



Top Stories

Ahmadinejad sends letter to George W. Bush



Iranian government spokesman Gholam-Hossein Elham said that Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has sent a letter directly to US president George W. Bush proposing "new solutions for getting out of international problems and the current fragile situation of the world".



UK Attorney General says Guantanamo should close

The Attorney General of the United Kingdom Lord Goldsmith has called for the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp at a speech in London today, saying "the existence of Guantanamo Bay remains unacceptable".

Featured story

Last American survivor of the Titanic disaster dies



Lilian Asplund, the last American survivor of the Titanic, has died in her

home in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. She was 99 years old.

Wikipedia Current Events

- China declassifies its diplomatic files from between 1956 and 1960, including records of the Sino-Soviet split.
- The Federal Open Market Committee of the United States' central bank, the Federal Reserve, decides upon an increase in the Federal Funds Rate by 25 basis points to 5.00%. The US economic growth has been strong so far, with only moderate concern of possible inflationary pressures.

UK Attorney General says Guantanamo should close

The Attorney General of the United Kingdom Lord Goldsmith has called for the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp at a speech in London today. He said "the existence of Guantanamo Bay remains unacceptable - it is time, in my view, that it should close". The United States, which operates the naval base, has been under pressure for some time to close the camp, over fears that prisoners have been mistreated and are being held for long periods of time without conviction or trial.

Lord Goldsmith said: "Not only would it, in my personal opinion, be right to close Guantanamo as a matter of principle, I believe it would also help to remove what has become a symbol to many - right or wrong- of injustice. The historic tradition of the United States as a beacon of freedom, liberty and of justice deserves the removal of this symbol."

In the past few days, US President George Bush has said he "would very much like to end Guantanamo", but said he had to wait for a Supreme Court ruling on whether inmates could be tried by military or civilian courts. This ruling is expected in June.

Judge delays exit exam decision until Friday

A California judge has delayed until Friday his decision on whether to stop the state from requiring high school students to pass the California High School Exit Examination in order to graduate.

On Monday, Alameda County Superior Court Judge Robert B. Freedman said he would issue an injunction against the high-stakes test, which was taken Tuesday by thousands of seniors in danger of not being graduated unless they pass, unless the state's attorneys came up with an otherwise convincing argument by 2 p.m.

Instead, Freedman said he will wait until Friday to issue his decision.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of Richmond High School senior Liliana Valenzuela and others by the San Francisco law firm Morrison & Foerster. It contends that the test violates the "equal protection" concept of the law in that poor students and English-language learners don't have access to equal educations.

The ruling would affect about 47,000 California high school seniors, and dozens at James Logan High School, who have yet to pass the exam and would be barred from being graduated if they don't.

Thirty-two James Logan students were scheduled to take the second half of the two-day test Wednesday, along with thousands of others throughout the state.

Last week, state Superintendent of Schools Jack O'Connell said that about 47,000 California high school seniors still needed to pass the test or face the prospect of completing four years of schoolwork without receiving a diploma. O'Connell wrote the law requiring the test while serving in the state legislature.

The statistics O'Donnell cited also show that, while nearly 90 percent of seniors have passed the test, only 71 percent of seniors who are English learners have passed, and 83 percent of those classified as low-income have passed.

Of the 50 taking the first part of the test at Logan High on Tuesday, only 13 were native English speakers.

Cynthia O'Brien, who is coordinating the administration of the exit exam at James Logan, said she'd like some certainty about whether the test is going to be required or not.

"The politicals in STATE and our judicial system need to get together and do the right job by the students. If the Exit Exam is going to go forward, then it needs to go forward. If not, then it needs to be cancelled completely," she said after a long day of testing Tuesday.

"It is not fair to the students to work their hearts out and agonize over something that has such a large impact on them and then find they didn't need to work so hard. I know there are probably students who have not taken the exam seriously, but the vast majority of Logan students have. They deserve better than to not know from one day to the next what they need to do to be granted a diploma. Most of our students who are taking the exam this go around have given up electives, lunches or time after school to prepare for the test," she said.

"I am afraid that the message we are giving our students is that you don't need to care," O'Brien continued, "Then, one day, the system will pull the rope tight, and students will be caught not having what they need. Yes, they should all be doing their best, but when the system cries WOLF too often, people tend to ignore the message."

O'Donnell, in a statement released on Monday, said he would try to make sure the test counts.

