



Top Stories

Thailand forces registration of prepaid phones to thwart insurgency



New rules begin today to regulate anonymous cell phone use in three provinces.

Hundreds of thousands rally in Australia against IR legislation



People rallied in 300 locations across Australia today to protest the Federal Government's WorkChoices proposed

changes to industrial relations laws.

Featured story

Chinese hunger strike continues at Australian detention centre



Three Chinese men being held at Sydney's Villawood Immigration Detention centre

have ended a four-week hunger strike. But another three detainees are continuing to refuse food for the 25th consecutive day. The men began their hunger strike on October 20 to protest Australia's Mandatory Detention policy.

Wikipedia Current Events

- In the 2005 Burkina Faso presidential elections current president Blaise Compaoré celebrates victory several days ahead of the release of the voting results. Prior to the election, Compaoré had a 60% approval rating. If no candidate receives 50% or more of the votes, there will be a second round of voting between the two candidates. Election officials claim a 60-70 percent voter turnout, but international monitoring agencies believe this percentage is hyped. International watchdogs and opposition officials complain off allegedly widespread vote rigging.
- The Chinese Health Ministry announces the country's first two confirmed cases of avian flu in humans in Hunan province, and one suspected case in Anhui.
- The United States government has won its fight to keep its supervisory authority over the internet through the ICANN, despite opposition from many nations.
- Major areas of the Australian city of Adelaide have been "locked down" ahead of the arrival of United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for the 17th annual AUS-MIN meeting.

US admits use of white phosphorus in Iraq

A documentary aired by Italy's state-run RAI24 television has led to an admission from U.S. military of use of white phosphorous

munitions during actions in Fallujah The documentary alleged the U.S.A. used the weapons in a "massive and indiscriminate way" against Iraqi civilians, but the military denies the weapons were used against citizens. Embedded Journalist Darrin Mortenson, who was with U.S. troops during the operation in Fallujah, already reported in April 2004 that a mortar team leader "directed his men to fire round after round of high explosives and white phosphorus charges into the city Friday and Saturday, never knowing what the targets were or what damage the resulting explosions caused."

The U.S. State department initially denied that white phosphorous was used as weaponry, but Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Col. Barry Venable said white phosphorous munitions were used as an incendiary weapon against enemy combatants. "It was not used against civilians," he said in a Tuesday briefing. Lt. Col. Venable repeated U.S. State department statements that white phosphorous munitions are a standard field artillery element.

The Pentagon briefing directed reporters to the March-April 2005 edition of the U.S. Army's Field Artillery magazine, where veterans of the Fallujah action described their use of white phosphorous munitions to "flush [insurgents] out", and it use as a screening agent (providing smoke cover) and as "a potent psychological weapon against the insurgents in trench lines."

The 1980 Convention on Conventional Weapons (Protocol III), which the USA is not a signatory to, disallows the use of incendiary weapons against civilian populations or air attacks against troops stationed in a civilian population center, but does not outlaw its battlefield use. General George Casey's 8 November 2004 briefing estimated the number of civilians still in Fallujah as between 20 000 and 100 000 civilians.

White phosphorous burns at temperatures near 5 000 degrees Fahrenheit (2760 C). It is used to start fires but cause severe burns where it strikes humans. The Italian documentary showed photos of what it said were Iraqis who had been burned by the white phosphorous. The accepted lethal dose of white phosphorous is 1mg/kg.

The smoke raises contentions for its battlefield use. It is primarily used as a "marker", as the high temperature combustion causes "pillaring" of the smoke column. But the smoke does contain phosphoric acid and traces of unburned phosphorous, which is corrosive to human tissue (internally and externally.) The US Army Field Manual cautions "Phosphorous smoke produces phosphoric acid. Soldiers must wear respiratory protection, such as protective masks, if exposed to phosphorous smoke." It is also listed as carcinogenic.

Increased tension in border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia

The BBC reports that Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has confirmed that he had moved thousands of extra troops to the north of the country, to prevent an

invasion by Eritrea. Ethiopia is estimated to have nearly half its armoured units in the area. Sapa-AFP reports however, "It is not true at all that there is an Eritrean troop movement," and, "Eritrea is only engaged in its development projects and agricultural revolution," as stated by the Eritrean Information Minister.

'The situation is indeed deteriorating. There is very heavy millitary movement in the area. Machine gunfire was heard on Sunday night near Shiraro,' the UNHCR said.

