



Top Stories

New bird flu outbreaks reported in Europe

Cases of the H5 type of the avian flu have been discovered in Romanian and Ukrainian fowl. Romania has banned hunting in parts of the country and Ukrainian troops have moved from house to house in villages rounding up chickens, ducks and geese for a mass cull.

Scissors, screwdrivers accepted on US flights beginning December 22

Carry-on rules relaxed for US domestic flights just in time for year end holiday travel rush.

Featured story

First face transplant performed on French woman

Surgeons in France have performed a face transplant operation on a French woman who had lost her nose, lips and chin after being savaged by a dog.

Wikipedia Current Events

- BBC World Service reports that the US are moving into four new bases in Romania, one of the bases is where the CIA has been accused of carrying out extraordinary rendition.
- An Iranian C-130 Hercules airplane crashes into a ten-story building in a civilian area of the Iranian capital Tehran, killing all 94 people aboard and 34 residents of the building - a total of 128 people.

Wikipedia Current Events

- David Cameron wins the leadership election for the United Kingdom Conservative Party.
- The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) photographs what appears to be a new mammal species in Borneo. The lemur-like carnivorous mammal is apparently a member of the viverrid family, related to the mongoose and civet.
- Conflict in Iraq: Two suicide bombers kill 27 Iraqi Police at a police academy in Baghdad.
- The Red Cross mulls adding a new Red Crystal symbol to ensure continuing acceptance of its work.

Lawsuit against CIA for the use of torture

A German man, Khaled al-Masri, has filed a lawsuit against the CIA for alleged torture when he was held prisoner for five months in Afghanistan last year. He was arrested in 2004 in connection with the September 11 attacks when he was stopped in Macedonia. After being arrested, he was flown to Afghanistan for questioning.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is representing Mr. al-Masri in the lawsuit filed on Tuesday in Alexandria, Virginia seeking damages of at least \$75,000. The main defendant is former CIA director George Tenet.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was in Germany

and would not comment on the lawsuit but the new German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "I'm happy to say we have discussed the one case, which the government of the United States has of course accepted as a mistake..."

A senior U.S. official accompanying Condoleezza Rice to Romania, said that Rice had not admitted to any mistakes in the handling of Masri. "We are not quite sure what was in her head," he said, referring to Merkel.

US passes 1000 executions in 30 years

Double murderer Kenneth Lee Boyd became the 1,000th prisoner executed in the United States since 1976. Another man was put to death on Friday for the 1994 murder of a store clerk, becoming the 1,001st person executed in the United States since capital punishment was reinstated 28 years ago.

The milestone drew a wave of protesters to the Central Prison in Raleigh, N.C., who opposed capital punishment.

Kenneth Lee Boyd, 57, of Rockingham, N.C., died by lethal injection for the 1988 shootings of his estranged wife, Julie Curry Boyd, who was 36, and her father, Thomas Dillard Curry, 57. Members of both families had asked to be present for the execution.

Boyd told Associated Press in a prison interview that he wanted no

part of the infamous numerical distinction of being the 1000th prisoner executed. "I'd hate to be remembered as that," Boyd said on Wednesday. "I don't like the idea of being picked as a number."

Some argued that Boyd, who had an I.Q. of 77, should not have been executed. The cutoff for mental retardation in some states, a mitigating factor in some capital cases, is an I.Q. of 75. Boyd never denied his guilt, but said he couldn't remember killing anyone and didn't know why he did it.

Boyd's son, Kenneth Smith, 35, who visited his dad every day for the last two weeks, said in an interview on Thursday that he felt the attention paid to the milestone had hurt his father's chances for clemency. Smith also said his dad was deeply troubled that he might only be remembered as a grim hash mark in the history books. "He didn't want to be 999, and he didn't want to be 1001 if you know what I mean," said Smith. "He wanted to live."

