

Commonwealth Update

DEREK INGRAM AND JUDITH SOAL

ABSTRACT *Fiji is suspended from the Commonwealth after a military coup. Peace talks progress in Uganda and flounder in Sri Lanka. Pakistan's fragile alliance with the West is highlighted when President Musharraf is simultaneously praised for fighting terror in the USA and blamed for supporting extremists in the UK. A major terrorist alert at UK airports disrupts hundreds of thousands of travellers after police say they have foiled a plot to commit murder on an unprecedented scale. Gorillas return to Cameroon, flamingoes disappear from Kenya and Pakistan becomes the first country to forfeit a cricket Test.*

Fiji Islands

The simmering rift between the government and the army chief comes to a head in a military takeover (5 December 2006), the fourth in 20 years. The tensions between Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and army leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama have been escalating over government plans to offer amnesties to those involved in a coup six years ago. At that time Bainimarama was forced to flee and then played a key role in putting down the uprising. On 31 October Qarase orders Bainimarama's dismissal—but the military chief refuses to step down and warns of bloodshed unless Qarase resigns.

A month later Bainimarama announces a bloodless military coup, saying he has assumed some powers of the president to dismiss Qarase. He declares a state of emergency, fires the police chief and shuts down parliament, then orders Jona Senilagakali, a 77-year-old military doctor, to take over as prime minister. Bainimarama warns that any attempt at resistance will be suppressed by the military. The Commonwealth suspends Fiji until democracy is restored (see Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group at the end of this Update) and Australia and New Zealand impose a travel ban and other sanctions.

Military leaders put adverts in newspapers asking for Fijians of “outstanding character” to fill interim government posts. A number of Fijian institutions, including the church and the influential Great Council of Chiefs, oppose the takeover, but Bainimarama warns that unless the tribal leaders approve a

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new government the military regime will continue “for up to 50 years” (14 December).

Australia

The world’s biggest solar power plant is to be built near Mildura, Victoria. It will be a solar concentrator collecting sunrays in hundreds of square metres of curved mirrors, beaming the heat on to photovoltaic panels. The 154-megawatt project will provide power for 45 000 homes and produce temperatures up to 100°C. Similar stations are being built in the USA and the Mediterranean.

Drought has devastated many parts of Australia, with 92% of New South Wales affected and no rain having fallen in some places for six years. Wheat crop forecasts are dire and there are reports of one farmer suicide every four days. Extremes of drought and heat are threatening wine growing in some areas. In Toowoomba, 85 miles from Brisbane, controversial plans to use purified sewage as its main water supply are to be put to a referendum.

Prime Minister John Howard says the country, which has the largest uranium reserves in the world, should consider developing uranium enrichment even if it upsets efforts to limit nuclear proliferation (14 August 2006). A week later Kim Beazley, leader of the opposition Labor Party, does a U-turn and says Australia should abandon the long-standing restrictions on mining the metal.

A federal court gives the Nyoongar aboriginal tribe the right to access land for its traditional activities in Perth. The federal government says it might appeal (20 September). It is the first time a metropolitan area has been ruled to belong to indigenous people.

Parliament lifts restrictions on media ownership and mergers (18 October). Foreigners can now take control of media companies and people can own two forms of media in one city. Two major deals take place within hours of the legislation being passed.

Australia, like the USA, has not signed the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and Treasurer Peter Costello says (31 October 2006) there is still ‘no point’ unless it applies to China and India too. He insists Australia is on track to reduce its emissions, although new UN figures show it is the West’s second highest emitter per capita after Luxembourg.

On 4 December Labor elects Kevin Rudd to succeed Beazley as opposition leader, choosing the former diplomat to take it into elections in 2007. Julia Gillard becomes deputy leader. Rudd promises to stick to pledges of withdrawing troops from Iraq and signing the Kyoto protocol.

An inquiry finds that Australia’s wheat exporter, AWB, broke UN oil-for-food programme rules by bribing Saddam Hussein in return for contracts (5 December). AWB is stripped of its power to control wheat exports for six months.

In advance of the 2006–07 England v. Australia cricket Test series the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission rules that the term ‘pom’, is not an insult and may be used. The origin of the word is obscure. Legend has it that POHM was stitched into convict’s uniforms—for Prisoner Of His Majesty.

Norfolk Island

More than a century after the island heard its last murder case, New Zealand chef Glenn McNeill, 28, is committed to stand trial (11 August 2006) for killing an Australian hotel worker in 2002. The four-year investigation included mass fingerprinting of the 1600 residents aged between 15 and 70.

New Zealand

Trade talks with 120 New Zealand business people open in Shanghai in November 2006 with the aim of striking a free trade deal with China by 2008. If successful, it would be the first such pact between China and an advanced Western economy.

About 1500 New Zealanders in London's Hyde Park, including Prime Minister Helen Clark, watch Queen Elizabeth dedicate the UK's first memorial to New Zealand war dead (11 November).

