



Top Stories

Dutch parties agree on government formation

The leading political parties in the Netherlands have agreed on a work program, part of an effort to form a coalition government after the splintered verdict of the elections held in November. The parties have yet to agree on who gets the top jobs in government.

Snow causes disruption in UK

Heavy snow has caused hundreds of school closures and disrupted road, rail and air travel. Runway closures at Birmingham, London Gatwick and City, Bristol and Cardiff have since then been lifted.

Featured story

Annie Awards for animation Sunday

The International Animated Film Association will hand out animation's highest honors, the Annie Awards in Glendale, California this Sunday. Cars, Happy Feet, and Monster House, Open Season and Over The Hedge are vying for the top prize - best animated feature.

Wikipedia Current Events

•A report by the U.S. Defense Department's inspector general has found Defense Department "purposely manipulated" pre-war intelligence. Senator Carl Levin, D-MI, as chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee has called the report "very damning" and said of its results, "highly disturbing".

Palestinians, Israelis clash in Jerusalem over construction at Temple Mount

Violent clashes have broken out between Palestinians and Israeli police near the al-Aqsa Mosque and Temple Mount in Jerusalem, from controversy over Israeli construction near the site, which is holy to both Muslims and Jews.

The construction work reportedly is to repair a pedestrian bridge that leads to the Mugrabi Gate, the entrance to the mosque used by Palestinians, and runs over the Jewish Western Wall area of the complex. The bridge collapsed in 2004 and was temporarily replaced with a wooden bridge which Israelis say is weakening and unsafe.

The construction involves excavation work and digging at the site, which Palestinian leaders contend is part of an attempt to dig under the mosque to find evidence of the Jewish Second Temple and/or to deliberately weaken the foundation of the mosque. Muslims dispute that the Temple was located at the site. Some artifacts have been salvaged from the digging work.

Israeli forces locked down Palestinian neighborhoods of Jerusalem in anticipation of backlashes from the construction. The Old Jerusalem city limits were blockaded, allowing only Palestinians over 45 years old from entering and only on foot. Palestinians from the West Bank were completely barred. Opponents have declared the blockades and

the construction work a deliberate act to prevent Muslims from accessing the holy site. The mass of protesters at the site have in turn blocked Jewish access to the Western Wall.

Palestinian leaders have characterised the excavation work as a deliberate act of aggression against a Muslim holy site. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas declared the construction and blockade as "hostile measures" against Muslims. Palestinian chief justice Tayssir al-Tamimi declared a "day of anger" and called on Palestinians to defend the mosque.

Arab and Muslim countries including Jordan, Malaysia and Indonesia criticized Israel for the controversial work and urged it to halt construction. Israeli defense minister Amir Peretz also warned against starting construction. The leader of the Pakistan Muslim League urged Muslim countries to freeze diplomatic ties with Israel in protest of the work.

Around 150 Muslims were inside the mosque for morning prayers when the construction and blockade began. An Israeli Muslim journalist reported that the worshippers were unable to leave and were bombarded with shouting from Israeli loudspeakers.

The al-Aqsa mosque is the third holiest site in Islam, having once been the central point of prayer (qibla) for Muslims and allegedly the place where Muhammad ascended into heaven.

Conventional Judaism believes it is also the historic site of the First and Second Temples, the holiest temple in Judaism, which is prophesised to be rebuilt ahead of the coming of the Messiah.

No deaths have been reported in the clashes, which simmered by evening.

Demonstrations also took place at mosques throughout the Muslim world, including Egypt and Jordan. Protests were expected later in the day in Nazareth.

The incident comes only a few days after rival Palestinian political factions, Hamas and Fatah, came to an agreement for a unity government aimed at restoring international support of Palestine and a return to Israeli negotiations.

Washington State Initiative would require married couples to have kids

An initiative has been introduced in the U.S. state of Washington that would require a married couple to have children within three years, or else their marriage would become void.

