



Top Stories

Ex-President Rafsanjani says Iran is enriching uranium

According to Iran's former President, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran has successfully enriched uranium using at least 164 centrifuges. According to the IAEA, Iran began to test 20 centrifuges in March.

Israeli PM Ariel Sharon declared 'permanently incapacitated'

Israeli Cabinet declared Prime Minister Ariel Sharon 'permanently incapacitated' today, formally ending his tenure as Prime Minister.

Featured story

Bush, Straw dismiss Iran nuclear attack plan

US President George W. Bush and UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw have both dismissed the nuclear 'first-strike' plan reported in the New Yorker magazine on Saturday.

Wikipedia Current Events

- The city of Essen, Germany is selected to be the European Capital of Culture of 2010 by the EU jury.
- A bomb explodes at a religious gathering in Karachi, Pakistan, killing at least 47 and injuring more than 80.
- Bernardo Provenzano, boss of the Sicilian Mafia (capo di tutti i capi), is caught near the town of Corleone.

Wikipedia Current Events

- The Venus Express spacecraft of the European Space Agency approaches Venus approximately 5 months after it was launched and starts its main engine burn to slow itself down and allow the capture into orbit around Venus.
- Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka: a bus carrying soldiers from Trincomalee hits a claymore mine, killing 12 navy sailors and leaving another 8 wounded. A pair of British tourists are also injured in the blast.
- Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announces that Iran has successfully enriched uranium. In a televised address from the northeastern city of Mashhad, Ahmadinejad said "I am officially announcing that Iran has joined the group of those countries which have nuclear technology".
- Proof, member of D12 and close friend of Eminem, was shot and killed at a club along 8 Mile road in Detroit. Another man was also shot, and is now in critical condition.

Protest outside Cole inquiry

The activist organisation AID/WATCH staged a protest outside the Cole Inquiry on Tuesday. In press release, Kate Wheen of AID/WATCH attacked the government over the scandal, claiming that foreign aid is being used to benefit Australian businesses rather than those in need. "It's scandalous that AWB was paying kickbacks to the Iraqi

regime, but it is unethical, immoral and possibly illegal that our government can ruthlessly support Australian business whilst so many in Iraq remain in such great need," she said.

The Cole Inquiry started in January, and is tasked with investigating whether Australian companies paid bribes to Saddam Hussein during the UN Oil-for-food programme. The government has denied any wrongdoing. In a press conference on Monday, the Prime Minister defended his ministers. "I do not believe, on the information known to me that any of my Ministers have been guilty of dereliction of duty and I am very, very happy to provide the statement and, if asked, to appear."

The Australian Trade Minister, Mark Vaile, and Foreign Affairs minister, Alexander Downer appeared before the Inquiry this week. During questioning, both men rejected all suggestion that they made any mistakes or acted in any way inappropriately.

On Monday Mark Vaile repeatedly answered that he "couldn't recall" details of whether he was aware of the many warnings given to the government from various sources that dealings between the AWB, formerly the Australian Wheat Board, and the Iraq government were corrupt and supplied the pre-invasion Iraq government with up to 300 million dollars of funding.

Alexander Downer spent 3 hours

before the commission on Tuesday and said that he could not specifically recall the details of any of the 21 cables containing warnings about the possibility of kickbacks being paid to the Iraqi government. He claimed that he did not have time to read all the material in his department and spent much of the year travelling. The Labor Party opposition has pointed to the fact that this testament seems to contradict statements previously made to parliament.

The commission also received a written statement from Howard, which will be assessed by the inquiry's lawyers to determine whether he should be called before the inquiry. Howard has said that he is prepared to appear before the commission, if required.

Former Iranian president Rafsanjani states Iran is enriching uranium

Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has confirmed that the country has successfully enriched uranium from 164 of their centrifuges.

"I am officially announcing that Iran has joined the group of those countries which have nuclear technology. This is the result of the Iranian nation's resistance. Based on international regulations, we will continue our path until we achieve production of industrial-scale enrichment," said Ahmadinejad on Tuesday.

"Iran has put into operation the first unit of 164 centrifuges, has injected (the uranium) gas and has reached industrial production. We operated the first unit which comprises of 164 centrifuges, gas was injected, and we got the industrial output. We should expand the work of these

machines to achieve a full industrial line. We need dozens of these units (sets totaling 164 centrifuges) to achieve a uranium enrichment facility," said Iran's former President, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, earlier today.