"Recognizing that today's ruling is not final, I intend to do everything in my power to ensure that at the end of the legal day we maintain the integrity of the high school exit exam, and that all graduates in the class of 2006 will enter college or the workforce with a diploma that reflects their mastery of critical academic skills," he said.

"Independent research shows that because of the High School Exit Exam, students are working harder and learning more, and those who are struggling are getting the help they need to succeed," he said.

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger said, "Delaying the exam's implementation does a disservice to our children by depriving us of the best tool we have to make sure schools are performing as they should be. We must increase our efforts to help all students meet the minimal bar set by the exam, not lower our standards or expectations of them."

"I am disappointed in the Court's tentative ruling to stop implementation of the California High School Exit Exam this year but I remain hopeful this will not be their final word," he said.

If Freedman grants the injunction, the state's lawyers say they'll appeal.

Whatever happens with Valenzuela vs. California, the battle isn't over. Next week, Freedman is scheduled to hear arguments in another suit which seeks to block the test. Lawyers for Public Advocates claim the department failed to hold until December a public hearing to consider alternatives to the test, six years after the Legislature approved it.

Multi-Million Dollar fraud at Boston 'Big Dig'

Boston's Central Artery and Third Harbor Tunnel Project (CA/T), unofficially known as the Big Dig, plagued by cost overruns and reports of shoddy workmanship, has been hit with yet another scandal as six employees of its primary concrete supplier have been indicted for falsifying records regarding allegedly inferior concrete supplied to the massive highway construction project.

Federal prosecutors alleged in a 135 count indictment that of the

135,000 truckloads of concrete, a "web" of falsified documents were used to cover up a conspiracy where at least 5,000 truckloads — 1.2 percent of the concrete used — did not meet specifications. The company, Aggregate Industries NE Inc. was paid US\$105 million for the concrete.

Aggregate said in a statement Thursday that it will cooperate with authorities.

"As a result of extensive testing by industry experts, Aggregate Industries is satisfied that all of the concrete it has supplied on the Big Dig and throughout the commonwealth is structurally sound," the statement said.

Massachusetts Attorney General Tom Reilly said "We have no evidence whatsoever that the structural integrity and safety of the tunnel has been compromised."

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney said in a prepared statement, "No one in Massachusetts should be surprised to learn that a project so badly mismanaged, over budget, and grossly delayed is now also facing allegations of criminal misbehavior." Romney and Lt. Governor Kerry Healey have also announced that they have decided to return campaign contributions from workers of Aggregate Industries.

Indicted were: former general manager Robert Prospero, 63, of Lynnfield, Massachusetts; Marc Blais, 36, of Lynn, Massachusetts, a dispatch manager; John Farrar, 42, of Canterbury, Connecticut, a dispatch manager; Gerard McNally, 53, of Rockland, Massachusetts, a quality control manager; Gregory Stevenson, 53,

of Furlong, Pennsylvania, district operations manager; and Keith Thomas, 50, of Billerica, Massachusetts, a dispatch manager. Stevenson and Farrar are no longer with the company. Aggregate says it has suspended the others.

According to the indictments, the six Aggregate employees recycled concrete that had been rejected because it had not been used within 90 minutes of being mixed in some cases double-billing for the loads the workers gave falsified documentation to project inspectors to show the concrete was fresh the faulty concrete was used in walls and roof slabs in the Interstate 93 tunnel, parts of the Interstate 90 tunnel and the sea walls of the Fort Point Channel, among other places.

At the arrest hearing, Assistant U.S. Attorney Fred Wyshack said, "The taxpayers of this community and this country will be paying for years to come."

Lawyers for the employees say the men believed their conduct was legal, that the concrete supplied by Aggregate Industries met all the strength requirements of the project, and that Big Dig managers sometimes waived the 90-minute rule when trucks of concrete were lined up to meet heavy demand. Stephen Delinsky, an attorney for one of the defendants, said they delivered quality concrete, but prosecutors probing the troubled project are looking to place blame. "It's always easy to blame the lowest level, which is the concrete manufacturers. Each defendant believed that they acted in good faith. They believed at all times

their conduct was legal and believed the concrete delivered to the Big Dig was appropriate."

A spokesman for project manager Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff declined comment.

On August 11, 2005, it was announced that the Massachusetts State Police searched Aggregate's offices in June and found evidence of faked records that hid the poor quality of concrete delivered for highway project. On March 19, 2006, the International Herald Tribune reported that Massachusetts "Attorney General Tom Reilly plans to sue Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff and other companies if the two sides do not reach an agreement over 200 complaints of poor work in the construction of a highway system under the center of Boston, the Boston Globe reported Saturday. Reilly was said to be seeking \$67 million from Bechtel and \$41 million from other companies."

