



Top Stories

Iran airs new video of UK crewmen, releases new letters from Turney

Iranian television has aired new video footage of three of the fifteen UK sailors and marines seized by Iran a week ago. On Thursday evening, the Iranian Embassy in London released a second letter purported to be written by detained servicewoman Faye Turney.

School children and teachers taken hostage in Philippines

The head of a day care centre in Manilla, Philippines, has boarded a bus containing 32 children and 2 teachers from the centre and is currently holding them hostage, demanding better education rights and better housing for them.

Featured story

Women's groups promote "Equal Pay Day" in Belgium

Several trade unions and women's organisations organised actions in public places and companies all over Belgium to promote equal pay for women.

European Union calls for release of British crewmen in Iran

The European Union has released a statement calling for the release of all 15 British sailors and marines being detained in Iran and that "appropriate measures" will be taken if Iran refuses to release them.

"The European Union deplores the continued arrest of 15 British citizens and underlines the EU's unconditional support for the government of the United Kingdom. The EU repeats its call for the immediate and unconditional release of the British Royal naval personnel. Should the UK citizens not be released in the near future, the EU will decide on appropriate measures," said the statement released by the E.U.

The statement added that "all evidence clearly indicated" that at the time of the seizure, the British naval personnel were on a routine patrolling mission in Iraqi waters, and called the Iranian seizure a "clear breach" of international law.

All 27 members of the union agreed to the statement.

On March 23, the fifteen sailors and marines from the frigate HMS Cornwall had been inspecting a ship, in what the UK identified as Iraqi waters, when they were surrounded by Iranian gunboats and taken into custody. Iran claims the UK forces were in Iranian waters, and are still detaining the fifteen.

Iran airs new video of UK crewmen, releases new letters from Turney

Iranian television has aired new video footage of three of the fifteen UK sailors and marines seized by Iran a week ago. On Thursday evening, the Iranian Embassy in London released a second letter purported to be written by detained

servicewoman Faye Turney.

The footage was released hours after Iran criticized yesterday's United Nations Security Council statement, which voiced "grave concern" over the incident and called for an "early resolution" of the matter.

In the video footage, three crewmen are shown with one identified as Nathan Thomas Summers. Summers was seen confessing to being in Iranian waters and apologising to the Iranian people. "We trespassed without permission," said Summers. "Since we have been arrested our treatment has been friendly. We have not been harmed at all."

"I would like to apologize for entering your waters without any permission ... I deeply apologize," continued Summers. "They have looked after us really well."

According to the BBC, the UK Foreign Office described the latest video as "disgraceful exploitation".

A hand-written note, the second letter apparently written by Faye Turney, was released by Iran on Thursday evening. The letter requests the UK government to withdraw its troops from Iraq. "Isn't it time for us to start withdrawing our forces from Iraq and let them determine their own future," the letter states.

In reply, a Prime Minister's office spokesman said: "It is wrong. It is

wrong in terms of the usual conventions that cover this. It is wrong in terms of basic humanity".

Iran has also released a third letter purporting to be from Leading Seaman Turney, addressed to the "British People". The letter states that she has been "sacrificed due to the intervening policies of the Bush and Blair governments" and repeats the call for the withdrawal of British and US forces from Iraq. British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in response: "I really don't know why the Iranian regime keep doing this. All it does is enhance people's sense of disgust at captured personnel being paraded and manipulated in this way."

The BBC says it has been able to confirm the names of six of the 15 sailors and marines held by Iran. Apart from Leading Seaman Turney and Seaman Summers (from Shropshire and Cornwall respectively), they are: Paul Barton from Southport, Danny Masterton from Ayrshire, Joe Tindall from south London and Adam Sperry from Leicester.

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US Food and Drug Administration reports melamine found in contaminated pet food

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced at a press conference today that a chemical used in the manufacture of plastics was found in recalled pet food from Menu Foods.

The FDA found melamine in samples of Menu Foods pet food and in samples of wheat gluten, imported from China, which was used as an ingredient. The FDA analysis, however, does not confirm the presence of the rodenticide aminopterin, which was reported March 23 by the New York State Food Laboratory.

According to Stephen Sundlof, director of the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine, melamine is used primarily to make plastic kitchenware, although it has been used as a fertilizer in Asia.

Sundlof also indicated that the presence of melamine in the urine of cats that died from kidney failure was revealed through testing. He stressed that melamine was not determined to be the source of illness or deaths in the affected animals.

Sundlof suggested that melamine would not be found normally in pet food.

