



Top Stories

World's biggest polluters won't cut back on fossil fuel



Six of the world's biggest polluting nations have pledged a multi-million dollar fund to develop cleaner energy, but stressed a heavy reliance on fossil-fuels for generations to come. Green groups, labelling this weeks "AP6" talks a sham, have condemned the summit as a "coal and nuclear pact" between big polluters and fossil-fuel firms.

Chinese block of Wikimedia enters tenth week

China's block of the Wikimedia project, which includes Wikipedia, has entered into its tenth week. Beginning October 19, this is the third such block, upsetting students and researchers who state that it is having a significant impact on their ability to conduct research, and even pass civil service exams.



Featured story

Hundreds dead in hajj stampede

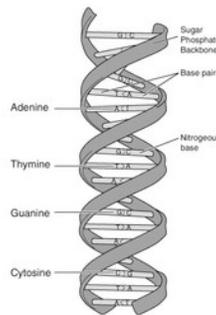


According to the Saudi Interior Ministry over 345 Muslim pilgrims have been killed in a stampede during the annual Hajj pilgrimage near Mecca.

Wikipedia Current Events

- A stampede during the Stoning the Devil ritual on the last day at the Hajj in Mina, Saudi Arabia, kills at least 345 Muslim pilgrims. A similar crush claimed 244 pilgrims' lives at the same spot in 2004.
- Mehmet Ali Ağca, who tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981, is released from jail.

New DNA tests find executed Virginia man was guilty



Schematic representation of the DNA which illustrates its double helix structure.

New DNA tests done on Roger Keith Coleman, the Virginia man executed in May 1992 for rape and murder, find him guilty of committing the crime.

The results were announced by Governor Mark Warner during a Thursday afternoon news conference. "The confirmation that Roger Keith Coleman's DNA was present [at the crime scene] reaffirms the verdict and the sanction," Warner said.

The tests end more than a decade of debate by death penalty

advocates on both side of the Coleman issue. More than 1,000 have been put to death in the United States since the penalty was re-introduced in 1976. Coleman maintained his innocence in the 1981 crime up until the time of his execution, and never admitted guilt.

The Coleman tests, if he were exonerated, would have been the first time a person who was executed would later be found innocent. A report issued with announcement states that testing standards performed today on the DNA evidence could only share a profile similar to another's DNA in 1 out of 19 million people, a level of precision not possible at the time of his conviction.

The order for the re-test is one of the last official acts performed by Governor Warner, who will step down as governor on Saturday. The testing was done in Toronto, Canada by the Ontario Centre of Forensic Sciences, whose findings report that Coleman could not be ruled out as the source of a sperm samples found from the crime scene.

The attorney for Coleman argued that his client did not have time to commit the crime, and that tests showed semen from two different men was found inside the rape victim, Wanda Fay McCoy . The attorney also said that another man bragged that he murdered her.

The governor at the time, Douglas

Wilder, allowed the sanction to proceed against Coleman after he failed a lie-detector test administered shortly before the execution was carried out.

Hundreds dead in hajj stampede



The Plains of Arafat on the day of Hajj Photo Credit: Ali Mansuri

According to the Saudi Interior Ministry over 345 Muslim pilgrims have been killed in a stampede during the annual Hajj pilgrimage near Mecca.

The stampede happened at Jamarat Bridge, near Mecca in Saudi Arabia, during an event where pebbles were thrown at a pillar, representing the stoning of Satan as part of the final rites of the Hajj. The stampede began when luggage from a bus tripped pilgrims at the eastern end of the wall causing a bottleneck. Those who were tripped were then crushed by the wave of people behind them.

Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca during the lifetime, if they are physically or financially possible to as it one of the five pillars of the Islamic faith. Saudi officials had already replaced the pillar before this event happened with a oval wall with padded edges to protect pilgrims from a crush, even more they installed security cameras and placed over 60,000 security

personnel in the area.

This is not the first time deadly stampedes have taken place during the Hajj, the deadliest stampede happened during the 1991 hajj, in which 1,426 pilgrims were trampled.

Last week, at least 76 people were killed when the Al Ghaza Hotel near the Masjid Al Haram or Grand Mosque collapsed, the cause of which is unknown.

Non-Muslims are not allowed in Mecca.

Hospitality exchange organisation grows to 100,000 members



About 450 members of the Hospitality Club gathered in the village of Monnai, France, for the annual "summer camp". Photo by Sébastien Jeux.