The purpose of the project was to remove the more than 50-year-old aboveground Interstate 93 freeway running through downtown Boston by burying it, and connecting the Massachusetts Turnpike with Logan Airport by running a third tunnel below Boston Harbor. The project was completed this year after serious delays and cost overruns reached US\$14.6 billion, a more than 500% increase over the original estimate of US\$2.6 billion. More than ten years of detours to traffic ended when the last major section opened in January.

Possibility of new graphic health warnings on cigarette packs

New Zealand Associate Minister of Health Damien O'Connor has proposed that warnings, both

images and text, should cover 60% of the packaging of cigarettes sold in the country.

The new images would depict throat cancer, rotting teeth/gums and gangrenous feet. Ashley Bloomfield, Chief Advisor on Public Health, says written warnings aren't as effective as pictures, and that many smokers do not know most of the diseases that smoking can cause.

If the proposal were adopted, the Ministry would dictate the size and placement of the images to the tobacco companies, but would not subsidise the cost of the changes.

Southern Australian munitions factory explodes

An Australian munitions factory exploded in South Australia. Two people were killed, another two were injured and one is still missing.

The factory produced explosives for quarrying, civil engineering and the military.

The explosion levelled everything within 100 metres and could be heard from 70km away.

Emergency services have been held back to a one kilometre radius of the factory until an explosives expert from Adelaide could come.

"It's very dangerous, so we're holding back," police inspector Phil Warwick said, "It's an explosives factory. All right it's exploded, but that doesn't mean all the explosives have gone. There's still smoke coming from the area, which means there must be fire or heat. Put them (remaining explosives and fire) together and we could have another (explosion)."

UK hacker faces extradition to US

Gary McKinnon was today told that he would be extradited to the US pending appeal. McKinnon stands accused of having caused \$700,000 worth of damage to US military computer systems. Describing himself as a "bumbling hacker", McKinnon said his intention was to look for UFOs and information regarding technology which he claims the US government is withholding.

Karen Todner, McKinnon's solicitor, explained that "there is power under the Computer Misuse Act to charge him here and he could stand trial here. In fact, had that happened he probably would have been tried, served his sentence and have been released by now". Speaking after the trial, District Judge Nicholas Evans said, "I readily accept, if convicted in the US, the probable sentence is likely to be appreciably harsher in the US than, in comparable circumstances, it would be in the UK. It must be obvious to any defendant that if you choose to commit a crime in a foreign country, you run the risk of being prosecuted in that country".

Judge Evans reported that the US government have made promises that McKinnon will be tried in a civil court, rather than facing a military hearing. Despite these assurances McKinnon still fears what could happen to him, "as one person has said to me, most people in Guantanamo have not been proved to be terrorists but allegedly I directly attacked the military".

Ms. Todner indicated that they intend to appeal against this initial ruling. "We're proposing to appeal this to the Secretary of State, and if we're still refused we will then

appeal to the High Court for a decision to allow Gary to be tried here as a British citizen". This seems unlikely to be successful, however, as Struan Robertson, a computing law expert, explains, "the only way out of it is if he faces the death penalty or if he can prove extradition is politically motivated, which he hasn't done. The fact that he may get 70 years in the US is irrelevant. The treaty makes an exception for capital punishment, but facing a harsh sentence is not in itself grounds to block extradition".

Britney Spears announces she is pregnant again

Pop-singer Britney Spears, 24, announced last night on the Late Show With David Letterman, that she is pregnant again.

"So, we've established now that you are in fact pregnant, is that right?", asked Letterman.

"Yes, sir," and "don't worry, Dave, it's not yours," replied Spears.

Spears gave birth to her son Sean Preston last September after marrying back-up dancer Kevin Federline, 28, in November 2004. This will be Spears' second child and Federline's fourth.

In 2004, shortly after the birth of her son, Spears put her singing career on hold to raise him. Her last album to be released was her greatest-hits album in 2004.

In February, a photo of Spears was taken while she was driving her car with her son in her lap. In April, her son allegedly fell from a high chair hitting his head which prompted Child Welfare agents to go to her home. No charges have been filed in either case.