The activist group Washington Defense of Marriage Alliance (WA-DOMA) filed Initiative 957 on January 26. If passed, marriage in the state would be limited to men and women who are able to have children. In order to receive a marriage license, a couple would have to assert that they "know of no reason" that they cannot have children. If they did not have children within three years, their marriages would be subject to annulment. All other marriages would be defined as 'unrecognized' and people in them would be ineligible to receive any marriage benefits.

WA-DOMA formed in 2006 in response to the decision in the case *Andersen v. King County*, where the state Supreme Court upheld Washington's ban on same-sex marriage. The court found the 1998 Defense of Marriage Act, which restricts marriage to unions between a man and woman, was proper. In the decision, the court reasoned that there was a "legitimate state interest" in limiting marriage to couples capable of having children.

WA-DOMA is in favor of gay marriage rights. The purpose of the initiative, according to founder Gregory Gadow, is to show that the logic behind the DOMA ruling is absurd. 'For many years, social conservatives have claimed that marriage exists solely for the purpose of procreation ... The time has come for these conservatives to be dosed with their own medicine,' said Gadow. 'If same-sex couples should be barred from marriage because they can not have children together, it follows that all couples who cannot or will not have children together should equally be barred from marriage.'

Supporters of I-957 must gather at least 224,800 valid signatures by July 6 to put it on the November ballot. The alliance says if the initiative were passed, the state supreme court would likely strike it down as unconstitutional, which would in turn weaken the Court's reasoning in upholding the Defense of Marriage Act.

The measure's backers have said they are planning two additional initiatives. One would prohibit divorce or separation when a married couple has children, and would make having a child together the equivalent of marriage.

Other gay rights groups do not

support the paper. Activist Bill Dubay commented that while he gets the point of the initiative, it is unlikely he would sign it. The gay advocacy group Equal Rights Washington does not endorse the bill, stressing that that families come in all forms, with or without children, and that laws should help families, not hurt them.

HIV vaccine trial set to begin in South Africa

The first large-scale trial of a vaccine for HIV has been launched in South Africa. About 3,000 HIV-negative people will be administered the test vaccine MRKAd5 HIV-1 created by the pharmaceutical company Merck. The study will examine if the vaccine prevents infection or lowers HIV levels in those who do get infected.

A parallel study will also be conducted in the United States and South America, to compare the vaccine's effectiveness on various strains of HIV. The vaccine's functioning in a heterosexual population and its effectiveness among women will also be studied. Preliminary trials for the vaccine have been conducted in the Americas and Australia as well as in Africa.

AIDS is estimated to have killed 25 million people worldwide since 1981, and between 33 and 46 million more are estimated to be infected with HIV, more than half of them in Sub-Saharan Africa. Between three and six million people are thought to have been infected in 2005.

The trial, named the Phambili ("Going forward") Trial, is being conducted by the International HIV Trials Network and the South African AIDS Vaccine Initiative (SAAVI).

The vaccine has been developed from an adenovirus, a type of virus that causes the common cold. The virus has been genetically engineered to prevent it from causing the flu or from passing on from person to person. Instead, three genes of the HIV virus have been introduced into the adenovirus. When the vaccine containing these genes is injected into the body, it is hoped that the body's immune system will learn to recognise and kill cells that contain the vaccine, thereby also developing an immune response against the HIV virus, which also contains these three genes.

The three genes, called gag, pol and env contain information needed to make the structural proteins for the capsid, the "shell" of the HIV viron. The vaccine does not contain the remaining six HIV genes that cause HIV to infect cells, replicate and cause disease.

The vaccine does not contain any live HIV and therefore cannot cause any infection, SAAVI said in a press release, adding that the vaccine was found to be safe and produced an immune response against HIV in earlier trials.

SAAVI has expressed its commitment to the "highest level of preventive care" for those who take part in the trial, promising "extensive, state-of-the-art" counselling as well as some forms of medical care and for those taking part, through the duration of the trial.

The trial starts a week after a different trial, involving a microbicide gel called Ushercell was stopped after more women who used the gel were found to be infected compared to those who were given a dummy gel as placebo. Eleven previous trials of

the gel had not shown any problems, the chief scientist for the trial in South Africa told Business Day.

The trial is expected to cost \$35 million and SAAVI will be supported by Eskom and the South African government.