Forty pilot whales become stranded on a Ruakaka beach, 85 miles from Auckland, in November and die. Forty others are herded back to safety. Records show 5000 whales and dolphins have beached themselves in New Zealand in the past 160 years.

Opposition leader Don Brash resigns (23 November) over his links with a secretive Christian sect, the Exclusive Brethren. The sect is accused of funding a clandestine publicity campaign to promote conservative values and attack leftwing parties. Private detectives say the Brethren hired them to dig up dirt on Labour politicians, including Clark and her family.

Solomon Islands

Australian peacekeepers raid the office of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare (20 October 2006) looking for evidence in a sex case. Australia accuses the Solomons of harbouring Australian lawyer Julian Moti, wanted for child abuse and now appointed Solomons attorney general. Moti was arrested on a trip to Papua New Guinea in October but escaped before being extradited to Australia. Sogavare threatens to expel Australian forces. The standoff develops as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) shifts from providing security to tackling corruption. The Sogavare government brands Australia a regional bully.

At the annual South Pacific Forum meeting in October heads of government agree to review the Australian mission. Sogavare says it has strayed from its goals. The leaders say they want RAMSI to continue.

Papua New Guinea

The World Health Organisation warns that HIV/AIDS cases could reach one million by 2015 unless drastic action is taken. Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare takes the issue under his remit, but points out the difficulties of health education in a society with 800 languages and only 34% literacy.

Conservative MP Boris Johnson apologizes after referring to PNG as a country of "orgies, cannibalism and chief-killing" (8 September 2006). The country's high

commissioner to London, Jean Kekedo, says she is shocked that such a supposedly well educated person could be so ignorant.

Kiribati

Under the sponsorship of Conservation International, one of the world's largest marine parks will be created to protect the country's coral ecosystem. The group praises the government for its "unprecedented vision for long-term conservation of its precious marine diversity". An endowment fund will compensate Kiribati for revenue it could have received from fishing licences. Isolation of the area over millions of years has resulted in separate evolutionary pathways.

Tonga

King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV dies in a New Zealand hospital (11 September 2006) aged 88, after reigning for 41 years. In 1976 he was named the heaviest monarch in the world, weighing 33 stone. His mother was the famous Queen Salote. His successor, his 58-year-old Sandhurst-educated son, Siaosi Tupou V, faces a push for more democracy. Under the 150-year constitution the king appoints the government and all but nine of Tonga's 32 lawmakers. Within a month it is announced that laws will be changed to establish a "fully elected parliament, by the people, for the people".

But the government fails to pass democratic reforms before it goes into recess in November and crowds take to the streets. They ransack much of the business quarter of the capital, Nuku'alofa, destroying the prime minister's office and several Chinese-owned shops (17 November). Eight people are killed. The king asks for calm. Prime Minister Fred Sevele calls it a day of shame. He appeals for help and Australia and New Zealand fly in 150 soldiers and police. When order is restored the government announces major changes ahead of elections in 2008. Legislation is immediately passed.

Pitcairn Islands

The Privy Council dismisses the appeals of six islanders against convictions for child rape and indecent assault (30 October 2006). Sentences range from six years jail to community service.

Canada

Canada hosts the 16th International AIDS Conference in Montreal (13–18 August 2006), which is addressed by former US president Bill Clinton and billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates. After the conference 151 delegates, including 137 South Africans as well as Salvadorans, Eritreans, Zimbabweans and Ugandans, apply for refugee status on the grounds they cannot receive life-saving drugs in their home countries.

A gunman goes on the rampage on a Montreal college campus, killing a teenage girl and wounding 20 others before turning the gun on himself (14 September).

Kimveer Gill's attack on Watson College prompts questioning on the failure of the country's tough gun control laws.

The death of four Canadian soldiers in a suicide bomb in Afghanistan on 18 September fuels a growing outcry over the troop deployment against the Taliban. In a speech to the Canadian parliament, Afghan leader Hamid Karzai appeals for continued support. Prime Minister Stephen Harper rules out early withdrawal: "Canada does not leave a country before achieving success". Thirty-six Canadian soldiers have died in Afghanistan since 2002.

Harper tells parliament it should recognize Quebec province as "a nation within Canada" in an apparent attempt to pre-empt a similar move by Quebec's separatist party. After initially rejecting the motion, the leader of the Bloc Québécois, Gilles Duceppe, offers his support. The motion passes easily (28 November), but experts say it carries little legal significance.

Former environment minister Stephane Dion is elected leader of the opposition Liberal Party, in a surprise victory over writer Michael Ignatieff (3 December). The 5000 delegates at a party convention in Montreal need four rounds of voting to select the winner to lead them into elections, expected in 2007.

MPs reject an attempt by the ruling Conservatives to overturn the legalization of gay marriages (8 December). Several cabinet members are among 12 Conservative MPs who joined with opposition parties to dismiss the motion by 175 to 123.