Explosives stolen from California mine

According to the Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms Agency or ATF, at least 686 sticks of dynamite and at least 30 pounds of ammonium nitrate were stolen from Gold Mountain Mine Company in Big Bear City, California located in San Bernardino County. Fuel oil and mining equipment are also among the items stolen. When combined, the fuel oil and ammonium nitrate become combustible and authorities fear what could be done with the explosives.

"The obvious concern is someone stole it, and what are they going to do with it? This is a quantity of explosives that could do significant damage. We need to recover these items," said John D'Angelo spokesman for the ATF.

The thieves cut locks on the gate that leads to the facility and then cut the locks on a metal storage bin and stole its contents and everything inside the facility. The mine is run by a man who mines the area as a hobby. The robbery was reported on May 3.

"We urge anyone who has information about this theft to contact ATF and the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department. Our job is to keep the public safe. We take the theft of explosives extremely seriously, and we will relentlessly follow up every lead until we solve the case," said John A. Torres who is the special agent in charge of the ATF in Los Angeles.

Authorities have offered a \$25,000 reward for information about the crime that leads to an arrest and conviction.

Australia will help in East Timor if requested: Downer

Australian minister for foreign affairs, Alexander Downer (Mayo, Liberal), told the Australian House of Representatives on Tuesday that Australia would provide assistance to East Timor if the East Timorese government or United Nations requested it.

Northern Territory member, David Tollner (Solomon, Country Liberal), who has long had an interest in East Timorese affairs, asked Mr Downer to update the parliament on "recent developments in East Timor".

Riots in East Timor's capital Dilli killed five people on April 28 following a march supporting 600 East Timorese soldiers who were dismissed for deserting following complaints of discrimination between those from the east and west of East Timor. The Australian government issued a travel advisory for East Timor on May 4, 2006 advising Australians to avoid the country.

Mr Downer today told parliament that there was no indication of violence against foreigners despite the warning still being in place. He continued by saying that the government was "deeply concerned" and would continue to monitor the situation closely. "We have, in a number of ways, strongly urged the leaders of East Timor to resolve quickly and peacefully the differences that there are and, of course, to do so with full regard for the democratic institutions of the country, its constitution, the rule of law and international norms of human rights." said Mr Downer.

Parliament also heard that Australia had agreed with members of the United Nations

Security Council to conduct a new operation in East Timor. "Australia does stand ready to offer assistance if requested by either the East Timor government directly or the United Nations." Mr Downer told parliament.

Last American survivor of the Titanic disaster dies

On May 6, 2006, Lillian Asplund, the last American survivor of the Titanic, died in her home in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. She was 99 years old.

"She went to sleep peacefully," said vice president of the Nordgren Memorial Chapel Ronald E. Johnson, which is located in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Barbara Joyce West Dainton and Elizabeth Gladys "Millvina" Dean are the two remaining survivors living in England, however they were too young to have a memory of the Titanic sinking.

"I could see the icebergs for a great distance around ... It was cold and the little ones were cuddling close to one another and trying to keep from under the feet of the many excited people ... My little girl, Lillie, accompanied me, and my husband said 'Go ahead, we will get into one of the other boats.' He smiled as he said it," said Asplund's mother shortly after arriving in Massachusetts after the disaster. Throughout her life, Ms. Lillian Asplund avoided talking about her survival.

The mother of Asplund, Selma and her three-year-old brother Felix were also on the ship and both survived. Her father and three other brothers were lost at sea. Selma died in 1964 on the 52nd anniversary of the disaster. She was 91 years old. Lillian's brother Felix died on March 1, 1983 at the

age of 73.

The Titanic sank on April 15, 1912 when the ship struck an iceberg tearing a hole in the side of the hull. At the time, it was the biggest ship ever built.

Today in History

330 - Byzantium became the new capital of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine I, and was referred to as Constantinople.

1792 - Explorer Robert Gray first sighted the Columbia River, the largest river flowing into the Pacific Ocean from North America.

1812 - British Prime Minister Spencer Perceval was assassinated by John Bellingham in the lobby of the House of Commons.

1949 - Siam was officially renamed Thailand.

1960 - Mossad agents captured Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi leader and fugitive war criminal hiding in Argentina.

Quote of the Day

"Positive vibrations man. That's what makes it work. That's reggae music. You can't look away because it's real. You listen to what I sing because I mean what I sing, there's no secret, no big deal. Just honesty, that's all."

~ Bob Marley

Word of the Day

tectum; *n*

Definition

1. The dorsal portion of the midbrain.
2. The interconnected outer surface of a spore.

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