities has been put on hold and existing

ones put up for sale, millions of man-hours have been cut, and executive salaries frozen.

House Oversight Post Office Subcommittee chairman Stephen F. Lynch (D-Mass.) has expressed reluctance with the plan to reduce service, saying "With the Postal Service facing budget shortfalls the subcommittee will consider a number of options to restore financial stability and examine ways for the Postal Service to continue to operate without cutting services."

Other than cost cutting, Congress could also appropriate taxpayer dollars to fund the struggling Postal Service, which currently does not rely on public funding outside of a subsidy for international voting mail and services for the blind.

If nothing is done, the USPS will soon run completely out of money, and may be unable to pay many of its bills. Salaries are the agency's highest priority to continue paying, though other debts may have to wait to be paid, said Potter. Last year the Postal Service lost \$2.8 billion.

New Jersey files lawsuit against federal sports betting ban

A New Jersey state senator has filed a lawsuit seeking to overturn a federal law banning sports betting in 46 states.

State Sen. Raymond Lesniak, a Democrat representing portions of

Wikipedia Current Events

Sweden's Parliament decides to abolish the 50-öre coin on

Union County, filed the suit Monday, arguing the 17-year-old law is unconstitutional because it treats four states differently than the other states.

Under the law, sports betting is prohibited in all states except Delaware, Oregon, Montana and Nevada, although only the latter two currently allow wagering.

"This federal law deprives the State of New Jersey of over \$100 million of yearly revenues, as well as depriving our casinos, racetracks and Internet operators of over \$500 million in gross income," Lesniak said in a statement to the press.

The 39-page lawsuit is believed to be the first challenge to the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act of 1992. New Jersey missed a 1994 deadline that would have allowed it to join the other states when the law was implemented.

Atlantic City officials and their political allies have argued allowing sports betting would give all the states a new source of revenue needed in the face of a staggering recession.

New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine was not involved with the lawsuit, but he said legalizing sports betting would help Atlantic City and said it was "worth pursuing".

Legalizing sports betting in New Jersey could bring the state more than \$50 million in annual tax revenue, according to officials from the Interactive Media Entertainment & Gaming Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based consultant for the electronic gaming industry, which joined Lesniak as a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

"This is about more than revenue," said Joe Brennan Jr., chairman of Interactive Media Entertainment. "It's about jobs and economic activity." According to 1999 study, \$380 billion in illegal sports betting occurs in the state each year.

New Jersey, in particular, is facing a difficult budget season, and the Atlantic City casinos are in what the Associated Press called a "financial meltdown". Eleven of the city's casinos suffered their biggest revenue decline in 30 years last month.

Delaware is reported to be considering regulating sports betting, which New Jersey backers of the lawsuit said adds a sense of urgency to the issue.

"We cannot afford to be naive about illegal sports betting," New Jersey State Sen. Jeff Van Drew said in a statement to the press. "It's happening right now, and is funding other criminal enterprises which are far more dangerous."

The New Jersey Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association, the Thoroughbred Breeders Association of New Jersey and the Standardbred Breeders & Owners Association of New Jersey were also listed as plaintiffs in the lawsuit.

Priests jailed for \$8.6 million theft

Two Roman Catholic Church priests in the United States, were sentenced to prison for theft. They were convicted of stealing over US\$8 million from St. Vincent Ferrer Catholic Church in Delray Beach, Florida.

Retired Monsignor John A. Skehan and Reverend Francis B. Guinan were accused in 2006 of misappropriation of funds from the

church collection plates and church bequests.

Judge Jeffrey Colbath handed down the sentence on Skehan who received 14 months in prison followed by seven years on probation. He plead guilty in January 2009 to grand theft of over \$100,000. The defense, prosecutors and Diocese of Palm Beach had requested probation for Skehan, who is 81 years old. Skehan has paid back \$750,000.

"The court finds the defendant is not merely sorry because he got caught, but is truly shameful, embarrassed and remorseful," Judge Jeffrey Colbath said. "The crime of the defendant was pure greed unmasked. There was not a shred of moral necessity to excuse the defendant's crime."

Circuit Judge Krista Marx sentenced Guinan who received four years in prison and was found guilty of theft of just under \$100,000.

"No matter how many good works you have performed in your many years as a priest, your legacy will always be one of thievery and deceit," Judge Krista Marx said. Skehan had invested in a Co. Clare cottage, a Co. Kilkeeny pub, and two penthouse condominiums. As well as real estate he had purchased a \$300,000 gold coin collection. Both priests had embarked on gambling holidays and real estate ventures.