Trinidad and Tobago

Fishermen and farmers block access to a site where the US company Alcoa hopes to build an aluminum smelter (12 September 2006), reciting Bible verses and lighting candles before being removed by police. Alcoa has signed a preliminary deal with the government to own and operate the smelter in Cap De Ville for 30 years. Demonstrators say it will poison their water supply for generations.

St Lucia

Former premier Sir John Compton, 81, wins an unexpected victory (11 December 2006) after coming out of retirement to lead the United Workers Party into elections. He defeats Prime Minister Kenny Anthony's Labor Party, seeking its third term in power. Compton, who led the country for 29 years between the 1960s and 1990s, is regarded as the father of St Lucian independence.

Jamaica

Information Minister Colin Campbell resigns (8 October 2006) after it emerges that a Dutch oil trading company, Trafigura, donated more than £235 000 to the ruling People's National Party in an account in the name of COCC (Colin Campbell Our Candidate). Trafigura has handled the Jamaican oil contract for more than 10 years. The company was also responsible for chartering the Probo Koala, a ship that dumped toxic cargo in Abidjan on 19 August, killing 10 people, hospitalizing thousands and leading to the resignation of the government.

Trevor Berbick, a former heavyweight boxing champion and the last man to beat Muhammad Ali, is killed in a hatchet attack in Norwich (28 October). Police said he appeared to have died from a massive “chop wound” to the head in a churchyard. A man is arrested the next day.

Montserrat

The territory gets its own airline, Air Montserrat, in October 2006, running daily flights to Antigua.

Cayman Islands

Conservationists discover in October 2006 that three eggs laid by a Grand Cayman blue iguana released into a nature reserve have hatched successfully. The blue iguana is the world’s rarest lizard, and is expected to be extinct in the wild within a decade. To try to save the species, 219 captive-bred iguanas have been released in the Salina reserve since 2004.

Belize

A £10 million fake drug scam is exposed when 11 people are arrested and charged in the USA and Belize (20 September 2006). American investigators say the drugs, sold over the internet, had little or no medicinal value. Georgian firm Hi-Tech Pharmaceuticals marketed the drugs as Canadian, although they were “crudely manufactured in an unsanitary house” in Belize, according to the charges. They include fake versions of Vioxx, Viagra, Cialis, Valium and Xanax.

Barbados

Cricket legend Sir Clive Walcott dies aged 80 (26 August 2006). With Sir Frank Worrell and Everton Weekes, Walcott was one of the famous ‘Three Ws’ of West Indian cricket. He made 3798 runs in 44 Test appearances, including 15 centuries, and averaged 56.68.

Guyana

President Bharrat Jagdeo wins another five-year term in general elections (28 August 2006). The ruling People’s Progressive Party, dominated by Guyanese of East Indian descent, increases its parliamentary majority by two seats to 36 seats out of 65. The main opposition People’s National Congress (PNC), with its power base in the African–Caribbean population, loses six seats. Analysts say the population voted largely along ethnic lines. An 18-strong Commonwealth observer group, led by Epeli Nailatikau, former parliamentary speaker of Fiji Islands, reports minor administrative problems, but says they did not “undermine the overall integrity and credibility” of the vote. Voting was largely peaceful, avoiding the violence that has marred previous polls.

Nigeria

Political tensions escalate in the run-up to the April 2007 elections. Vice-President Atiku Abubakar is suspended by the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) (28 September 2006) after President Olusegun Obasanjo accuses him of misusing £62 million of state money. A court later declares the suspension illegal. Abubakar says the claims against him are politically motivated. He backed the campaign to prevent Obasanjo seeking a third term and has been clear about his intentions to run for president. After much infighting in the PDP, Obasanjo's choice, Umaru Yar'Adua, is nominated as its presidential candidate (17 December). Yar'Adua is governor of Katsina state and did not have much of a national profile until it became known he had Obasanjo's backing.

Two leading opposition parties form an election alliance in December, agreeing not to field candidates against each other. The All Nigeria People's Party and the Action Congress say they want to improve their chances of challenging the PDP. The Action Congress nominates Abubakar as its presidential candidate (20 December).

Three more impeachments bring the number of state governors sacked since December 2005 to five. Obasanjo says the moves are part of a crackdown on graft but critics claim he is using the anti-corruption drive to remove political opponents ahead of the election. Ayo Fayose, governor of Ekiti state, is fired in October and a state of emergency is declared. Obasanjo installs a retired army general in his place. Joshua Dariye, of central Plateau state, is impeached on 13 November and replaced by Michael Botmang. Anambra state leader Peter Obi is sacked (6 November) and Virginia Etiaba becomes Nigeria's first woman governor. She initially refused to take the position as civil rights groups criticized the dismissal as unconstitutional. On 8 December the Supreme Court reinstates Rashidi Adewolu Ladoja, sacked in January, declaring his impeachment illegal.