At a news conference Friday, Paul Henderson, President and CEO of Menu Foods, indicated that Menu Foods is satisfied that the contamination problem was related to melamine and not aminopterin. "One week ago, some of the dedicated researchers who had been investigating this matter reported the discovery of a single, toxic compound in our pet food," said Henderson in his opening statement. "That, seemingly, cleared the way for us to address the problem, deal fairly with the pet-owners who had been injured, put our business back together, and move on," he continued.

"In the intervening week, other top scientists have been unable to validate the findings. That is, they

were unable to find the toxin – called aminopterin – in our pet food, or in any of the component ingredients. It was also brought to our attention that some veterinary experts held the view that aminopterin was inconsistent with what was being observed in dogs and cats," Henderson said.

Menu Foods has determined that melamine in wheat gluten from a new US supplier was the likely source of contamination, and that they are confident that the issue has been resolved. "Melamine has been found in the wheat gluten from a new supplier in the United States, who sourced this wheat gluten in China," said Henderson. "This is the same ingredient that Menu Foods made reference to in its recall press release of March 16. Melamine has not been found in the wheat gluten that we obtain from our other suppliers."

Henderson refused to name the supplier of the wheat gluten, leaving that up to the FDA. "We have had correspondence with the FDA and we know that they are diligently following-up on the supply of the suspect wheat gluten. It is not our place to name the supplier as we do not want to interfere in any way with the important investigation they are conducting."

Menu Foods is maintaining the warning on the previously recalled product. "The recalled product is unfit for consumption by pets. It contains melamine. The pet food that we have manufactured after March 6 is safe and healthy," stated Henderson.

Menu Foods is the manufacturer of several brands of cat and dog food subject to a March 16, 2007 recall.

Adult-only TLD rejected by Internet body

The creation of the proposed "adult-only" Top-Level Domain name, .xxx, has again been rejected today by the board of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which manages the Internet's domain name systems. The creation of the TLD was opposed by a 9 to 4 vote, with one abstention on the part of ICANN CEO Paul Twomey.

The domain was first proposed in 2001, with reasons stated as creating an "adults-only" section of the Internet, making it easier to filter out pornographic or otherwise unsuitable websites for children. The proposal was approved in June 2005, with a final decision to be made in December of the same year. However, in May 2006, the decision was reversed, and the approval was revoked. In January of this year, the proposal was reopened.

The rejection of the creation of the TLD today was focused on the main reason of ICANN not wanting to become involved in "content regulation". Steve Goldstein, ICANN board member, told the Associated Press that "the last point in our board's resolution that under the revised agreement that we, ICANN, would be forced to assume ongoing management and oversight roles regarding the content, and that is inconsistent with ICANN's technical mandate."

Women's groups promote "Equal Pay Day" in Belgium

Today, several trade unions and women's organisations organised actions in public places and companies all over Belgium to promote equal pay for women. Volunteers handed out flyers about the issue at the Brussels Airport

and the Brussels subway and in train stations, companies, hospitals and schools throughout the country.

The third edition of the U.S.-inspired Equal Pay Day was called for by the socialist women's organisations *zij-kant* and the women-section of the trade union ABVV, in partnership with their Francophone equivalents, *PS-women* and the union FGTB, the Institute for Equality of Women and Men, the Catholic Worker's Women Movement (KAV) and the union ACV.

The Institute for Equality of Women and Men reports that wages are still on average 15% lower for women in Belgium. This figures varies in different studies. In a report ordered by the trade unions, the Higher Institute for Work of the Catholic University of Leuven reports a pay difference of 26%, based on an analysis of the wages of 20 000 men and women. This also results in an inequity in pensions.

According to the Structure of Earnings Survey by Eurostat, the European gender pay-gap mounts to 26%, whereas in Belgium the difference is around 17%. Sweden, Poland, Hungary and Slovenia are doing even better, while in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Cyprus women earn around 30% less.

The inequity in payment results from company's human resource management, but is also influenced by the role of the women in the family, education, and so on. But even when these factors are taken into account, there is still a difference of 5 to 7%.

The organisations acknowledge that there have been small

improvements, and that there have been hopeful political steps since their action last year. Because their target of equal wages for men and woman has moved a little bit closer, they've decided to hold the third edition one day earlier, on March 30 instead of March 31. This date symbolises the 15 months a woman has to work on average to earn the same as her male colleague. In the United States, the difference is bigger, and hence the Equal Pay Day is only held on April 24. The European Equal Pay Day was been held last February 22.