The Hospitality Club became the first hospitality exchange network to pass the 100,000 members milestone on January 11, 2006. Its closest competitors, CouchSurfing and GlobalFreeLoaders, have 40,000 and 30,000 members.

Hospitality exchange organisations are dedicated to putting travellers in contact with locals offering to host them in their house for free, or simply offer them a tour of their city or share a meal with them. Besides the obvious financial advantage, the Hospitality Club believes that "bringing people

together and fostering international friendships will increase intercultural understanding and strengthen peace."

Servas Open Doors, the oldest network, in fact formally views itself as a peace initiative, and there are also a number of smaller hospitality exchange networks which focus on specialized audiences, such as Agritourism.

Veit Kühne from Dreseden, Germany, who founded the Hospitality Club in 2000 while he was still a student, believes that "one day, everyone will have the opportunity to visit any country knowing that someone will be waiting to receive them with open arms. People will travel in a different way, meet each other and build intercultural understanding through personal contact."

"There will be many members in places like Israel and Palestine, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Chechnya, Rwanda, or Timor who will exchange hospitality with each other, and in small steps the Hospitality Club will have helped making peace a lasting vision for our wonderful planet," he adds.

Hospitality Club was the first online organisation to offer on a major scale the possibility for travellers to find and contact locals open to cultural exchange. The whole system is entirely free. The safe and efficient operation of the 30+ languages website and its database, forum, and chatroom depends on the work of hundreds of volunteers from around the world.

Anybody can become a member, but they must provide their full name and address, for security reasons. All members have a

profile they can fill with information about themselves and their preferences, to help prospective visitors contact the person most likely to welcome them.

The most often mentioned drawback of the system is lack of security. The main difference between hospitality exchange networks and other social networking platforms such as Orkut or LiveJournal is that the former's ultimate objective is to allow for face-to-face meetings. Users should realise that there is a risk involved, although according to Frenchman Jean-Yves Hégron, main software developer of the Hospitality Club, "By using the Club you have the same level of risk as the one you face whenever you get out from your home."



Some of the most involved volunteers gathering in Brussels to discuss the evolution of the organisation. Photo by Martin Jähnert.

Critics often mention lack of transparency in how they perceive decisions are taken by volunteers in most networks, the Hospitality Club apparently making no exception. Exponential growth of the network has also caused server failures alike to those observed in Wikipedia until recently.

The idea of free hospitality exchange is not new. Servas was

the first organisation to develop it, right after World War II. It still exists to this day, with over 15,000 members, and is represented as an NGO in the United Nations. Because democratic, paper-based Servas is perceived as bureaucratic by some, Hospex was created as the first online network in 1991.

Hospitality Club succeeded to Hospex in August 2000, introducing innovative security features ranging from spam protection to passport control and a sophisticated feedback system, thus making online hospitality exchange available to travellers with higher safety concerns. From 1000 members in July 2002 to 10,000 in February 2004, it quickly grew to 100,000 on 11 January 2006 and is expected to reach the million in about two years.

Colombian unions reiterate their accusations against Coca Cola

The workers of Coca Cola in Colombia reiterated their accusations against Coca Cola for violations to the collective agreements after denying that the world wide campaign they are moving forward has political interests. Javier Correa, president of SINALTRAINAL, the National Union of the Food Industry, denounced that Coca Cola continues to violate the worker's right of association. He declared that of 8,700 employees only 2,300 have a direct contract with the company and that contractors and sub-contractors have no right to join the union organization. In addition, SINALTRAINAL denounced that there is a persecution campaign against its members that has resulted in attacks by paramilitary groups.

World's biggest polluters won't cut back on fossil fuel



The AP6 Delegates, at Government House, Sydney. January 2006

Six of the world's major polluters, who participated in this week's Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (AP6 or APPCDC), have launched a multi-million dollar fund to develop clean-energy, but stressed they will be heavily reliant on polluting fossil-fuels for generations to come.

Green groups, labelling the talks a sham, have condemned the climate talks which were held in Sydney, Australia as a "coal and nuclear pact" between the big polluters and fossil-fuel firms. Australian climate change observers have attacked the AP6 outcomes as grossly irresponsible, saying the Federal Government is willing to accept the reality of runaway climate change.

A communique released by the AP6 states: "We recognise that fossil fuels underpin our economies, and will be an enduring reality for our lifetimes and beyond" - the document said. Green groups say the pact has missed a vital opportunity to commit to renewable energy sources. They say the two-day meeting failed to make any serious commitments in combatting global warming.