Ninety-nine people, including the Sultan of Sokoto, die as their plane crashes after takeoff from Abuja (29 October)—the fourth air disaster in a year. Three days of mourning are declared for Ibrahim Muhammadu Maccido, 80, leader of an estimated 70 million Nigerian muslims. His son also dies and his younger brother, retired Colonel Muhammadu Sada Abubakar, 53, becomes the 20th Sultan. Abubakar had been Nigeria's military attaché to Pakistan. Aviation Minister Babalola Borishade is dismissed after the crash. A month earlier an air crash near Obudu killed eight major generals and two brigadier-generals—the top echelon in army headquarters. The government approves £70 million to reform the aviation sector.

Under a £4 billion contract signed in October a Chinese firm will build an 800-mile railway between Lagos and Kano. About 50 000 Nigerians will be employed.

A kidnapped British oil worker is killed during a rescue attempt by the Nigerian navy (22 November). David Hunt, 58, was one of seven foreigners taken hostage from an oil ship off the southern coast. Although kidnappings of oil workers are increasingly common, Hunt is the first to have been killed. On other occasions the hostages have been released unharmed, presumably after a ransom has been paid. Earlier, militants invaded three Shell stations (24 October), shutting the facilities. They accuse Shell of failing to fulfil an agreement to provide them with aid. Armed men take control of another Shell oil facility on 15 December, before being

overpowered by security forces. Militant groups are demanding more local control of oil wealth for residents.

Sierra Leone

President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah announces elections for 28 July 2007, the first since UN peacekeepers left in 2005. Kabbah, not eligible for re-election, appeals to voters to see the elections “not as warfare between warlords but as a friendly contest”. The polls will test whether the country has recovered from the 10-year civil war that ended in 2002.

Ghana

President John Kufuor accuses predecessor Jerry Rawlings of trying to raise money to stage a coup (24 October). Rawlings dismisses the claims as an “astounding” attempt to salvage the government’s image.

In August the government tells mining firms to cut their electricity consumption by 25% because of a serious water shortage affecting the country’s generating capacity. AngloGold Ashanti says it will have to close one of its goldmines temporarily if the problems worsen. A further cut would force it to close its Iduapriem mine.

The government bans a conference for gay men and lesbians due to take place in September in Accra. Homosexuality is illegal in Ghana.

The Gambia

President Yahyeh Jammeh wins another five-year term in elections (22 September 2006). Jammeh, whose Alliance for Reorientation and Construction takes 67% of the vote, seized power in a 1994 coup. Opposition candidate Ousainou Darboe, of the United Democratic Party, takes 27% and Halifa Sallah 6%. Turnout is 59%. A Commonwealth observer group headed by Salim Ahmed Salim of Tanzania says the election result reflects the wishes of the electorate, but that they would like to see “a more level playing field and a more restrained utilization of the advantages of incumbency”.

Cameroon

Four gorillas smuggled out of the country in 2002 are to come home. Cameroon has sought their return since they were illegally snatched and taken to Taiping Zoo in Malaysia four years ago. In 2004 Malaysia sent the so-called Taiping Four to a zoo in Pretoria in South Africa, where DNA tests confirmed they were from Cameroon. After international pressure South Africa agreed to send them home. Cameroon is one of the few countries where the western lowland gorillas still exist in the wild.

Uganda

A truce to end the 20-year conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the government is signed in Juba, Sudan, on 26 August 2006, but plans for rebel

troops to leave the bush within three weeks soon break down. President Yoweri Museveni meets LRA negotiators for the first time in October. The absence of rebel leader Joseph Kony and three top commanders at the talks threatens any conclusive deal. The four fear arrest under warrants from the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has indicted them on charges including murder, rape and abducting and conscripting 25 000 children. The court refuses to withdraw the warrants, despite Uganda's offer of total amnesty. On 12 November UN aid chief Jan Egeland meets Kony on the Sudan border. Egeland had agreed to the meeting on condition that the LRA release some captured women and children, but this does not happen. Kony denies holding anyone against his/her will. A new withdrawal deal is struck in December, when Museveni speaks to LRA deputy leader Vincent Otti. Kony meets his 83-year-old mother, Nora Anek Oting, for the first time in 17 years (9 December). She reportedly advises him to talk to Museveni directly. Kony says he is "overwhelmed by the government's generosity" in facilitating the meeting. The deadline for rebel troops to withdraw is extended to 28 February (18 December).

The US-based Population Reference Bureau says Uganda is the fastest-growing country in the world. The 27.7 million population is expected to reach 56 million by 2025. A typical Ugandan woman gives birth to seven children.

Kenya

The murder trial of landowner Tom Cholmondeley, 38, sole heir of the Fifth Baron Delamere, opens amid chaotic scenes in Nairobi (26 September 2006). He is accused of killing a trespasser, Robert Njoya, on his land. He admits the shooting but says he fired his hunting rifle at the poacher's dogs. It is the second time Cholmondeley has been accused of a killing. The first charge was dropped.