Canadian annual seal hunt begins amid controversy

The Honourable Gail Shea, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, opened the Canadian seal hunt amid protests by animal rights groups, at a time when bans on seal product imports are becoming more prevalent internationally.

Seal hunters along the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Gulf of St. Lawrence are allowed to catch a maximum of 270,000 Harp Seal pups from a total estimated population of 5.5 million. 8,200 is the allowable catch of Hooded seals from an estimated population of 600,000, and seal hunters may catch 50,000 grey seals from an approximate population of 300,000.

The Harp seal pups may be killed as soon as they have molted their white pelts, which occurs 10 to 21 days after birth.

It is reported that Russia has shut down the seal hunt on its shores. The United States, Netherlands, and Belgium ban the import of seal products. The European Parliament committee has endorsed a ban on seal product imports by the 27 European Union (EU) member states, in the form of a proposed bill that would still allow the Canadian Inuit to trade in seal products for first nation cultural purposes. All members of the EU must approve the bill for it to become law.

"While we are extremely disappointed that the European Parliament has called for a ban of the trade of seal products, our position remains that any ban on a humanely conducted hunt, such as Canada's, is completely without merit. We will continue to explore all legal and diplomatic options and we will exercise our rights to their fullest extent under international trade laws if and when it becomes necessary and appropriate."

"Sealing is a significant source of income in many small, isolated coastal communities throughout Atlantic Canada, Quebec and the

North, and creates critical employment opportunities for processing plants, as well as fuel, food and equipment suppliers in coastal communities," said Minister Shea.

"Our government will continue to defend the rights of Canadian sealers to provide a livelihood for their families through our humane, responsible and sustainable hunt," she said. "It represents as much as 35 per cent of a sealer's annual income and is important for thousands of families at a time of year when other fishing options are limited at best."

The first area to open up to the seal hunt was the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where 30 percent of the catch is allowed.

Sixteen observer permits have been issued. "The majority of the observers are people who protest against the seal hunt, but there are journalists and other observers as well. We try to make sure there's an even proportion of sealing activity and observer activity," Mr. Jenkins, Department of Fisheries and Oceans spokesman said. The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) is going to observe and record the commercial seal hunt.

"It's devastating to be here, to know the commercial seal hunt has started again. It's clear that a change is on the horizon with the European Parliament voting on a proposal to ban seal-product trade in the EU and many people in the Canadian sealing industry believe that could spell the beginning of the end of the commercial seal hunt," commented Rebecca Aldworth, director of the Canadian chapter of Humane Society International.

Canada commits \$127.4 million to fighting tuberculosis

On Tuesday, World Tuberculosis Day, the Government of Canada committed C\$127.4 million to the fight against tuberculosis (TB) worldwide.

The Minister of International Cooperation, Beverley J. Oda, said "Our government has a comprehensive, long-term approach in the global fight against tuberculosis and Canadians can be proud that our country continues to be an international leader. We have achieved significant results, as Canada has already contributed to the successful treatment of more than four million tuberculosis sufferers and saved over half a million lives."

Three programs will be funded via the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The Reach Facility Accelerated Case Detection Program will receive \$100 million, The Capacity Building for Tuberculosis Control Program will gain \$20 million and the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Tuberculosis Control Program will receive \$7.4 million.

It is reported that the CIDA minister will increase aid to Africa twofold where TB is killing those suffering from AIDS, more than any other illness. TB also kills more women worldwide than any other disease. In 2006, over 9,000,000 people worldwide were infected with TB.

"Every 20 seconds someone dies from TB, TB is a devastating airborne and opportunistic disease that preys on the poor and takes 1.7 million lives every year. The tragedy is compounded by the fact that TB can be cured and treated for as little as \$20." Chris Dendys,

RESULTS Canada Executive Director said. RESULTS is an advocacy group which works to increase the public and political will to put a stop to hunger and poverty.

"Today's announcement from CIDA, which comes on World TB Day, is an important step in positioning Canada as a global leader in TB control," said Dendys. "These new investments will ensure that more people are diagnosed, treated and cured."

Comedian Stephen Colbert wins NASA space station name contest

American comedian Stephen Colbert has won a NASA contest poll to determine the name for a new wing on the International Space Station.