With their campaign, the organisation urges politicians to improve the rapports on the phenomenon, to encourage gender-friendly human resource management in businesses, to address gender-issues in the schools, and to keep their previous promises.

Canadian university students would prefer MP3 players over car radios

At Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, students are finding that popular MP3 players, such as Apple's iPod, are very convenient devices for listening to music at the gym, while traveling on foot, and in the car.

In a recent ad-hoc survey conducted by Wikinews contributor Darren Mar, 150 students were randomly pulled aside in the hallways of the university, and asked if they own an MP3 player. 94 of the 150 students (62.66%) did in fact own MP3 devices, most of who were found to be carrying it on them when questioned. There was one simple follow up question for those who had a player: "If it were possible to have complete and safe control of the device on the steering wheel of a car, would you rather listen to your device, or the

radio?" There were three answers possible, yes, no or both. Of the 94, 78 (82.98%) said yes, eleven (11.70%) said no, and five (5.32%) said both. The reporting took place primarily on March 16, 2007. The reasons for those who would listen to their device were commercial free music, personalized choice of music, and complete control of what you are listening to.

This study was motivated by the new design of 2006+ model cars. Many are being built with auxiliary jacks for the stock radio, allowing the driver to easily connect any audio playing device to the car's sound system with a simple 3.5mm plug. What's more, cars in the upper price echelon are being built with (1) a custom made area in the dash for MP3 players (iPod's being the most popular), and (2) implementing audio device control right onto the steering wheel. A good example of this is the Ford Fusion or the 2007 Lexus IS250: "The centre console input port allows an iPod, MP3 or Windows Media Audio player to be plugged into the IS audio system."

Israeli company converts radioactive waste into clean energy

Israeli firm Environmental Energy Resources (EER) has announced that it has developed a new technology, plasma gasification melting technology (PGM), to safely dispose of low- and medium-level nuclear waste. Extremely high temperatures are used to turn the waste into a mildly radioactive glass-like substance, which can be used as a building material. The process also releases an extremely hot mixture of gases that can be used to power steam turbines, generating electricity. The company claims that 70% of this electricity is used to drive the PGM process, while 30% is available as

exportable energy.

The solid waste produced by PGM is resistant to leeching, so there is little danger of radiation contaminating water supplies. (However, it remains to be seen how openly companies will accept the use of mildly radioactive slag as a building material, even for use as a road bed filler.)

The waste gases (hydrogen gas, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, nitrogen gas, and various hydrocarbons) are produced by pyrolysis of organic substances in the input waste, and are therefore mainly harmless. (If they were instead burned in the presence of oxygen, many of the usual pollutants would be produced, such as nitrogen dioxide and dioxin. Carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide are examples of pollutants that are generated by PGM, however, so the process cannot be called entirely clean.

PGM was developed by EER with the help of Russian scientists from Russia's Kurchatov Institute research center, the Radon Institute in Russia, and Israel's Technion Institute. The company, founded in 2000, won the bid to clean up after the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl.

UN Security Council calls for release of British soldiers in Iran

The United Nations Security Council has issued a statement calling for a "early resolution" to the rising tensions between Britain and Iran by releasing all 15 British sailors and marines who were detained by Iranian forces on March 23.

"Members of the Security Council expressed grave concern at the capture by the Revolutionary Guard and the continuing detention by the government of Iran of 15 United

Kingdom naval personnel and appealed to the government of Iran to allow consular access in terms of the relevant international laws," said the U.N. Security Council in a statement.

"Members of the Security Council support calls, including by the secretary general in his March 29 meeting with the Iranian foreign minister, for an early resolution of this problem including the release of the 15 UK personnel," added the statement.

All 15 members of the Council agreed to the wording of the statement and released it after nearly four hours of debate, but Russia and South Africa opposed to having the statement or the Council's recommendations be "too harsh" or to put the blame fully on the Iranian government.

Iran released a statement shortly after the Security Council met saying that getting the U.N. involved, "will not be helpful."

"This case can and should be settled through bilateral channels. The British government's attempt to engage third parties, including the Security Council, with this case is not helpful," said a statement released by Iran's U.N Mission.

The sailors and marines from the frigate HMS Cornwall had been inspecting, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1723, a ship that was believed to be smuggling cars into Iraq, though it was subsequently cleared after inspection when Iranian gunboats surrounded the sailors and arrested them at gunpoint.

On Thursday, Iran stated that they are "suspending" the release of the 15 soldiers, including Faye Turney a female soldier, 26, who was

supposed to be released "very soon."