Ahmadinejad had said on Monday that he would release "good nuclear news which will be a source of pride for the whole Iranian nation" today and that reports from the media are part of the United States campaign involving "psychological warfare."

"Nothing can stop our civil nuclear program as the Iranians are a courageous nation and not afraid of intimidations. We are not after atomic bombs," added Ahmadinejad.

According to the IAEA, Iran began to test 20 centrifuges in March.

On Wednesday, the President of the IAEA will visit Iran to review the progression, if any, to Iran's nuclear program and will release a report at the end of April.

The United States said that Iran is "moving in the wrong direction" in regards to its nuclear program and that if it continues its program, it will discuss the possibility of taking steps with the United Nations.

Washington DC is said to "be talking about the way forward with the other members of the Security Council and Germany about how to address this [Iran's nuclear program]," according to White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

Australia's deputy PM faces Iraqi kickback inquiry

Yesterday, Australia's Deputy Prime Minister, Mark Vaile, appeared before the Cole Inquiry into kickbacks paid to Saddam

Hussein's Iraqi regime. It is the first time in over a decade that a senior government official has been called to give evidence before a royal commission in Australia.

The inquiry heard that Mr Vaile could not recall being told any specific details of the allegations made against the wheat exporter AWB before 2003, and despite his department receiving information about the allegations, it came as no surprise that he was not informed as he held no responsibility for the UN Oil-for-Food program.

Mr Vaile has been Australia's trade minister since 2000 and the deputy prime minister since 2005.

Mr Vaile told the commission that despite the cables received by his department in 2000 alleging that the AWB agreed to pay a kickback to Hussein's regime in Iraq, inflating wheat prices and paying money into another non-Iraqi account, he does not recollect being told specific details of the allegations.

When asked by counsel assisting the commission John Agius about how such cables are dealt with, Mr Vaile told the commission that they are looked at by department officers who decide whether or not they need the minister's attention. Mr Vaile said that if a particular cable needed his attention it was generally put into a ministerial submission. He said that such submissions may require ministerial action, while others just contain information which he may need to make a note of. Once the submission has been read, the minister signs it and it goes into the system.

Mr Vaile told the commission that

on occasion he receives information from cables via briefings from his advisors and departmental officers.

When questioned about a cable sent to the department of trade containing concerns raised by the UN about AWB's dealings in Iraq dated January 13, 2000, Mr Vaile said that he was briefed in a general sense on the issues raised. Despite the UN's concerns being stated in the cable, Mr Vaile said that he "can't recall being aware of the substance".

Mr Vaile said he was under the belief that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and Australia's UN mission were taking care of the UN's concerns. He said that he did not have responsibility over the issues being raised "That's my recollection, and my recollection is that there were concerns that had been raised about an AWB contract, and that DFAT and the Mission in New York were dealing with it, bearing in mind that I was not - I didn't have direct ministerial responsibility for either the UN Mission in New York or the Oil-for-Food Program" he said.

When asked if he would have expected to be briefed in detail on the issues in the cable, Mr Vaile said "Given the circumstances at the time, in terms of my direct ministerial responsibility and being new in the portfolio, probably not."

Mr Vaile told the inquiry that he was surprised that he had not been briefed about a cable dated March 11, 2000 from Austrade to the department of trade. The summary of the document said "It may be necessary to advise the minister of the situation."

The inquiry heard that in April,

2000 Mr Vaile was told by an advisor that the issue raised in January, 2000 had been resolved with the UN.

When questioned by Mr Agius about why he did not follow up on the allegations made against AWB in 2000, Mr Vaile said he was too snowed under with work. "My best recollections are that I was pretty well snowed under in taking on the responsibilities of a new portfolio and the breadth of issues, having come from a much narrower base in the previous portfolio, and I recall early in 2000 being very, very focused on what to do next in the WTO process after the Seattle ministerial failed in the December of 1999" he told the inquiry.

Mr Agius then questioned Mr Vaile about allegations made by US Wheat Associates in 2003 that AWB had been inflating wheat prices to Iraq. At the same time there were also allegations that money was being paid to Hussein's regime, that AWB was not being transparent in their dealings. At the time Mr Vaile defended AWB based upon information provided to him by his department. He claims that it was some time later that he learned the information he was given was provided to the department by AWB. Mr Vaile said that his department did not conduct an investigation into the allegations despite them being raised in 2000 and again in 2003 by separate parties.