Belinda J. Foster, District Attorney for Rockingham, N.C., who prosecuted Boyd, said she felt confident that the death penalty was warranted in this case. "There are cases that are so horrendous and the evidence so strong it just warrants a death sentence," Ms. Foster said. Michael Paranzino, president of the pro-death penalty group Throw Away the Key, agreed. "You'll never stop crimes of passion, but I do believe the death penalty is a general deterrent, and it expresses society's outrage," Paranzino said.

"We believe this occasion is the perfect time to reconsider the whole issue of execution," said William F. Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International,

a human rights group that has sought to end the practice of using executions as a punishment for crime around the world. "Since 1976, about one in eight prisoners on death row in the U.S. has been exonerated. That should raise serious questions about ending a person's life," Schulz said.

According to the non-governmental organization Amnesty International, the countries People's Republic of China, Iran and Vietnam are the only nations with more executions in 2004 than the United States. Thirty-eight of the 50 US states and the federal government permit capital punishment. An October 2005 Gallup poll found that 64 percent of all Americans support capital punishment in murder cases.

North Carolina executed two prisoners last month, as well as two others earlier in the year.

The grim milestone has prompted global outcry from human rights advocates. In a media statement the European Union also condemned the execution, calling for the end of the death penalty worldwide. "We consider this punishment cruel and inhuman. It does not act as a deterrent and any miscarriage of justice - which is inevitable in any legal system - is irreversible." "It is a scandal that the death penalty still exists in a civilised country like the United States of America," said Petra Herrmann, chairwoman of the German group Alive e V.

Boyd's death rallied death penalty opponents, and about 150 protesters gathered outside the prison. After watching Boyd die, Rockingham County (N.C.) Sheriff Sam Page said the victims should be remembered. "Tonight, justice

has been served for Mr. Kenneth Boyd. What I would ask you to do is not forget the victims of this crime," Page said. "Pray for them. Pray for them and their healing."

"This is one small step for humankind - backwards," said veteran American campaigner Clive Stafford Smith in an interview with Reuters. "The death penalty makes us all far more barbaric. I have watched a lot of people die, and when you come out from watching someone being executed it certainly isn't a better world."

According to Kenyan National Human Rights Commission Chairman Maina Kiai, "[It is] a great pity that the US can keep on executing people [when much of the developed world had already ended the death penalty]." "Also, the fact that in the US a lot of death sentences that are carried out invariably affect people of colour and poor people, it's an issue of great concern," Kiai said.

In Singapore, where a 25-year-old Australian was hanged just hours before Boyd's execution, Sinapan Samydorai, president of the think-tank Think Centre, said there was no justice without life. "The US is supposed to be a champion of human rights and democracy, yet they do not recognise the right to life," he said. Singapore has a mandatory death sentence for crimes such as murder, firearms offences and drug trafficking, and has hanged 420 people since 1991, mainly for drug trafficking. Singapore's death penalty is often believed to enjoy wide public support; although details remain obscure for political reasons.

In Japan, where the death penalty is also widely supported, Akiko Takada of anti-capital punishment

group Forum 90 said despite frequent use of the death penalty in the United States, "crime there shows no signs of diminishing, so ultimately the death of these people has no effect."

Kansas Professor assaulted by angry intelligent design supporters

Professor Mirecki, the chairman of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Kansas, was hospitalized after being assaulted by two unidentified men who made references to the class he had planned to teach in the spring. The course, entitled "Special Topics in Religion: Intelligent Design, Creationism and other Religious Mythologies" was intended to support evolution, and explore creationism as a mythology.

Professor Mirecki had left his home and was driving to breakfast when he noticed the men tailgating him in a pickup truck. He said, "I just pulled over hoping they would pass, and then they pulled up real close behind." "They got out, and I made the mistake of getting out."

John Calvert, managing director of the Intelligent Design Network, had previously objected to Professor Mirecki's focus on creationism as mythology, and claimed that the religious studies professor was "labeling anybody who proposes [intelligent design] to be simply a religious nut".

Professor Mirecki had already decided to cancel the course after he caused controversy by using the slang term "fundies" to refer to Christian Fundamentalists in an email to a student organization, the Society for Open Minded Atheists and Agnostics. Professor Mirecki has apologized for using

the term, which is viewed as a slur by some conservatives.