Combined, the United States, China, Japan, India, South Korea and Australia, account for around half the globe's greenhouse gases. The six countries set up the summit as an ulterior method of tackling global warming outside the Kyoto Protocol by, they say, focussing on "clean-energy technology."

Nuclear Power, clean coal technologies, geosequestration and industry-driven environment funds were some of the proposals raised at the summit. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol the six nations have not set any targets to cut greenhouse gases.

Climate change observers have broadly criticised the AP6 as a waste of time. Australian Climate Institute's Clive Hamilton says the meeting did little to cut greenhouse gas emissions. "I think really this conference is about trying to protect the long-term future of the coal industry," he said. "If you look at the sort of business people who have a seat at the table at the conference in Sydney, they overwhelmingly represent the polluting industries rather than those that will at some time in the future replace them - the renewable energy and energy efficiency industries."

CSIRO chief scientist Dr David Brockway says the technology required to reduce greenhouse emissions is not viable for industry.

"It has to be borne in mind that anything we are going to do to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and intensity from the Australian economy will come at a cost," he said. "What we are doing at the moment is doing research to try and reduce the size of that additional cost. I would say in a

five to 10 year timeframe a number of these technologies will become viable."

An AP6 communique issued at the end of the conference said reductions in greenhouse gases must be achieved without hindering economic growth - "the partnership aims to mobilise domestic and foreign investment into clean and low-emission technology by fostering the best possible enabling environments," it states. Some of the world's big mining and energy firms attended the talks and pledged to improve efficiency.

Green groups, who were left out of the conference, say the talks were aimed at subverting Kyoto - which obligates some 40 developed countries to cut greenhouse emissions by 5 percent below 1990 levels during 2008-2012. "Basically, they haven't agreed to do anything in terms of serious commitment," said Monash University climate change expert Professor Amanda Lynch. The United States and Australia refuse to sign Kyoto claiming its mandatory greenhouse gas cuts would threaten economic growth.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard said, "experience has taught us that seeking arbitrary targets doesn't result in achieving practical solutions to global climate change." Mr Howard stressed the importance of maintaining economic growth to alleviate poverty, while cutting greenhouse emissions.

He said the summit had injected "an overdue dose of realism into the debate about climate change. We believe it is possible to tackle issues of greenhouse gas emissions and the challenge of climate change without reducing

living standards," he said. "The world will go on using fossil fuels for many years into the future because it's more economic to do so. So therefore it's elementary commonsense that you should try and make the use of fossil fuels more greenhouse gas sensitive, you should try and clean up the use of fossil fuel," he said.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have dismissed Mr Howard's comments as misleading and irresponsible. The WWF's chief executive Greg Bourne said, "in my whole business career, I have never seen a more misleading public statement as that... If the statements made today become a reality, this will lock us in to a four-degree rise in global average temperatures, when two-degrees is considered extremely dangerous," he said. "There couldn't be anything more irresponsible than to knowingly embark on a path towards massive increases in emissions and runaway global warming."

The AP6 nations said in the final communique that the eight public/private partnership taskforces created at the conference, will draw up action plans by the middle of 2006 on issues including renewable energy, power generation, cleaner fossil fuels and coal mining.

Environmentalists said the Sydney pact was doomed to fail because it did not impose targets on its members which comprise nearly half of humanity. The New South Wales Nature Conservation Council said the group's voluntary approach was a "licence for government and business to do nothing". "Without any incentives or penalties there is no reason for industry to move away from burning polluting coal and oil,"

said the council's Cate Faehrmann. The AP6 countries encompass: 49 per cent of world GDP; 48 per cent of the world energy consumption; 48 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions; and 45 per cent of the world's population.

Scientists say global warming is melting glaciers, raising sea levels and will cause more intense storms, droughts and floods. Current levels of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere are higher now than at any time in the past 650,000 years, research from Antarctic ice cores shows.

Lobbyist giant shuts down due to ties with Jack Abramoff and Tom DeLay

The Alexander Strategy Group (ASG), one of Washington's top lobbying operations, plans to shut down at the end of January.

Edwin A. Buckham, the company's owner and former top DeLay aide, said Monday that the company had been fatally damaged by the publicity surrounding the federal investigation the lobbyist Jack Abramoff and former House majority leader Tom DeLay (R-TX).