The government is under international pressure to track down a Hutu businessman said to have financed the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The International Criminal Tribunal claims Felicien Kabuga moves in and out of Kenya freely, bribing officials to protect him (28 September). But the government says it does not know where he is. Kabuga is accused of paying for machetes, food and other equipment used by Hutus during the massacres, and of giving money to the notorious Mille Collines radio station, which incited the deaths of some 800 000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Kenya's anti-corruption commission says four former cabinet ministers should be investigated for their alleged role in a £150 million graft scandal (2 October). Two serving ministers have accused John Githongo, the commission's former chief now living in the UK, of being a sell-out in the pay of donors. Githongo left Kenya in 2005 saying he had been threatened because of his investigations into corruption. The 'Anglo-Leasing' affair involved contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars being awarded to fictitious firms. Two ministers resigned after being accused of involvement.

Conservationists say Lake Nakuru is in danger of losing its famous pink shores because of environmental degradation and pollution (4 October). Its flocks of flamingo attract thousands of tourists to the National Park in the Rift Valley, but experts believe the lake is drying up.

Veterans of the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s demand an apology and compensation from the UK for the beating, starvation and torture they say they suffered fighting colonial rule 50 years ago. Their lawyer says (11 October) he has filed an official request with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. So far a handful of claimants are demanding an average of £42 000 each. If they succeed, up to 1000 others could come forward. The UK has four months to reply to the demands. It argues that it handed over all responsibilities to the independent Kenyan government in 1963. Some historians say 25 000 people died in the uprising, mostly Mau Mau suspects or civilians linked to them. About 1000 were hanged.

An ally of ex-president Daniel arap Moi is named the chairman of Kanu, the former ruling party (29 November). Nicholas Biwott becomes the official opposition leader after a split in the party. His faction opposes a decision to join the Orange Democratic Movement, a broad-based political alliance, ahead of 2007 presidential elections. The ousted leader Uhuru Kenyatta, son of founding president Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, refuses to accept the government's decision to recognize the breakaway faction. His supporters hold a rally in Nairobi (5 December), where they clash with police.

After criticism at home and abroad, President Mwai Kibaki rejects a 60% salary increase supported by parliament that would have taken his monthly pay to more than £22 000 (14 December). Kibaki says the country has "other priority projects in need of urgent funding".

Tanzania

In a major restructuring, President Jakaya Kikwete appoints 46 new district commissioners and moves or retires many others. Dar es Salaam regional commissioner Yusuf Makamba becomes the new secretary-general of the ruling Chama cha Mapinduzi party (25 June 2006). In his first months in office Kikwete stops the privatization of the Tanzanian Port Authority, becomes the first head of state to visit the prisons of Dar es Salaam and travels the country speaking to his citizens. At a dinner hosted by Robert Mugabe in Bulawayo, Kikwete supports Zimbabwe's land reform policy and praises his firm anti-neocolonialism stand.

More than 40 000 market traders in Dar es Salaam are relocated to the remote Kigogo area (18 October). The government says they are there illegally and preventing sewage and clean water pipes being installed, and hindering traffic.

Zanzibar bans the import and production of plastic bags to protect its tourism industry and the environment (10 November). It estimates that 200 tonnes of bags are shipped through its port every month.

Mozambique

In South Africa Graca Machel, now married to Nelson Mandela, lays a wreath on the site where her first husband, Samora, the founding president of Mozambique, died with 34 others in a plane crash 20 years ago (19 October 2006). It was thought to be an assassination plot by the South African apartheid regime—although this has never been proved. South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki and Mozambiquan President Armando Guebuza are there. Guebuza repeats a commitment to discover

the truth about the incident. In his newsletter Mbeki calls Machel a “towering giant of the African Revolution”. South Africa is conducting a third investigation into the crash.

The 400-mile Sena railway linking the Beira port with the interior, closed for 20 years, is finally cleared of mines (18 October). Resources such as gold, copper, diamonds and coal will now be accessible. The USA invested £6 million in the two-year project.

Seychelles

Opposition leader Wavel Ramkalawan is one of dozens of people injured when security forces clash with protesters outside parliament in Victoria (4 October 2006). Witnesses say trouble began after a bill restricting private radio station ownership was passed, ending the opposition National Party’s hopes of opening its own station. The unrest comes two months after Ramkalawan, an Anglican priest, was defeated in presidential elections by James Michel of the Seychelles People’s Progressive Front.

Malawi

Opposition MP Lucius Banda, a former musician, wins an appeal against a 21-month jail sentence for faking a school certificate to allow him to run for parliament (7 November 2006). The judge declared the sentence excessive. Banda was arrested in 2005 shortly after proposing a motion to impeach President Bingu wa Mutharika. Banda, popularly known as the Soldier of the Poor, said: “He wanted to break me but I am a survivor”.