After using his Comedy Central show *The Colbert Report* to call on fans to vote in the contest, the write-in name "Colbert" topped the poll with 230,539 votes.

NASA officials said they ultimately reserve the right to choose an appropriate name, but have said top vote-getters will receive "the most consideration". The final decision will be made in April.

Almost 1.2 million total votes were cast in the contest, which ended Friday. "Colbert" received more than 40,000 more voters than the second place runner up, "Serenity", which was one of the choices NASA put forward.

Colbert has mocked the NASA suggestion on *The Colbert Report*, saying, "Come on, Serenity? That's not a space module, that's a Glade plug-in."

The contest rules say NASA has the right to choose a name "in

accordance with the best interests of the agency." The rules also say, "Such name may not necessarily be one which is on the list of voted-on candidate names."

Other modules on the space station are named Unity, Harmony and Destiny.

NASA insiders have told Space.com if they choose not to name the module after the comedian, they may consider naming the station's new \$19 million toilet "Colbert" instead.

Colbert, who plays a narcissistic political pundit on his satirical show, has called on his fans (known as "The Colbert Nation") to help have other things named after him in the past.

Among his other namesakes are Steagle Colbeagle the Eagle, the mascot of the Saginaw Spirit junior ice hockey team in Michigan; Stephen Jr., a bald eagle born at the San Francisco Zoo; *Aptostichus stephencolberti*, a species of trapdoor spider; Air Colbert, a Virgin America airplane; and AmeriCone Dream, a Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavor.

Authorities search home of owner of German Wikileaks domain

German authorities have searched the homes of Theodor Reppe, a 32-year-old student who owns the "wikileaks.de" domain. Reppe has homes in Dresden and Jena in Germany. Wikileaks describes itself as an "uncensorable Wikipedia for untraceable mass document leaking and analysis."

The police report obtained by Wikileaks states the reasons for the raid were "distribution of pornographic material" and "discovery of evidence". Wikileaks,

however, asserts that the raid was in connection to Wikileaks hosting "censorship lists" of websites blocked by governments in Australia, Denmark, and Thailand. Wikileaks most recently published an alleged list from the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The list contains thousands of URLs that are blocked when internet service providers use the government's software. Most URLs are alleged child porn sites and gambling sites. One of the blocked URLs on the ACMA's list included an image previously hosted on Wikimedia Commons. Wikileaks does not host and has never published child pornography.

Wikileaks goes on to allege that Mr Reppe was not properly informed of his rights when the searches were taking place. According to Wikileaks, authorities demanded the German domain be shut down and asked that passwords for the domain be handed over to them.

The 'wikileaks.de' domain is a mirror of 'wikileaks.org', and had been registered to Mr Reppe since at least November 2007. As of this report the website was still operating. Reppe and Wikileaks have not been charged with any crimes and no arrests have been made. Wikileaks also says that Reppe refused to sign any documentation from authorities "due to its inaccuracies".

Four-storey building collapses in Lagos, Nigeria; two dead

A residential four-storey building collapsed in Lagos, Nigeria on Tuesday. At least two people have died, and another fourteen people have been rescued from the debris.

The building was located in the Idi- Araba neighbourhood, a densely

populated area of the city.

A spokeswoman for the Red Cross, Umo Okon, stated that "there are about 14 people so far rescued alive. It was a four-storey building, fully residential. There are still some people trapped inside."

Construction workers working at another site nearby helped remove the building's roof to help the rescue effort.

Building collapses are not unheard of in Nigeria: In 2006, 28 died after a building, with a restaurant and shops, collapsed in Lagos. In July of last year, three people were killed when another four-storey building came down in Abuja, the capital of the country.

It is still uncertain what caused the incident, although collapses such as these have in the past been blamed on poor building standards and low construction material quality.

WHO says Zimbabwean cholera epidemic 'past its peak'

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has stated that the cholera outbreak that has struck the African country of Zimbabwe seems to have passed its peak.

The WHO said that "while data collection and verification remain a challenge throughout the country with the effect that weekly statistics are not always accurate or complete, the overall trend over the last 2 months is of a decreasing number of cases and deaths.

"The situation with the current cholera outbreak is improving. The overall trend over the last two months is of a decreasing number of cases and deaths," the WHO said.

The number of new cholera cases in the week ending March 14 was 2,076, almost half of the 3,812 infections reported the week before, and 8,000 per week in the beginning of February. The WHO stated that the fatality rate per week dropped from a peak of 6% in January to 2.3% this month.