New video game genre promises to 'boost psychological health'

The developers of a new video game genre hope to promote the idea of boosting the psychological health of gamers. Today, fun and violence are staples of the gaming industry and several groups in different countries are working on and promoting games to strengthen people's self-esteem and emotional health.

One of such groups is Dimple Entertainment, based in Tokyo. The group's representatives stated that in May they will start the production of "DS Therapy", which is a quite unconventional game. Launched in Japan, the game will be available on hand-held DS Player developed by Nintendo.

The game's creators say that by answering several light-hearted questions on various topics in the game, players can see a daily evaluation of their mental health.

In Montreal, Canada, at the McGill University Mark Baldwin looks forward to make people feel good about themselves. Together with his crew, the psychology professor developed a game called "MindHabits Booster". The research team says that the game is based on their research in the field of social psychology. The idea came after they discovered the fact that they can use repetitive components from video game play to shape humans' perceptions as well as

their ways of thinking.

The researchers working at the University of Rochester outlined that both children and adults play video games because they lack several psychological needs like: opportunities for achievement, freedom and a sense of connection.

Dutch parties agree on government formation

The leading political parties in the Netherlands have agreed on a work program, part of an effort to form a coalition government after the splintered verdict of the elections held in November 2006. The parties have yet to agree on who gets the top jobs in government.

The main parties of the left, the Labour Party (PvdA) and Socialist Party (SP) won 58 seats in the 150 strong Tweede Kamer, the lower house of parliament, while the more splintered right wing parties led by the Christian Democrats (CDA) and ChristianUnion (CU) won 47 but with probable support from the 9 members of the Party for Freedom (PVV).

The parties announced their plans on Wednesday reaching a deal on the main issue of the election campaign, Mortgage Interest Relief, which split the SP from the other coalition partners. Mortgage Interest Relief, which is a significant factor in most people's finances, with a marginal rate of 52%, had been threatened by the SP manifesto, but the compromise deal announced by the parties left Mortgage Interest Relief unchanged in return for a continuation of the tight legal restrictions on rent increases that had been threatened by the previous government.

In another key concession, the CDA reversed the hard line asylum policy that it introduced with its

previous coalition partners, the VVD, and introduced an amnesty of all illegal immigrants who arrived in the country before 2001.

The publication of the government agenda (the "Coalitieakkoord") outlines policies in a number of main areas:

Retirement: the CDA conceded changes to retirement benefit to introduce taxation on retirees with pensions over EUR 18,000 from 2011.

Work: the government will allocate EUR 700 million to facilitate unemployed and disabled people finding jobs.

Education: more money will be made available for schools in poorer areas or schools with substantial immigrant populations but, in return, the government will force everyone under 27 to either be in education or have a job. Those in high school education will be forced to gain a diploma before leaving high school and take a three-month "social internship" before leaving school.

Health: the CDA has compromised on Health too in reversing the 2003 policy of excluding dental care from basic health insurance and more money will be made available for staffing of health care outlets. The CDA's stated policy of cutting budgets in a new government will be restricted to cost savings from elimination of waste and red tape.

Following the nomination of Balkenende as formateur of the new government the haggling of cabinet and government jobs will be the last element in sealing the deal. Balkenende will continue as Prime Minister for the CDA with Wouter Bos (leader of the PvdA) likely to become Finance Minister and CU leader André Rouvoet becoming Youth Minister.

China accused of torturing Chinese-Canadian prisoner

The family of a Chinese-Canadian imprisoned in China on terror-related charges say that the prisoner, Huseyin Celil is being tortured by Chinese police in order to make him sign a confession.

Celil has Canadian citizenship, which China has refused to recognize. Consular officials and his Canadian lawyer have not been permitted to meet him and his wife Kamila Telendibaeva hasn't seen him in almost a year.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said that Celil is being tried in accordance with Chinese laws and that consular access does not apply since Celil is a Chinese citizen.

Huseyin Celil's sister, mother and older brother say that they are speaking out despite fears that the police would arrest them.