The company was founded in 1981 and has thrived due to its connections to Tom DeLay. Its current clients include Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Microsoft, and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America.

DeLay has been indicted for money laundering and other charges in Texas. ASG employed DeLay's wife, Christine, for four years.

Shooter of former Pope John Paul II released from prison

Mehmet Ali Agca, jailed in 1981 for shooting and injuring former Pope John Paul II in Rome has been released from Turkish prison. A Turkish court had determined that he had already completed his sentence with time already served.

Agca shot the Pope as he rode around St Peter's Square in a open-topped car. Agca was a Turkish militant who was a member of the nationalist Grey Wolves; however, his motives for the shooting remain unclear.

Agca was sentenced to life in prison in Italy, before being pardoned in 2000 and extradited to Turkey to serve jail time for the murder of Abdi Ipekci, a journalist. Turkish citizens were outraged that he served only four and a half years for murder.

Calls for aid to help feed millions, as East Africa plunges into drought

Millions may starve in Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Djibouti in East Africa, because of extreme drought, combined with inequalities built into mechanisms for distributing food, according to the analysis made by Amartya Sen, who was awarded the Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998. War in parts of the region is an extra exacerbating factor.

The countries need immediate food, water, seeds and any other agricultural product, according to the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which reports that millions of people are on the brink of starvation due to the recent severe droughts that have been devastating the area.

"The whole area is affected," FAO

representative Shukri Ahmed said. "The situation is deteriorating." Local newspaper reports gave an official death toll at 30 famine-related deaths, said Mr Ahmed.

Many had not expected that the area's dry season would be as severe as it has been, and did not anticipate the effects.

Others, such as Yves Engler, expect famines and massive starvation to continue in the region as long as the IMF continues to influence economic policies in the region. Yves Engler has claimed, consistently with Amartya Sen's analysis, that the IMF is responsible for worsening or actually creating famine in Malawi (2002), Ethiopia (2003) and Niger (2005).

The present drought has been said to be getting worse by the day, and the total figure for those who need food from the World Food Program could rise from today's 1.2 million, to exceed 2.5 million people, according to United Nations (UN) spokesman Stephane Dujarric at the organisation's New York headquarters.

The FAO had called for domestic food purchases in areas where harvests were expected to be favorable, coupled with food aid imports elsewhere, the UN's Mr Dujarric said.

Crops have failed, and local attempts at distributing supplies have been blamed on poor infrastructure and a lack of supplies. What makes the region's situation even more grave, is that the rainy season failed to aid in the production of much needed crops.

Nearly one-fifth of the population of Djibouti were said to be facing

food shortages and wide-spread starvation. Nearly \$40 million is said to be needed to offset the famine. 64,000 tons of food are needed by the World Food Program, but only 16,700 were known to be available.

The World Food program was trying to assess the worst hit areas.

Internal audit reveals IRS improperly identified hundreds of thousands of taxpayers as potential frauds

An internal audit of the IRS has found that the IRS has improperly identified hundreds of thousands of taxpayers as potential cheats and frozen refunds. Many of the taxpayers are unaware their refunds are frozen because the IRS does not notify taxpayers of their investigations. The audit found that 80% of a sample of cases flagged as potential cheats were actually legitimate refunds.

Many of the frozen refunds were from the poor. The median gross income from the sample was \$13,300 with a median refund of \$3,519. The median delay was 8 1/2 months.

Republican Senator Charles E. Grassley, Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said "Refunds have been a source of abuse recently, but we need to make sure taxpayers have proper due process when the IRS decides to freeze a refund." he noted that taxpayers "can't effectively challenge the IRS' actions."

Democrat Senator Max Baucus said the IRS was after fraud "at the expense of honest taxpayers who need these refunds for food, medicine, home heating and other basic needs."

Today in History

- 1898 - Émile Zola published "J'Accuse" to expose the Dreyfus affair, and accused the French government of anti-Semitism.
- 1957 - The Wham-O toy company produced their first flying disc, later renamed the Frisbee.
- 1967 - General Gnassingbé Eyadéma seized power in Togo after a coup d'état, ruling as head of state until his death in February 2005.
- 1986 - A month-long violent struggle began in Aden, South Yemen between supporters of Ali Nasir Muhammad and Abdul Fattah Ismail, resulting in thousands of casualties.
- January 13 is St. Knut's Day (Christianity-Scandinavia)

Quote of the Day

"Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom; and a great empire and little minds go ill together." ~ Edmund Burke

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