Mr Vaile also admits that at the time, he dismissed the allegations made by US Wheat Associates as he believed that they were putting pressure on the US administration with regards to WTO negotiations between Australia and the US.

Mr Vaile told the inquiry that the first he became aware of possible

corruption with connected with AWB was in April, 2004. The inquiry heard that Mr Vaile and Alexander Downer (Australia's foreign minister) had received a submission claiming that AWB had acted properly, but the company they paid to transport wheat in Iraq had been paying kickbacks to Hussein's regime. Mr Vaile said that at the time he saw no need to review procedures within his department for the distribution of information regarding AWB.

According to Mr Vaile, the only time the department of trade investigated its files to locate information it had received on AWB's dealings in Iraq was around March 2004 to assist the UN's inquiry into the Oil-for-Food programme.

Bush, Straw dismiss Iran nuclear attack plan

United States President George W. Bush and the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw have both dismissed the nuclear 'first-strike' plan reported in the New Yorker magazine on Saturday.

Wikipedia has one or more articles about Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations.

According to the New Yorker story, written by Seymour M. Hersh, American military and intelligence officials were making plans for a massive nuclear strike on Iran in order to stop the country developing nuclear weapons. The report also said that US special forces were already operating in Iran gathering target information.

The Iranian government insists that its nuclear development program is purely for meeting civilian energy needs, but several intelligence agencies around the

world believe that Iran's true goal is to develop nuclear weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency has said that it has not seen indications of diversion of nuclear material to nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices after several years of intensive inspections in Iran, but has also expressed uncertainty about the nature of Iran's nuclear program and called for confidence building measures from Iran.

A former US intelligence official claimed that Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is referred to as "the new Adolf Hitler" within the White House. Some military officials believe that Bush wants a "regime change" in Iran. President Ahmadinejad has previously disputed the existence of the Holocaust and at a conference discussing Zionism, he described Ayatollah Khomeini's statement that Israel as an occupying force in Palestine should be "wiped off the map" as "a wise statement".

An anonymous Pentagon official said "This White House believes that the only way to solve the problem is to change the power structure in Iran, and that means war. It also reinforces the belief inside Iran that the only way to defend the country is to have a nuclear capability."

US aircraft flying from carriers in the Arabian Sea have been flying practice nuclear weapon missions within range of Iranian radar, widely seen as an effort to intimidate Iran.

In the last few years Iran has been constructing a series of underground facilities to support its work. Colonel Sam Gardiner, a military analyst, says there are

over 400 targets in Iran that would need to be destroyed to end Iran's nuclear program. In one option of a plan reportedly presented to the White House by the Pentagon this winter, "bunker-busting" mini-nuclear weapons would be used to penetrate the deepest-buried facilities, some of which are 75 feet below the surface.

An insider claimed that the Joint Chiefs of Staff tried to remove the nuclear option from the plan, citing problems of huge casualties and radioactive contamination, but the White House retained it. Another source claimed that while nuclear weapons were seeing more interest amongst civilian staff and within "policy circles", military officers remained very much opposed to their potential use, with some high-level officers threatening resignation.

The insider said "if senior Pentagon officers express their opposition to the use of offensive nuclear weapons, then it will never happen".

When asked about the veracity of the claims made in the New Yorker article, the White House said "As the President has indicated, we are pursuing a diplomatic solution". The Defense Department also said that Iran was being dealt with through "diplomatic channels". The C.I.A. said that there were "inaccuracies" in the account.

Since then, Bush has described the plan as "wild speculation", without denying it, in a speech delivered at John Hopkins University in Washington DC.

"The doctrine of prevention is to work together to prevent the Iranians from having a nuclear

weapon," he said. "I know here in Washington prevention means force. It doesn't mean force necessarily. In this case it means diplomacy. What you are reading is just wild speculation which happens quite frequently here in the nation's capital."

Jack Straw said "the idea of a nuclear strike on Iran is completely nuts." Speaking on a BBC television show, Straw said "I have made clear the British Government's position on this time and time again which is widely shared across Europe."

"The American administration, Condoleezza Rice, [and] President Bush use slightly different language. They say that it is not on the agenda, but it isn't on the agenda. They are very committed indeed to resolving this issue - it is a complicated issue - by negotiation and, yes, by diplomatic pressure. "

Straw stated that the UK would not launch a pre-emptive strike on Iran, going on to say that he was as "certain as he could be" that neither would the US.