91,164 total cases were reported as of March 17 since the epidemic started in August of last year, with a total of 4,307 deaths. The cholera epidemic is the deadliest in Africa for a decade and a half.

European Parliament agrees on unified airspace

On Wednesday, the European Parliament approved the "Single European Sky II" legislation that will lead to the creation of a single European airspace. The single European airspace will result in "more efficient rules, leading to shorter flights, fewer delays and reduced fuel consumption". In turn, this should result in fewer CO2 emissions and cheaper ticket prices. Implementation should be completed by 2012.

Currently the European airspace consists of 650 parts with 60 different control centers and 27 air traffic control (ATC) zones. International flights have to switch between national air traffic control zones, also known as "blocks", when they enter another country. This leads to delays and bottlenecks, causing airplanes to consume more fuel.

Euro parliamentarian Corien Wortmann stated that "the EU countries have stepped on the break for years in creating a European airspace, because they wanted to keep influence over their own airspace. Luckily that resistance is now

broken."((translated from Dutch)) Euro parliamentarian Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert agrees: "Everyone agrees - in theory - that this is important for security, efficiency, reliability, cost reduction, capacity improvement en durability. But self-interest of organizations and countries appeared often more important."((translated from Dutch))

Benefits for the aviation industry over the next ten years are estimated at €2 to 3 billion. CO2 emissions should be cut with approximately 16 million tonnes. As a first step the airspace of Germany, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland will be combined. The European transport ministers are expected to approve the legislation at the end of March.

US Treasury Secretary: "We need the ability to seize firms"

Treasury Department secretary Timothy Geithner and the Obama administration are pressuring Congress to allow the government to seize troubled financial institutions such as insurance companies and investment firms. Currently, banks are the only such entities that the government has authority to take over.

Speaking before the House Financial Services Committee, Geithner said "The United States government does not have the legal means today to manage the orderly restructuring of a large, complex non-bank financial institution that poses a threat to the stability of our financial system."

Committee Chairman Barney Frank (D-MA) agreed, saying, "When non-bank major financial

institutions need to be put out of their misery, we need to give somebody the authority to do what the FDIC can do with banks."

Geithner would work with the White House and Federal Reserve to execute any such takeovers.

The expanded powers would have allowed the seizure of companies such as pariah AIG, which has already received US\$180 billion in government aid. The recent controversy over the payment of bonuses has bumped up the plan to high priority. It was initially to have been part of a more comprehensive overhaul by the government of the financial regulatory system.

Not all are happy with the proposal. Republican House minority leader John Boehner derided the plan, saying it would be "an unprecedented grab of power."

Maxine Waters (D-CA) criticised the government for its lack of transparency in dealing with the current crisis, and questioned Geithner on whether firms such as Goldman Sachs had received preferential treatment by the government. Such probing may indicate reluctance on the part of Congress to grant the expanded powers.

Other than simply taking over a firm, the government would also be able to purchase its assets, guarantee losses, and take out a partial ownership interest.

"It is a terrible, tragic thing that this country came into this crisis with such limited tools for trying to protect the economy itself from the kind of distress that would come as the system came back down to Earth," Geithner

summarized.

Czech PM calls Obama's rescue plan a 'road to hell'

Mirek Topolanek, the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic and the head of the European Union, called United States President Barack Obama's plan to spend almost US\$2 trillion to revive the country's faltering economy a "road to hell".

"The US treasury secretary talks about permanent action and we at our [EU summit] were quite alarmed by that. He talks about an extensive US stimulus campaign. All of these steps are the road to hell,"((translated from Czech)) he said, warning that the US's massive bailouts could risk destabilising financial markets worldwide. He urged other EU governments to avoid making similar plans.

The remarks were made during Topolanek's report to Members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France on Wednesday.

The comments are in sharp contrast to UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown's speech to the European Parliament on Tuesday, in which he spoke of a "new era" of cooperation in the ongoing global recession between the United States and Europe.

"Never in recent years have we had an American leadership so keen at all levels to cooperate with Europe on financial stability, climate change, security and development," Brown said Tuesday.

Mirek Topolanek has become a lame duck prime minister after he was ousted in a vote of no confidence in his government in Prague late Tuesday.

Morning-after pill to be made available to 17-year-olds, U.S. federal judge rules

A federal judge ruled Monday that the controversial morning-after pill Plan B must be made available without a prescription to girls as young as 17, citing the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) willingness to concede to the Bush administration's conservative influences by setting the age limit to 18 in 2006.

