



Top Stories

ETA declares permanent cease-fire

The armed Basque separatist organisation "ETA" (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) has announced a permanent cease-fire as of Friday 24th March 2006.

Athens' new Acropolis museum will be ready in 2007

The long-delayed new Acropolis Museum in Athens will be ready to receive visitors in 2007. Moreover, the new Museum re-issues the demands for the restoration of the Parthenon Marbles from London's British Museum back to Greece.

Featured story

Buffalo, N.Y. hotel proposal approved by Common Council

With no comments permitted from the public, Buffalo's Common Council approved the Elmwood Village Hotel proposal. However; the Planning Board, which meets this Tuesday, must also approve the proposal.

Wikipedia Current Events

- Senior Muslim clerics in Afghanistan call for the execution of an Afghan citizen, Abdul Rahman, who is on trial for converting from Islam to Christianity.
- A tortoise that once belonged to British colonial Lord Clive in the 18th Century has died at the age of 250 in a zoo in Calcutta.

Wikipedia Current Events

- French youths set fire to cars and looted shops in Paris marring protests against the contrat première embauche law that Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin had agreed to discuss with unions.
- More than 100 people die after their boat capsizes in Cameroon.
- The British Embassy in Baghdad confirms the rescue of three western hostages held in Iraq for nearly four months; Briton Norman Kember and Canadians Harmeet Singh Sooden and James Loney. They were freed during a multinational military operation involving American, British, Canadian and Iraqi forces.

Pandermalis announces 2007 Acropolis Museum opening

The president of the organization for the construction of the new Acropolis Museum, professor Dimitrios Pandermalis, announced that the Museum will be ready to operate as an exhibition center for archaeological treasures in 2007. In response to this statement, the Greek government re-issued demands regarding the subject of the Parthenon Marbles' restoration to Greece from the United Kingdom.

After visiting the construction site, Greek Culture Minister George Voulgarakis reiterated yesterday that the new Athens museum would be ready to receive visitors

by the end of next year.

The new Acropolis Museum, which is located in the area of Makriyannis, just a few metres away from the rock of the Acropolis, will cover an area of about 23,000 sqm. According to the Greek Ministry of Culture, the whole project would cost 129 million euros.

The Parthenon Marbles - also known as the Elgin Marbles - are currently located in a specific hall in the British Museum of London. The demand from the side of the Greek government as well as from greek or non-greek organizations and British celebrities like Sean Connery for the restoration of the marbles - a demand which was an idea of the former Greek Culture Minister and actress Melina Mercouri - didn't have any result until today due to the denial from the side of the British Museum administration.

New book links Bonds, Giambi and Sheffield to BALCO

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Police arrest hostage taker in Greek mental clinic

A hostage situation in the private mental clinic Castalia, in the suburb of Glyfada, south Athens, has ended with the arrest of a 26 year old man. The man had locked himself up along with three hostages in the Accounts Department, on the first floor of the building.

According to Greek police, the man — who was armed — has mental problems and is a drug addict. His demands were unknown to the police, as he did not communicate them to the police negotiators. The situation in the Castalia clinic prompted the Greek Minister of Public Order to

cancel his scheduled meetings in order to supervise personally the rescue operation.

PAD petitions election commission for Thaksin's disqualification

Thailand's People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) has petitioned the country's Election Commission to disqualify caretaker Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from the upcoming April 2 election and to postpone it, to bring an end to the current political crisis. According to the Bangkok Post, approximately 1,000 PAD protesters rallied outside the election commission's headquarters to mark delivery of the petition.

Parinya Thewanarumitkul, a law lecturer at Thammasat University, claimed at a Thai Journalists Association forum that he had evidence that the PM had abused his position by using government resources to aid in the organisation of a March 3 rally of Thai Rak Thai supporters. In addition, Parinya expressed doubt that the required 500 MPs would be returned, due to the main opposition party election boycott and the requirement for 20% of the eligible electorate to vote for a candidate, even when the candidate stands unopposed.

Thailand's Democrats, the current main opposition party, who are boycotting the April 2 election, raised doubts over the validity of a number of Thai Rak Thai candidates' listings. Calling for the Election Commission to investigate these allegations, Pichai Rattanadilok na Phuket of the National Institute of Development Administration also highlighted the 46 constituencies where the Prime Minister's party stands unopposed, viewing vote buying as a

possibility in these areas.

According to Democrat claims, over 200 people who applied to be on ballots failed to meet the requirement to have maintained party membership for 90 days prior to the announcement of the election. It isn't just the candidates of smaller parties that have caught the eye of the Democrat panel examining candidate credentials. They claim that at least three of the Thai Rak Thai candidates should be disenfranchised due to having not voted during the 2005 election. The three accused — including the party's deputy leader — dispute the claim that they failed to vote. Party deputy Somchai Sunthornvat claimed it was a person with the same name who had failed to vote, and threatened to sue the Democrat party for making the allegation.