Controversy (and the media) descends in October when Madonna adopts a young boy. Some human rights groups oppose the adoption of David Banda and promise to challenge it in court.

Zambia

President Levy Mwanawasa of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy wins a second term in office with 43% of the vote (28 September 2006). Opposition leader Michael Sata (Patriotic Front), second with 29%, accuses the government of electoral fraud but accepts the result. During the campaign, Sata praised the policies of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Haikande Hichilima of the five-month-old United Democratic Alliance, a coalition of three parties, wins 25%. After peaceful campaigning and voting, the Patriotic Front clashes with police in Lusaka while waiting for the results. Commonwealth observers, led by Paul Berenger, former prime minister of Mauritius, say the outcome largely reflects the will of the people, and congratulates political leaders for committing themselves to peace.

Sata is arrested on 5 December for allegedly making a false declaration of assets before the election, but the charges are withdrawn on 14 December.

The first discoveries of oil and gas reserves are announced (October 23). They were found in western Zambia near the border with Angola, a major oil exporter. Mwanawasa says tests in Germany have confirmed that samples from 12 sites contain oil. The government extends the search for oil to other parts of the country.

The corruption case against former president Frederick Chiluba experiences further delays when the court rules he is too ill to stand trial (17 November). The state is asked to release his passport so he can go to South Africa for a heart transplant. Chiluba, who ruled Zambia for 10 years until 2001, denies allegations of stealing public funds while in office. In October charges are brought against his wife, Regina, for using “unlawfully obtained” money to buy five houses and four cars.

Zimbabwe

Harare shops run short of bread after manufacturers are arrested in September 2006 for overcharging. Two bakers are sentenced to four months in jail (1 December). The government controls prices of bread and other staples, but bakers say the official prices do not cover production costs. This comes as the country’s main internet connection is shut for 10 days because of unpaid debts. The reserve bank bails out telephone operator TelOne, which owed £350 000, and the link is restored (26 September). In December authorities stop issuing new passports because they cannot afford to import the necessary special paper. Would-be travellers are told to wait until March. Zimbabwe’s annual inflation is 1200%—the highest in the world.

Police suppress an anti-government protest in Harare (13 September). Fifty demonstrators, including leaders of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, are arrested. Two days later 12 unionists are transferred from prison to hospital, claiming they were tortured. ZCTU secretary-general Wellington Chibebe says he was beaten unconscious.

The UK announces £20 million to fight AIDS in Zimbabwe (12 October). Part will go to a project training hairdressers to reduce infection by offering counselling and condoms to their clients.

The government takes out a four-page newspaper advert, offering compensation to more than 1000 white farmers whose property was seized under the so-called land reform programme (15 November). Secretary of Lands Ngoni Masoka asks former farmers to contact the ministry “as a matter of urgency in connection with their compensation”. Many former landowners have since left the country.

Zimbabwe says it will not extradite Mengistu Haile Mariam after the former Ethiopian ruler is found guilty of genocide in Addis Ababa during a trial *in absentia* (12 December). Mengistu was given asylum after being ousted from power in 1991.

The ruling Zanu-PF resolves to postpone the next presidential election from 2008 to 2010 (16 December), extending the 26-year rule of President Robert Mugabe. Insiders say the party is deeply divided over who should succeed the 82-year-old.

An average of about 265 Zimbabweans fleeing into South Africa are deported every day. Many slip back again, joining an estimated 1.2 million now living in South Africa.

South Africa

Corruption charges against former deputy president Jacob Zuma are dismissed (20 September 2006), boosting his bid to become president in 2009. A high court judge says the prosecution failed to follow proper guidelines, but leaves open the possibility of charges being refiled. The ruling is a significant political victory for

Zuma, whose rivalry with President Thabo Mbeki has divided the ruling African National Congress. Zuma, 64, was fired as deputy president in 2005 after his financial adviser, Schabir Shaik, was found guilty of fraud. The judge ruled that there was a “mutually beneficial symbiosis” between Zuma and Shaik. Zuma has denied any wrongdoing. Shaik’s appeal against his 15-year sentence is rejected (6 November). The ANC will elect a new leader in December 2007, who will almost certainly become president.

After a decade of intense criticism of its AIDS policies, the government changes tack by promising to step up the fight against the epidemic and improve treatment for the estimated five million infected. In the past Mbeki has questioned the link between HIV and AIDS and Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang has said nutrition, especially garlic and beetroot, is more effective than anti-retroviral drugs. Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka now takes over the leadership of AIDS policies. The Treatment Action Campaign, one of the government’s fiercest critics, welcomes the new commitment. A five-year plan to combat HIV is announced on 1 December, World AIDS Day.

The National Assembly approves a sweeping anti-mercenary law (29 August) that could criminalize thousands of citizens working in war zones. If passed by the upper house, the law would mean 800 South Africans in the British army giving up their careers or surrendering citizenship. Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota says the government has the right to stop its citizens fighting in wars it does not support—which many take as a reference to the invasion of Iraq.