Witnesses testify in former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's trial

As the trial of Saddam Hussein drew another day of testimony, the court heard the testimony of five witnesses of the killing of 140 men in Dujail, a town north of Baghdad.

Witnesses who feared showing their face or voice and were allowed to testify in a covered box with their voice altered. Their names were also protected and each witness was named with a letter. The defense was, however, allowed to know the name of the witnesses as long as those names were not disclosed outside the proceedings.

Tuesday's court session lasted around nine hours.

Witness A Female
Iraqi intelligence officers in the Abu Ghraib prison beat her with cables and gave her electric shocks. Recalled torture of family members and others in prison
Officers destroyed homes and orchards

Witness C Male
Taken to Baath Party headquarters at age 12, where he was tortured and then sent to Abu Ghraib prison. Spent four years in desert prison camp. Saw Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti at Baath Party headquarters in Dujail
Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti is Hussein's half brother

Military plane crash in Iran, at least 100 dead

Authorities have confirmed 128 dead following a deadly plane

crash in Tehran. The Iranian Air Force C-130 military transport plane collided with a 10-storey apartment building, while attempting to make an emergency landing.

The air force airline crashed at approximately 14:10 local time (10:40 UTC), killing all 94 people aboard and sparking fires in the apartment building that houses about 250 people consisting military personnel and their families. Most of the airplane passengers were Iranian radio and television journalists.

The victims have been recovered to nearby hospitals in the town of Towid.

Ford pulls ads from gay media facing AFA boycott

Facing a threatened boycott from the American Family Association, Ford Motor company pulled its advertising from gay publications early this week. The American Family Association (AFA) quickly claimed a cultural victory after Ford made the decision. The AFA was threatening to boycott Ford because of its previous support for certain gay civil rights associations, such as the Human Rights Campaign, and advertising in the gay media in publications such as The Advocate.

In June the AFA announced that it would postpone a boycott when Ford agreed to negotiate with the organization. The negotiations were organized by Ford Executives Ziad Ojakli and David Leitch, both of whom previously held important posts in the Bush White House.

"They've heard our concerns; they are acting on our concerns. We are pleased with where we are," said AFA's chairman Donald Wildmon.

"Obviously there are still some small matters of difference, as people will always have, but generally speaking, we are pleased with the results—and therefore the boycott that had been suspended [is] now officially ended."

According to the AFA's Web site, the list of demands included that Ford and all of its brands stop donating money, merchandise, and endorsements to pride celebrations and groups such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the Human Rights Campaign, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. HRC, GLAAD, and the Task Force are expected to release statements by close of business on Friday.

The AFA ended in May what is considered a largely ineffective nine-year boycott of The Walt Disney Co. The boycott had been launched over its holding of gay-related events at its theme parks and for giving employees with same-sex domestic partners benefits equal to those with other-sex partners.

Australian Government passes new terror laws

The Australia Federal Government has passed wide-ranging new counter-terrorism laws that civil opponents warned will disintegrate civil liberties. The federal parliament has agreed to laws aimed at stifling home-grown terrorists. The terrorism legislation was rushed through the Senate yesterday evening after the Government gagged debate on the bill.

The new laws enable police and intelligence agencies to detain suspects without charge for up to 14 days in solitary confinement. Authorities can also restrict and

control movements of suspects, including fitting them with electronic tags for up to 12 months.

Prime Minister John Howard introduced the package after the July 2005 bombings in London. Federal Justice Minister Chris Ellison told the Senate the laws would give authorities the necessary tools to tackle terrorism, while being consistent with international human rights obligations.

John North, president of the Law Council of Australia, an outspoken critic of the package, said lawyers would monitor the government's use of its new powers. "We want governments to know that almost 50,000 lawyers will be watching closely to make sure the new laws are not implemented at the expense of our civil liberties," Mr North said.

The package, broadly supported by the opposition Labor Party, gives police tougher powers to stop, search and seize evidence from suspects and enables more close circuit television cameras to be used to monitor public places. The new legislation also updates sedition laws and allow greater use of security cameras.