While PAD protesters demonstrated away from Government House, the beleaguered PM returned unannounced from his election campaigning in the country's northeast. In addition to his having been continually called upon leave office, his key privatisation policies had been dealt a serious blow by the ruling that the privatisation of the state-owned power company EGAT was unlawful.

Judges overturned two royal decrees that had been the foundation of the plan for Thailand's largest ever IPO. Supporters of the eleven civic groups that had filed the petition with the court greeted the decision with cheers. Mention of conflicts of interest in the privatisation process adds fuel to the accusations of anti-Thaksin groups, who accuse the PM of

leading a government that indulges in cronyism.

West Papuans, asylum seekers, get temporary Australian visas

The Australian government has granted temporary visas to 42 of the 43 West Papuan asylum seekers who arrived by boat in January. The group accuse the Indonesian military of "conducting genocide in their homeland." The 36 adults and seven children spent five days at sea in a traditional outrigger boat before arriving in far north Queensland's Cape York. They have been since been detained under Australia's Mandatory Detention policy.

Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone said the 42 West Papuans have been given temporary protection visas (TPV). "These people have completed their medical and character checks and will be moved into the community," she said. Most of the group are being relocated by private jet, from Australia's remote immigration detention centre on Christmas Island to Melbourne. Senator Vanstone said a decision was still pending on one of the asylum seekers, as there were further, specific case issues to be addressed.

However, the Indonesian government says the refugees should be sent back. Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has told Prime Minister John Howard that the group should not be given political asylum. He assures that they would not be prosecuted. Last month, Indonesia's ambassador, Hamzah Thayeb, warned that Australia's relationship with Indonesia would be affected if the Papuans were granted asylum.

A spokesman for Foreign Minister Alexander Downer dismissed suggestions that the decision would cause a rift between Australia and Jakarta. "We've got an excellent bilateral relationship with Indonesia and we wouldn't expect that any particular issue is going to bring that into question," he said. Mr Downer personally informed his Indonesian counterpart, Hassan Wirajuda, of the decision. "It's a matter of some significance between our two countries," said Mr Downer.

Indonesia has insisted that there are no human rights abuses in Papua. Djoko Susilo, a member of Indonesia's parliamentary foreign affairs commission, labelled the decision "an unfriendly gesture by the Australian Government."

Since their arrival, the 43 West Papuans have accused the Indonesian military of "genocide in their homeland," taken over by Indonesia in the 1960s after a widely disputed independence referendum.

Herman Wainggai, who spoke for the asylum-seekers, thanked the Australian Government and people for a fair and just decision. "We were threatened in an extremely dangerous position ... We had to flee to Australia from the intimidation of the killing and the persecution inflicted by Indonesian authorities against us," he said.

"We trust that Indonesia will act with maturity and see that the situation in West Papua is very serious and one which must be dealt with peacefully and with humanity, not by violent means," he said.

The Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) has denounced the Australian

government's decision, urging the government to send a formal protest note to the Australian government over the visas and political asylum granted to the 42 Indonesian citizens. "We question the decision to grant visas and political asylum at a time when the security situation in Papua province is tense," said member of the House Commission I for defence, foreign and information affairs, Effendy Mara Sakti of the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDIP).

Another House Commission member, Yudy Chrisnandy of the Golkar Party, said the granting of political asylum and temporary visas was unethical and could disrupt relations between the two countries.

Amnesty International has expressed particular concern about human rights violations in Papua, but welcomed the decision. "While welcoming today's decision ... Amnesty now encourages the government to consider the plight of the Papuan refugees, as under Australia's temporary protection regime the refugees now face isolation from their families left behind and face uncertainty about their future," the organisation said in a statement. Amnesty reports of "extrajudicial executions, 'disappearances,' torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary detentions in Papua Province."

Australian Greens Senator Kerry Nettle also welcomed the decision. "The situation in West Papua is clearly very dangerous for those who assert their right to self-determination, so the decision to grant protection visas is a good one," Senator Nettle said.

West Papua have been seeking sovereignty since the United

Nations handed the province to Indonesia in 1969. A spokesman for the Free West Papua Campaign, Nick Chesterfield, said the decision highlights the dire situation. "What this clearly demonstrates is that the world needs to wake up to what is happening in West Papua and start to actively look at ways of ending the sickening violence that the Indonesian military continues to inflict on the people of West Papua," Mr Chesterfield said.

"Rather than being isolated and locked up thousands of miles away on Christmas Island, these very courageous individuals can receive the support they deserve from the local community. This decision also means Australians will be able to hear first hand about the atrocities and escalating human right abuses that are unfolding in one of our closest neighbouring countries," said Mr Chesterfield.

Meanwhile, the "Morning Star" flag of West Papua was raised in Marrickville, New South Wales, by Senator Nettle and the Mayor of Marrickville, Sam Byrne. The flag, officially unrecognised by Indonesia in the West Papuan region, was raised to "urge city citizens to support self-determination for the West Papuans people."