As frustration grows on both sides, some fear that recent Ethiopian troop movements to the frontier while the domestic political situation worsens could lead to renewed conflict. AFP reports that "Ethiopia[n] police on Monday accused Eritrea of fuelling deadly street violence that rocked the country early this month and claimed the lives of at least 48 people."

At the close of a 3-year war over their common border, Eritrea and Ethiopia decided to settle their differences in court. The Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague in the Netherlands presided over the Border Commission. Its decision in 2002 was hoped to be the conclusion to this long conflict.

Instead the stalemate has drawn on for three years. One of the modalities of the Agreement was that the decision would be 'final and binding.' In essence, both parties agreed to the decision in advance. At the announcement of the decision both parties lauded the decision as being fair and on the side of justice.

Since that time however, the

border between these two countries remains unmarked. The Ethiopian Government refuses to allow the marking of the boundary, saying that there must be allowance for the shifting of the border. On the other hand the Eritrean Government has recently curtailed the movements of the UN peacekeeping mission.

This Cold War has been cool for years, but as frustration mounts the conflict simmers and sparks have already begun to fly.

FDA ruling on emergency contraceptive pill questioned

The independent and nonpartisan US congressional watchdog, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) called the Food and Drug Administration's decision not to allow over-the-counter (OTC) sales of an Emergency Contraceptive pill, "unusual".

Emergency Contraceptive Pills or ECPs ("morning-after" or "next-day" pills) are used to prevent an unintended pregnancy, following unprotected sexual intercourse. They are objectionable for abortion opponents who consider thier use to be a form of abortion, though scientific studies (including those by the FDA) classify them as contraceptives. The pill, called Plan B is manufactured by Barr Laboratories and had been approved earlier by the FDA as a prescription drug.

Barr Laboratories requested that the drug be approved for OTC sale for adults and prescription-only sale for minors. The decision to not approve went against the advice given by the FDA's Joint Advisory Committee and its Review staff and led to a GAO investigation into the decision making process. The investigation

was requested by 30 House members and 17 Senators.

The GAO found several anomalies in the decision making process. The rationale used by Dr. Steven Galson, the acting director of the Centre for Drug Evaluation and Research for rejecting the application was novel and did not follow usual FDA practices. The decision was not signed off by the director of the office responsible for the application and the director of the Office of New Drugs, as they disagreed with the "reject" decision. The GAO also found that the FDA's high-level management more involved in reviewing this decision than in other change-to-OTC applications.

The Plan B decision was the only one of 67 proposed prescription to OTC changes to be disapproved, even after advisory committees approved the changes. FDA review staff told the investigators that they were told early in the review process that the decision would be made by high-level management. E-mail and other documents involving the then-FDA Commissioner Mark McClellan were found to have been destroyed "routinely".

The FDA has disagreed with the GAO's finding that the high-level management was more involved in processing this application and that the rationale offered was novel, despite acknowledging that the adolescent cognitive ability rationale was unprecedented in FDA practice. The accounts as to whether the decision to reject was taken prior to the reviews being completed offered to the investigators were conflicting.

The acting director cited concerns about the potential behavioral implications for younger

adolescents from OTC marketing of Plan-B, given their supposed lower cognitive ability, and that it was not valid to extrapolate data from older to younger audiences. However, the FDA had not considered similar "potential behavioral implications" for younger users for other OTC-switches and had previously considered it appropriate to extrapolate data from older to younger audiences.

Farmers clash amidst high security at APEC summit in South Korea

In the lead-up to the APEC forum, thousands of South Korean farmers clashed with police on Tuesday in the capital, Seoul, to demand the withdrawal of a bill to open up the country's rice market.

Local police said that about 40 farmers were arrested. Protesters drove back ranks of riot police in full combat gear as they marched towards the national assembly.

Police put the number of protesters and farm activists at about 10,000. The farmers were stopped just short of the assembly and entered in a standoff with the police, who used water cannon to subdue the farmers and disband the protest.

"No to WTO, No to APEC, No to BUSH," the protesters chanted. A representative for the farmers said one activist suffered a severe eye injury. Three police buses were burned in the protest. South Korean media reports that 70 protesters and 10 police were injured in the action.

Busan Mayor, Hur Nam-sik, said the protests should be contained. "I cannot block all the protests and demonstrations at APEC at

all," he said. "If the protests and demonstrations happen, it has to be in an orderly way, not to harm the image and progress of APEC."

South Korean farmers regularly take to the streets demanding protection for the domestic rice market from imports. The farmers oppose government's plans for wider liberalization of the nation's rice market.

"The government must come up with realistic policies for the rice market and the farming industry to allow farmers to live comfortably," said the Korean Advanced Farmers Federation.