Buckingham Palace releases trivia about Queen Elizabeth II

As Queen Elizabeth II approaches her 80th birthday, on April 21, Buckingham Palace has released 80 little known facts about her.

Did you know that; The Queen owns all dolphins, porpoises, and sturgeons in British waters. She has sat for 139 official portraits, opened 15 bridges in the UK, launched 23 ships, and speaks fluent French.

The Queen sent a message of congratulations to Apollo 11 astronauts, for the first moon landing on July 21 1969, and it

was put in metal container and placed on the Moon's surface.

Or that in 1976 at an Army base she sent her first e-mail. Or she has owned more than 30 corgis, starting with Susan who was her 18th birthday present. And in 2002, at 76 years of age, that The Queen was the oldest monarch to celebrate a Golden Jubilee.

Israeli PM Ariel Sharon declared 'permanently incapacitated'

The Israeli cabinet today (Tuesday) declared Prime Minister Ariel Sharon "permanently incapacitated," a declaration that officially ends his tenure as Prime Minister.

Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, whose centrist Kadima party won parliamentary elections in March, is currently in negotiations to form a coalition government.

Sharon has been in a coma since suffering a massive hemorrhagic stroke on January 4. Under Israeli law, Olmert can serve in the capacity of acting prime minister for only 100 days, until April 14, before a permanent replacement must be chosen. The official announcement was moved up to Tuesday because the Jewish holiday of Passover begins on Wednesday, April 12. Olmert is expected to be named as Sharon's permanent replacement.

Prodi claims victory in Italian election; Berlusconi refuses to concede

Italian opposition leader Romano Prodi, leader of the center-left coalition L'Unione (Lit. "The Union"), was declared the victor today in parliamentary elections held Sunday and Monday, but Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi

has yet to concede his office.

Official but not yet confirmed results indicate that L'Unione won control of the lower house or Chamber of Deputies with 49.8% of the vote to 49.7% for Berlusconi's center-right Casa delle Libertà (Lit. "The House of Freedoms") coalition. The winning party automatically receives a minimum of 55% of the seats in the lower house, giving Prodi at least 340 seats in the 630-seat Chamber.

Berlusconi, however, claims that his party would control the 315-seat Senate by one vote, resulting in a split parliament. The current results, however, show Prodi with a 158-156 lead in the Senate, giving him enough seats of support in both houses. Berlusconi's spokesman also indicated that his party has requested a recount.

Italian law requires that the prime minister receive the support of both houses of Parliament. Should the two houses be controlled by different coalitions, the stalemate would result in new elections. A caretaker government would rule in the meantime.

NY Post columnist suspended over extortion allegation

The New York Post has suspended gossip columnist Jared Paul Stern pending an FBI investigation into allegations that he tried to extort money from billionaire Ron Burkle. Stern has denied the allegation.

Stern contributes to Page Six, the New York Posts gossip and celebrity news section. The allegation first appeared in the New York Daily News, the Post's long-standing rival. The Daily News reported that, in a sting operation, Stern was videotaped

asking Burkle for cash, in exchange for weeding out negative stories on Burkle.

The Post said that it is cooperating with the federal investigation.

Seven south Thailand constituencies face one horse race

Following a pyrrhic victory by the Thai Rak Thai party, Thailand's caretaker Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra resigned to try to defuse the country's political crisis. It remains unclear what the eventual outcome will be.

In 38 constituencies, Thai Rak Thai (lit. Thais love Thais) stood unopposed and failed to garner support from the required 20% of eligible voters. Seven of those 38 may face the same ballot choice in the upcoming April 23 by-elections, according to the Thai-based English-language newspaper, the Bangkok Post. A repeat of the mass abstention that saw TRT resoundingly rejected in the south would leave the lower house of the parliament short of the required 500 seats and, according to the country's constitution, unable to convene and elect a prime minister. A reading of the constitution reveals that the only likely fallback position would involve intervention from the monarch.

Leaders of the PAD (People's Alliance for Democracy), who have spearheaded the campaign to bring down the Prime Minister, may face arrest, according to a report from the Thai News Agency. Protests organised by the PAD have been peaceful, and no specific charges that may be used against the organisation's leaders are given in the TNA report.