Plan B, available in the United States since 1999, consists of two pills designed to prevent conception and must be taken within 72 hours of sexual intercourse. Only since 2006 has it been available without a prescription, following lobbying from the World Health Organization and American Medical Association. Currently the drug is only available without a prescription to women over the age of 18.

The lawsuit was filed in 2005 by the Center for Reproductive Rights. In the ruling, the judge blasted the FDA for giving in to "political considerations" and delaying approval of the new age limit.

Susan F. Wood, former director of women's health at the FDA, resigned in 2005 in protest over the agency's handling of the drug.

"What happened with Plan B demonstrated that the agency was off track, and was not being allowed to do its job properly," she said.

The Family Research Council, a conservative organization, said the judge had given in to "political ideology promoting sexual license for teens."

The FDA says it is reviewing the ruling, which it has thirty days to comply with.

Pilots in 16-death crash jailed for praying instead of flying

The pilot and co-pilot of Tuninter Flight 1153, which crashed into the Mediterranean Sea in 2005, killing sixteen people, have each received ten-year jail sentences for the ditching of the flight. They were found to have prayed instead of trying to direct the plane to safety when the engines failed. Tuninter Flight 1153, from Bari, Italy, to Djerba, Tunisia, crashed into Italian waters on August 6, 2005.

The flight ran into trouble because the ATR 72 twin-engined turboprop had mistakenly been fitted with the fuel gauge for an ATR 42, which has a lower fuel capacity. The incorrect reading on the gauge was relied upon, and led to the aircraft suffering fuel starvation and eventually running out of fuel. The right engine failed at 23,000 feet, and the left at 7,000 feet.

Captain Shafik Al Gharbi and co-pilot Ali Kebaier Lassoued were described as having panicked and started praying aloud, rather than following emergency procedures to bring the plane safely to a runway. After gliding for sixteen minutes, the pilots decided to attempt a crash-landing in the Mediterranean, and the aircraft crashed into the sea about 23 nautical miles to the Northwest of Palermo.

The court in Palermo also sentenced five other employees of Tuninter to sentences of between eight and nine years' imprisonment. None of the accused were in court to hear the verdict, and none will serve time in jail before the appeals process is

completed.

NATO soldiers honour fallen Canadians

On Sunday, at Kandahar International Airport in Afghanistan, over 3,000 NATO soldiers honoured four recently fallen Canadians who died in combat and returned home on Monday.

On Friday, a blast in Zhari District killed Canadian Master Corporal Scott Vernelli and Corporal Tyler Crooks of the The Royal Canadian Regiment. A separate bomb incident in Kandahar City killed Troopers Corey Joseph Hayes and Jack Bouthillier of the Royal Canadian Dragoons.

This is the third time in March that Canadians have fallen in Afghanistan.

"The deaths of four young soldiers and the injuries of others ... reminds us once again of the sacrifices these people make, and that military men and women have made historically, to give us what we have today," said Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada.

Peter MacKay, Minister of National Defence, said "Canada has 100,000 of its citizens buried on this continent. I called four parents and spouses yesterday as a result of recent casualties in Afghanistan. There's so much at stake. We can't fail in Afghanistan, we can't fail in this important alliance. And the world's depending on us."

Canada has previously stated that will end its part in the combat mission, which currently involves 2500 troops, in 2011.

Today in History

1027 – Pope John XIX crowned Conrad II as Holy Roman Emperor.

1484 – William Caxton, the first printer of books in English, printed his translation of Aesop's Fables.
1636 – Utrecht University, one of the oldest universities in the Netherlands and one of the largest in Europe, was established.

1971 – After the Pakistan Army attempted to curb the Bengali nationalist movement in Operation Searchlight, East Pakistan declared its independence from Pakistan to

form Bangladesh, starting the Bangladesh Liberation War.

1975 – The Biological Weapons Convention, the first multilateral disarmament treaty banning the production of an entire category of weapons, entered into force.

1999 – The Melissa computer worm was released, infecting e-mail systems around the world.
March 26 is Independence Day in Bangladesh (1971)

Quote of the Day

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the
difference.

~ Robert Frost ~

Word of the Day

conterminous adj

1. Meeting end-to-end or at the ends.
2. (of geographical regions) Adjoining; sharing a boundary.
3. Having the same scope, range of meaning, or extent in time.

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