An inquiry is launched into the 1981 disappearance of Mbeki’s son Kwanda (12 September), thought to have been killed by apartheid agents. In a rare personal comment Mbeki points out that the disappearances of his son, brother and cousin were among 477 left unsolved by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Mbeki was speaking on the nature of forgiveness, following news that former apartheid minister Adriaan Vlok washed the feet of Rev Frank Chikane, a man he once ordered killed who is now director-general in Mbeki’s office.

Fourteen current and former MPs, mostly ANC, plead guilty to fraud in one of the biggest corruption scandals since the end of apartheid (16 October). They admit hiring expensive cars and booking into luxury hotels with state funds. The admission means they escape jail, receiving fines or suspended prison sentences.

South Africa wins a two-year seat on the UN Security Council (16 October). Dumisani Kumalo will take up the post.

Finance Minister Trevor Manuel announces a £1 million budget to host the 2012 Football World Cup (25 October). Most will be spent on building new stadiums and refurbishing existing ones. South Africa hopes to defy critics who say it does not have the infrastructure to host the event.

American-born geologist Cynthia Carroll, 49, president of Alcan’s primary metals division, becomes chief executive of Anglo-American, third largest mining group in the world (25 October). She is the first non-South African to hold the post and the first woman.

Nobel literature prizewinner Nadine Gordimer, 83, is robbed in her Johannesburg home (26 October). Four armed men lock her up with her housekeeper and steal money and jewellery. She later expresses sympathy for the robbers, saying young South Africans need more job opportunities to save them from a life of crime.

Johannesburg International airport, formerly known as Jan Smuts airport, is renamed O. R. Tambo airport in honour of Oliver Tambo, who led the ANC in exile (27 October).

Former apartheid leader P. W. Botha dies aged 90 (30 October). There is little sympathy in South Africa or around the world for the man who presided over some of the harshest of apartheid's atrocities, as prime minister from 1978 to 1984 (and president from 1984 to 1989), and who never delivered the reforms he promised. Flags are flown at half-mast and Mbeki attends the funeral.

The ANC backs down on a plan to remove power from the mayor of Cape Town, Helen Zille, the only non-ANC mayor in the country (31 October). Ministers had threatened to restructure the council, giving Zille little more than ceremonial powers, while leaving mayoral responsibilities in other cities intact. Zille belongs to the opposition Democratic Alliance.

South Africa legalizes same-sex weddings, the first African country to do so (14 November).

ANC chief whip Mbulelo Goniwe is sacked after a party disciplinary committee finds him guilty of sexually harassing a 21-year-old intern (14 December). He is barred from public office for three years.

Botswana

The presidents of Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe sign a £35 million deal to build a bridge linking the three countries across the Zambezi River (29 August 2006).

Kalahari Bushmen win a long-running battle against the government for the right to live on their ancestral land (13 December). The high court rules that the state acted illegally by evicting them from the game reserve, and should have given them licences to hunt. San leader Roy Sesana celebrates victory, saying: "My ancestors need my presence...they are waiting for me". More than 1000 Bushmen were evicted from the reserve when their water supplies were cut off in 2002. The government says it will abide by the ruling.

Lesotho

The Lesotho Promise, a 603-carat diamond found in the Letseng mine on 22 August 2006, is sold in Antwerp for £6.2 million to the South African Diamond Corporation (9 October). The Letseng mine is jointly owned by the Gem Diamond Mining Company of Africa and the government.

The kingdom marks the 40th anniversary of independence from the UK (3 October) by changing its flag to a more peaceful image. A traditional cone-shaped hat on the blue, white and green flag replaces the military emblem of a shield, spear and knobkerrie.

Namibia

South African bank Old Mutual is to sell £22.6 million-worth of assets to black Namibians in the country's largest economic empowerment deal. Insurance and

banking shares will be transferred to 250 000 employees, business consortia, women's organizations and church groups.

Africa

Leaders from 48 out of Africa's 53 countries meet in Beijing for a forum on Africa – China cooperation (4–5 November), signing deals worth £2.8 billion and pledging to boost trade and development between them. President Hu Jintao promises to double aid to Africa by 2009, as China seeks new sources of raw materials for its booming economy. In December South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki warns Africans against falling into a "colonial relationship" with China and says relations must be on an equal footing.

Environmentalists say Africa faces a particular threat from climate change. The UN says widespread coastal flooding, loss of animal habitat and lower cereal yields are all likely in coming decades. "Africa has made the lowest contribution to climate change [but] is the least prepared to cope with the consequences... and has the most to lose", says Achim Steiner, executive director of the UN Environment Programme (9 November). A UN climate change summit in Nairobi ends without agreement on mandatory cuts of greenhouse emissions or a firm timetable for negotiating such limits (17 November).

At the Great Lakes summit in Nairobi, leaders of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania sign a £1 billion security and development pact to stop violence in the region (14 December). It includes measures to disarm rebel groups, prevent arms trafficking and help refugees.