Dell delays filing of financials as accounting investigation continues

Dell Inc., a global leader in computer hardware manufacturing and sales, announced yesterday that it will delay filing of its annual performance report, the Form 10-K, required for compliance with U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and Nasdaq listing rules.

In a press release, Dell explained that an audit committee of the company's board of directors is carrying out an investigation into accounting and financial reporting issues. The company stated that it would delay filing of the 10-K since the investigation had not been completed.

The internal investigation has found evidence of accounting errors, misconduct, and deficiencies in areas of financial control.

The chairman of Dell's audit committee, Thomas Luce III, indicated that the delay in filing would extend past the April 3, 2007 deadline as well as an April 18, 2007 extension date. "As we move toward the conclusion of our investigation, we are committing the time and resources required to ensure a thorough and comprehensive review and resolution of all identified issues and the implementation of appropriate remedial measures," said Luce.

The investigation is to determine whether the restatement of any financial disclosures are warranted, based on the accounting errors identified. The probe will also assess whether there are deficiencies in Dell's internal control

over financial reporting.

Proposed U.S. legislation seeks to push China raise the value of yuan

Eswar Prasad, a professor at the trade policy from the Cornell University, warns the United States legislators, that their bill could poison the relationship between USA and China.

This warning was given regarding the U.S. bill, which is meant to force China to raise the value of its national currency yuan. Currently yuan has a value, which is about 40% lower than it should be, as stated by the legislators, which gives the Chinese trading companies a huge advantage on the international trading ground.

Professor Prasad, who was a China trade expert and an economist at the International Monetary Fund until late last year, said that this bill would not have a long lasting effect and would not influence the problems the legislators are trying to avoid.

The opinion of the China trade specialist was that the USA should try to collaborate with Chinese officials in order to fix the problem of U.S. trade deficit and the current instabilities in the Chinese economy. The strategy to force the Chinese Government to do something would only worsen the relationship between the two countries.

The expert's opinion was it was more important to concentrate on the question what framework of the monetary policy could substitute the fixed exchange rate of the Chinese currency, which helped China in anchoring the inflation expectations.

Mr. Prasad added that the best way

to stabilize the Chinese economy would be to couple an inflation objective with a flexibility of exchange rate.

The bill needs two thirds of the votes both in the U.S. House of Representatives and in the Senate, in order President George W. Bush would not have the possibility to veto the bill.

Boat capsizes in Guinea, up to 60 dead

A boat carrying around 120 passengers capsized and sank off the coast of Guinea and as many as 60 did not survive. State television called the type of boat a pirogue, which is usually used for fishing. However, many people living in coastal communities in Guinea use open boats to travel between towns due to the poor roads.

Maradona out of danger

Diego Maradona, the Argentinian soccer legend is stable and recovering after being hospitalized on Wednesday. Doctors said that he was given sedatives to curb alcohol cravings. This is not the first health crisis for the 46 year-old Maradona.

Sources

Luis Ampuero "Maradona sedated to stop alcohol cravings". The Australian, March 30, 2007

Luis Ampuero "Maradona sedated in hospital". Reuters, March 29, 2007

"Maradona 'sedated and recovering'". BBC News Online, March 29, 2007

Thailand elections announced

Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont has announced that a general election will be held on December 16 or 22. At the same time, he resisted requests from the military for emergency powers as anti-coup protests grow. Surayud was appointed prime minister by the

military after the overthrow of his predecessor Thaksin Shinawatra in a coup last September.

Ethiopian helicopter shot down in Somalia

An Ethiopian helicopter battling rebel forces near Mogadishu in Somalia was hit by a missile and crashed. No survivors were reported. Ethiopian troops are helping Somali government forces against an insurgency. Dozens were killed in fighting on Thursday as a six-day truce was broken.

Today in History

1854 - Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy signed the Treaty of Kanagawa, forcing the opening of Japanese ports to American trade.

1889 - The Eiffel Tower was inaugurated in Paris.

1903 - New Zealand inventor Richard Pearse reportedly flew in one of the first flying machines.

1917 - The Danish West Indies became the U.S. Virgin Islands after the United States paid Denmark US\$25 million for the Caribbean islands.

1930 - Hollywood movie studios instituted the Production Code to avoid government censorship.

March 31 is Mawlid in Sunni Islam (2007); César Chávez Day in various U.S. states, Freedom Day in Malta.

Quote of the Day

Accept the truth from whatever source it comes. ~ Maimonides

Word of the Day

laconic; adj

- Using as few words as possible to communicate much; pithy and concise.

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