The family says that if Celil, who fled China in the 1990s and sought refuge in Canada, living in Hamilton, does not sign the confession, he would be "put in a hole and buried alive." Celil was arrested in Uzbekistan in 2005 and extradicted to China. Chinese authorities say he is a member of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which China and the United States consider to be a terrorist organisation.

Celil alleged that he has been tortured during a court appearance during which his sister and son were present. Canadian officials were not permitted to be present at the trial.

This issue has caused friction between Canada and China, with Prime Minister Stephen Harper questioning China's human rights

record. The issue was also brought up when Harper spoke with Chinese President Hu Jintao at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in Vietnam last November.

Canadian media report that Canadian federal officials have been dispatched to China and will stay in the country.

China's assistant foreign affairs minister He Yafei said Celil is suspected of involvement in terrorist activities.

Ford Taurus to be revived

Ford Motor Company CEO Alan Mulally has reported that Ford will rename the Ford Five Hundred to the Taurus for the 2008 model year, when a facelifted model is expected to be launched to improve the lackluster sales of the outgoing model. Mulally says that Ford's decision to name all their cars with the letter F was a lackluster move, and makes their names easily forgettable. As a result, Mulally plans on reviving many respected Ford nameplates, the Taurus being one of them, and the Falcon possibly in the future.

The Ford Taurus was originally introduced in 1986, and was a revolutionary car that rewrote the rules for creating a sedan, and pushed the other American automakers to follow suit, leading to a design revolution that completely rid Detroit of the "boxy" cars of the 70s and 80s. The Taurus survived for four generations, selling over 7,500,000 units. The Taurus was discontinued in October 2006, after a brief run of 2007 models destined for fleet customers.

"How can it go away?" Alan Mulally remembered asking, "It's the best-selling car in America."

While it is not expected for the name change to turn the Five Hundred into a 400,000 plus units a year blockbuster like the Taurus, it is expected to make sales more solid, and to make the car well known, since the Taurus is a well known nameplate around the country.

Canada, U.S. officials to meet Feb. 23

Two top US Officials will be meeting with their counterparts in Ottawa on February 23.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff will meet with Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay, Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day, Trade Minister David Emerson, and their Mexican counterparts.

The top agenda item is expected to be border security, as American officials are concerned with Canada's slow progress in implimenting new secure forms of identification.

Currently, with the approval of the U.S. government, British Columbia and nearby Washington State have a pilot project that involves upgraded drivers' licences.

Besides border security issues, the meeting is expected to address other issues like trade.

Burlington, Markham, and York South-Weston election results

Votes were cast out yesterday in the Ontario ridings of Burlington, Markham, and York South-Weston.

Progressive Conservative candidate Joyce Savoline won a seat in Burlington.

Ontario Liberal Party candidate Michael Chan won a seat in

Markham.

NDP candidate Paul Ferreira won a seat in York South-Weston.

None of the previous Member of Provincial Parliament's (MPPs) ran in the byelection.

Former Conservative MPP Cam Jackson resigned to run for mayor of Burlington and won on November 13, 2006. Former Liberal MPP Tony Wong resigned his seat in the legislature to run for York Regional Council and won the seat on November 13. Former Liberal MPP Joe Cordiano, who was MPP for York South—Weston, left his political career to spend more time with his family.

The official Ontario elections with begin on October 10, 2007.

Today in History

1258 - Hulagu Khan and the Mongols sacked and burned Baghdad, a cultural and commercial centre of the Islamic world at the time, ending the rule of the Abbasid caliphate.

1763 - Britain and Spain partitioned New France by the Treaty of Paris, and decimated the French colonial empire.

1840 - Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha married Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom at the Chapel Royal.

1962 - "Rudolf Abel," a Soviet spy arrested by the FBI, was exchanged for Gary Powers, the pilot of a U.S. Air Force spy plane shot down in the U-2 Incident.

Quote of the Day

I have read descriptions of Paradise that would make any sensible person stop wanting to go there.
~ Charles de Montesquieu

Word of the Day malapropism; n

1. The blundering use of an absurdly inappropriate word in place of a similar sounding one.
2. An absurdly inappropriate word that has been improperly used in place of a similar sounding word.

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