The Australian Greens, the Democrats and the Law Council accuse the Labor Party of selling out civil rights by supporting the bill, which will give unprecedented powers to police and spy agencies. Australian Greens leader Bob Brown condemned the laws. "We are in a new period of McCarthyism and we need to know that, and understand it, and worry that this time it won't be turned around, that citizens, using a law like this, will be brought before courts for political reasons, not

security reasons," he told parliament.

Following some ammendments, the Commonwealth Ombudsman will be given more power to oversee detention, detainees will have greater access to relatives and police will need to satisfy a greater number of grounds to impose limits on who a suspect can contact. The Australian Law Reform Commission will review the sedition provisions next year.

Civil libertarians and people who oppose Australia's involvement in Iraq also have protested. The proposed laws are "horrific for journalists," senior Fairfax journalist David Marr said. "Firstly, there's a completely secret new regime of putting people in preventive detention — that's entirely secret," he said. "If we report it, if we report that people have gone into preventive detention, we're going to go individually to jail for five to seven years, something like that. Even if we report what happened to people in detention, we go to jail."

Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission president John Von Doussa says the proposed counter-terrorism laws are the first step towards a police state. The legislation gives police extraordinary powers to detain people without charge, but does not set out means by which the application of those powers can be checked or appealed, he said.

Prime Minister John Howard rejects suggestions the Government acted in undue haste by pushing a range of striking new laws through parliament before Christmas, despite public outcry over inadequate scrutiny and the

gagging of parliamentary debate on many of the bills.

Defence Minister, Senator Robert Hill says the government has a responsibility to protect Australians. "Out of the British bombing, we went back and looked at our laws. We believed that we needed further powers to protect Australians, said Mr Hill. "Obviously, we want to put them through as quickly as possible because we are addressing a terrorist threat."

Both sides of Kenya's constitution dispute are negotiating

After Kenyans voted "no" for the implementation of the new constitution, the "Orange" anti-constitution campaign and the "Banana" pro-constitution campaign finally sat down together to discuss the way forward.

The draft constitution would have banned foreign land ownership, set the prime minister position to report to the country's president, banned same-sex marriages and restricted regional political parties. It would have also given women equal rights to inherit property, and addressed local elections. The country was attempting to rewrite its post-colonial constitution. This draft constitution was brought forward by the Attorney General, Amos Wako.

A day after the results were announced, the President of the country, Mwai Kibaki fired his whole cabinet. It is not yet known what he plans to do, but hopes for reconciliation are high: a member of the opposition called on the president "to provide leadership in the way forward"

Former South African official Jacob Zuma charged with rape

Former deputy president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma has been charged with rape and has appeared in the Johannesburg Magistrate's court. Zuma has been released on R20 000 bail. He has since announced that he has voluntarily decided to suspend his participation in the ANC leadership structure during the trial.

David Cameron elected new UK Conservative Leader

David Cameron has been elected the new leader of the United Kingdom Conservative Party, beating off his rival David Davis by a factor of two to one in a postal ballot of the nationwide party membership.

The thirty-nine year old has said he is committed to an agenda of reform within his party, characterised by his 'Change to Win' leadership campaign.

Today in History

- 1732 - The Royal Opera House opened at Covent Garden in London, England.
- 1815 - Michel Ney, Marshal of France, was executed by a firing squad near the Luxembourg Garden in Paris for supporting Napoleon Bonaparte.
- 1941 - World War II: The Imperial Japanese Navy made its attack on Pearl Harbor, Oahu, Hawaii.
- 1965 - East-West Schism: Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople (pictured, left) and Pope Paul VI (right) issued the Catholic-Orthodox joint declaration and simultaneously lifted mutual excommunications that had been in place since 1054.
- 1995 - The Galileo spacecraft arrived at Jupiter, a little more than six years after it was

launched by Space Shuttle Atlantis during Mission STS-34.

Quote of the Day

"That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great." ~ Willa Cather

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