Phil Mickelson wins Masters

Yesterday in Augusta, Georgia at Augusta National Golf Club, American Phil Mickelson won the 70th Masters with a final round score of 69 and a four round total score of 281, seven under par and two strokes better than South African Tim Clark, the sole second place finisher. This was Mickelson's second consecutive major as well as his second green jacket. In a five-way tie for third place at four under par were José María Olazábal, Retief Goosen, Tiger Woods, Chad Campbell, and Fred Couples. Rounding out the top ten were eighth place finishers Angel Cabrera and Vijay Singh followed by Stewart Cink in tenth place.

Although Mickelson had to fire up during the last few holes to take the '04 Masters over Ernie Els, nothing of that sort was required during Sunday's round. He parred the first six holes before making two straight birdies at 7 and 8, and then went on to make two more at 13 and 15 before finishing off with a bogey at 18. Last year, Mickelson put Tiger's jacket on for him. This year, Tiger helped Phil into the jacket. "I certainly enjoyed having the jacket put on me," Mickelson said. "I love the chance to compete against guys like Tiger, guys like Retief and Ernie and Vijay and Fred who are playing so well. It gives me an incredible feeling of accomplishment to be able to come out on top this week." After 42 straight misses at majors, Mickelson is now on track with one major per year for the past three years.

Playing partner Fred Couples nearly got within one stroke of Mickelson but went on to miss the birdie putt and another par putt to sink out of contention. Putting was also Tiger Woods's major

hindrance. He made three three-putts and had an overall total of 33 putts with a final round of 70. Afterwards, Woods remarked, "It was frustrating. I felt in control of my golf swing from tee to green. Once I got on the green, I was a spaz. I didn't have it all day - even this morning (in the third round) I didn't putt well." Clark capped off a great run and a final round 69 with a chip-in from the sand at 18 for a birdie. Clark moved to number 15 on the Official World Golf Rankings, Woods stayed at number 1, Couples moved to 21st, and Mickelson moved up to 2nd.

NASA plans to send probe into Moon's surface

NASA, the United States' space agency, has announced that its next mission to the Moon will not only orbit the Moon, but also send two craft crashing into its surface. The Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO), whose main mission pertains to mapping the Moon, will send a spent fuel stage and an impactor probe towards a crater on the South Pole. The crater seems to be rich in hydrogen and possibly ice.

The mission is part of the run-up to trying to land astronauts back on the Moon, and perhaps keep them there for a longer period of time than the Apollo missions did. Scott Horowitz, NASA's associate administrator for the Exploration Systems Mission Directorate, had this to say: "What this mission buys is an early attempt to know what some of the resources we're going to have ... we know for sure that for human exploration to succeed we're going to have to essentially live off the land."

Twice before, with the Pentagon's Clementine spacecraft and with the Lunar Prospector, scientists have seen hints of ice on the

Moon's surface. It is NASA's hope that this mission may provide better answers to the question of water ice on the Moon. This would prove useful to the agency's goal of a four-astronaut mission to the Moon by 2020.

The name of the project is the Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite, or LCROSS for short. It will launch with the LRO in October 2008 and use its onboard cameras and spectrometers to watch the impact of its upper stage into the surface. The upper stage roughly resembles an SUV in mass - around 4,409 pounds.

The project manager, Daniel Andrews said: "We will create a substantial plume and excavate some sample material, some of which we think will be water ice." After the first crash, LCROSS will attempt to fly through the plume of debris, taking readings and sending them back to Earth. Once done, it will itself crash into a different region of the crater, allowing both the LRO and stations on Earth to observe the plume that it creates.

Today in History

467 - Anthemius became Emperor of the Western Roman Empire.

1633 - The formal interrogation of Galileo Galilei by the Inquisition began.

1961 - Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man to enter outer space.

1980 - Terry Fox dipped his artificial leg in the Atlantic Ocean and began his trans-Canada run towards the Pacific Ocean to raise funds for cancer research.

1981 - Columbia, the first space shuttle, was launched for its first flight.

April 12 is Passover begins at sunset (Judaism, 2006), Yuri's Night

Quote of the Day

"A writer writes not because he is educated but because he is driven by the need to communicate. Behind the need to communicate is the need to share. Behind the need to share is the need to be understood. The writer wants to be understood much more than he wants to be respected or praised or even loved. And that perhaps, is what makes him different from others." ~ Leo Rosten

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