Uniting Church minister Reverend John Barr, who recently returned from the area, warned of an "intensification of violence" and also demands from protesters to have the Freeport mine and the Indonesian government held responsible for despoiling the Papuan environment. "We have heard one student was shot dead and many are badly wounded. I could hear people yelling and fleeing as my contact spoke to me

on the phone from the grounds of the theological seminary," he said in a statement.

Media Ban

The Jakarta Foreign Correspondents Club has stated concern that no foreign journalist has had official access to Papua in the past eighteen months. In that period there has been "a significant build-up of troops in Papua with reports of widespread displacement of civilians, arson, and arbitrary detention in the central highlands region."

Last week, Indonesian media showed police shooting directly at students on local university grounds. Authorities have not released details of casualties among the demonstrators. "I can't tell you exactly how many were shot," says Hans Magel. "In such traumatic circumstances, we ourselves are finding it difficult gathering casualty figures. The latest information we have is that 22 were seriously injured."

Indonesia has effectively maintained a ban on access to Papua for many foreign organisations since 2003. Indonesia's Minister of Defense, Juwono Sudarsono, said in February that the government will "maintain curbs on foreign media reporting from Papua. He is quoted as saying, "We feel that our unity and cohesion are being threatened by the presence of foreign intrusion and concerns so there is a balance between international concerns and sovereignty that we want to strike very peacefully."

Minister Sudarsono also stated that the curbs should "extend to foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and churches, whom he thought might

create conflict in the province by encouraging Papuans to campaign on issues of human rights." He stated that he feared reporters could be "used as a platform" by Papuans to publicize the alleged abuses.

Ken Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, is alarmed at efforts by the Indonesian government to ban or limit press coverage of human rights violations and other issues in Papua. In a letter to President Yudhoyono, Mr Roth urged the Indonesian government to respect press freedom and to allow full press coverage of all issues affecting the province.

Senior Indonesian ministers have vehemently denied that the people of West Papua are being repressed.

EU bans 92 airlines, buries "flying coffins"

EU Transport Commissioner Jacques Barrot on Wednesday banned 92 airlines, some planes of which he described as "flying coffins," from landing at European airports, declaring them unsafe by international standards.

"This blacklist will keep dubious airlines out of Europe," Barrot said. "It will also make sure that all airlines operating in Europe's skies meet the highest safety standards."

President Bush calls on Helen Thomas during press conference; question stirs debate

During a press conference on Tuesday, President George W. Bush called on veteran White House reporter Helen Thomas for the first time in three years. She said, "... your decision to invade Iraq has caused the deaths of

thousands of Americans and Iraqis, wounds of Americans and Iraqis for a lifetime. Every reason given, publicly at least, has turned out not to be true. My question is, why did you really want to go to war?"

Bush replied, "And when [Saddam Hussein] chose to deny inspectors, when he chose not to disclose, then I had the difficult decision to make to remove him. And we did, and the world is safer for it."

The exchange has provoked extreme responses in the blogosphere, with conservative commentators like Fred Barnes of Fox News portraying Helen Thomas as being "unprofessional" and "improper" in "accusing the President."

Barnes argued, "Reporters aren't supposed to fire accusations at the President or anybody else they're interrogating, and that was wrong." He pointed out that Helen Thomas is an outspoken critic of the war in Iraq and the Presidency of George W. Bush. Fox News reporter Brit Hume said of Thomas, "She has an agenda, period, and always has had an agenda of sorts." Conservative commentators mostly agreed that President Bush "got the better of the exchange."

Liberal commentators like Josh Marshall from Talking Points Memo focused on the President's response, saying, "Of course, that's not what happened. [...] We got the resolution passed. Saddam called our bluff and allowed the inspectors in. President Bush pressed ahead with the invasion." He added "His lies are so blatant that I must constantly check myself so as not to assume that he is simply delusional or has blocked out whole chains of events

from the past."

Today in History

- 1603 - King James I became the first British monarch to reign in the Kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland simultaneously.
- 1882 - Robert Koch announced the discovery of the bacterium that causes tuberculosis.
- 1944 - World War II: Captured Allied soldiers began "the Great Escape", breaking out of the German prison camp Stalag Luft III.
- 1976 - Dirty War: President Isabel Perón of Argentina was kidnapped and deposed in a bloodless coup d'état.
- 1989 - The tanker Exxon Valdez spilled more than 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound, Alaska, causing a major environmental disaster.
- March 24 is World Tuberculosis Day

Quote of the Day

"With the arrogance of youth, I determined to do no less than to transform the world with Beauty. If I have succeeded in some small way, if only in one small corner of the world, amongst the men and women I love, then I shall count myself blessed, and blessed, and blessed, and the work goes on." ~ William Morris

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