The rally follows the death of a South Korean farmer, who allegedly committed suicide last Friday in protest of APEC policies.

About 2,000 South Korean farm activists plan to travel to Hong Kong next month to protest during a meeting of global trade ministers.

Amidst the street clashes, South Korea has taken steps to insure against potential terrorist attacks at the forum. Civil and military forces in Busan are on the highest alert with some 37,000 deployed in the area.

Twenty one international leaders, including US President George W. Bush, Chinese President Hu Jintao, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Russian President Vladimir Putin set to attend.

Trade and foreign ministers have begun two days of talks ahead of the main summit on Friday and Saturday. Authorities have designated security zones that will be off-limits to protesters.

Over 900 foreigners with criminal

records have been banned from entering South Korea during the summit period. Police say 400 others will be deported if they engage in illegal demonstrations.

Organizers said they expected thousands of demonstrators to criticize the international trade policies, which they say favors rich countries over poorer ones. An anti-APEC rally in Seoul at the weekend drew around 20,000 people.

The main security focus during the summit is terrorist threats. Although there have been no specific threats, South Korea has sent troops to Iraq and was mentioned as a potential target by al-Qaeda.

US military declined to comment on whether their 32,500 American troops based in South Korea were helping bolster security for the APEC summit

Ships will be blocked from entering the area, officials said. Anti-aircraft missiles have been deployed around the city, and a no-fly zone designated above the summit venues.

Police have increased security at subway stations, department stores and cinemas. Thousands of volunteers nationwide are monitoring public transport for suspicious activity, and customs and security checks at all international airports have been increased.

Mass poultry vaccination planned by China

China's Chief Veterinary Office, Jia Youling, has announced that the country plans to take drastic steps to counter avian influenza by attempting to vaccinate its entire

poultry stock of 14 billion birds. The move follows a number of reports of the virus spreading within the country and other Asian countries such as Vietnam engaging in culls to try and halt the disease's spread.

Millions of infected birds have been slaughtered in China and despite the spread of the virus it is only today that the World Health Organization has confirmed the first human cases in the country. The cases include at least one fatality, a 24-year-old female poultry worker in the eastern province of Anhui. The other confirmed case is a 9-year-old boy in the central province of Hunai who has since recovered.

The officials in Liaoning have reportedly finished vaccinating all 320 million birds in the northeastern province. David Nabarro, the United Nations coordinator for bird and human flu, says such vaccination programs are "the right thing to do" since slaughtering the animals will not work due to the virus being so entrenched in China's birds.

According to Henk Bedekam, the World Health Organization's representative in China, the time of year is favourable to the continuation of the disease. He said that since the virus can survive in the cold, winter outbreaks are to be expected during cold months.

Avian influenza continues to be a very rare disease in humans, and so far only seems to be transmitted to people through direct contact with infected birds. Experts, however, are afraid that the virus will mutate into a strain that will be easily transmitted between humans.

Elsewhere in Asia, the lethal H5N1 strain of the avian flu has infected at least 126 people and killed at least 64 since 2003. WHO spokeswoman Maria Cheng said, however, that there is no increased risk of an influenza pandemic since there has been no observed genetic change in the virus or spread between humans.

U.S. Producer Price Index shows inflation at bay

The Producer Price Index for October report released today shows prices for finished goods increased by 0.7 percent in October, prices rose by 1.9 percent in September.

Liquid Petroleum Gas climbed 1.4 percent compared with 24.7 percent in September. Gasoline dropped 3.3 percent, it increased 12.7 in September. Diesel fuel climbed 22.7 percent, having advanced 1.5 percent the previous month.

Prices for foods changed very little, a mere 0.1 percent decline, it increased 1.4 percent the previous month.

The Producer Price Index is a US government report on prices as seen from the producer of goods. This shows prices before effects such as government subsidies, sales and excise taxes, and distribution costs. The index is used as a leading indicator of consumer inflation in the future as changes in price will eventually flow down to the consumer.

The index can be found at the US Department of Labor web site.

Today in History

- 1558 - Elizabeth I ascended the English Throne.
- 1869 - The Suez Canal, linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea, was inaugurated in an elaborate ceremony.
- 1969 - The SALT I negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States began in Helsinki.
- 1970 - Douglas Engelbart received the patent for the first computer mouse.
- 1989 - The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia began.
- November 17 is : International Students Day; Peak of the Leonids

Quote of the Day

"It seems to me that any sensible person must see that violence does not change the world and if it does, then only temporarily." ~ Martin Scorsese

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