Pakistan

On an official visit to Washington in September 2006 President Pervez Musharraf says the USA threatened to bomb his country "back to the Stone Age" after 11 September 2001 if he did not cooperate with the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. In a television interview Musharraf says the threat came from Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who later claims to have been misunderstood. President George Bush sidesteps the row and praises Musharraf as "a staunch ally in the war against terror"—at the same time as a document is leaked in the UK claiming Pakistani intelligence services are backing the Taliban. The report, written by a Ministry of Defence think-tank, says: "Indirectly Pakistan, through [the intelligence agency] ISI, has been supporting terrorism and extremism, whether in London on 7/7 or in Afghanistan or Iraq". The UK government distances itself from the report, describing it as "academic research notes".

Back in Washington Bush hosts a meal between Musharraf and the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, at the White House (27 September). The two disagree about many things, most recently Pakistan's truce with militants in tribal areas along the Afghan border. Karzai accuses Musharraf of giving the Taliban sanctuary; the general claims he is being made a scapegoat for the weakness of Afghan authorities. The next day the US military says attacks along Afghanistan's southeastern border have more than doubled since the deal came into effect on 5 September.

On 30 October the Pakistan army attacks an Islamic school it claims is a training camp for terrorists. Helicopters fire missiles into the *madrassa* in the Bajaur tribal region, killing 82 people. Residents say many of the dead were pupils, but officials insist they were all fighters. Several thousand people march through Bajaur's main town, Khar, shouting: "Death to Musharraf" and "Death to Bush". Jamaat Islami, a hardline but influential Islamist party, condemns the attacks as "brutal and barbaric".

The raids interrupt the five-day visit of the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall (31 October). The royal couple cancel a planned trip to Peshawar because of security fears. They visit Islamabad and areas hit by the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir. During the trip the Prince takes up the case of Mirza Tahir Hussain, a Briton from Yorkshire sentenced to death in Pakistan, with Musharraf. On 17 November Hussain is released and returned to the UK.

On 8 November a suicide bomber attacks a Pakistani military camp in Dargai, killing 42 soldiers. The attacks are blamed on extremists seeking revenge for the *madrassa* raid.

Earlier (August 26) security forces kill Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, 79, nationalist leader and former chief minister in Baluchistan, and 60 others in his cave hideout 150 miles from Quetta. Days of rioting in Karachi and elsewhere follow.

Parliament passes a motion condemning Pope Benedict after he cites a medieval text (15 September) describing the Prophet Muhammad's contribution to religion as "evil and inhuman". The remarks anger Muslims around the world, with leaders accusing the pontiff of falling into "the trap of bigots and racists". Protesters burn effigies of him. Pope Benedict apologizes for causing offence.

Former prime ministers (and bitter rivals) Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif say they will join forces to oppose Musharraf in 2007 elections (20 October). Musharraf, who ousted Sharif in 1999 in a military coup, says neither politician will be allowed back into the country. Bhutto, who heads the Pakistan People's Party, and Sharif, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League, have met three times during 2006.

Former president Ghulam Ishaq Khan dies aged 91 on 27 October. He came to power in 1988 after military ruler Zia ul-Haq was killed in a plane crash. Five years later Khan resigned during a political crisis sparked when he dismissed the Sharif government, which was restored by the courts.

In North West Frontier Province, 17 people are killed in fighting between Sunni and Shia Muslims (6 October) over ownership of the shrine to 18th century figure Syed Amir Anwar Shah in Orakzai tribal region.

The senate approves a bill allowing rape cases to be tried in civil courts, despite opposition from Islamist MPs (23 November). In the past, rapes cases were tried under *sharia* law, which requires women to produce four witnesses to the assault. The new bill, which needs to be approved by the president, also drops the death penalty for sex outside marriage.

China's President Hu meets Musharraf in Lahore (24 November) and signs a number of defence and trade deals. China thanks Pakistan for its "valuable support on issues such as Taiwan, Tibet and human rights". The deals could triple bilateral trade within five years, to £7.7 billion.

A court rules that the schoolgirl who ran away from Scotland should return to live with her mother (29 November). Misbah Rana, also known as Molly

Campbell, says she wants to stay in Pakistan with her father, who promises to appeal.

Terrorist charges against Rashid Rauf, a Briton suspected of being a ringleader in the alleged plot to blow up transatlantic airliners this summer, are dropped (13 December). Criminal charges against him, including claims of forgery and possessing explosives, remain. Rauf's arrest in Pakistan in August was described as the trigger for a major security alert at London airports. UK officials say the ruling does not affect an extradition request for Rauf, relating to a separate incident in 2002.

A fire at a wedding in Jhok Ultra kills 22 women and children, including the bride (17 December). More than 100 women and children were in the tent for female guests when an electrical circuit set fire to the canvass, causing a stampede.

The government gives permission for the import of 300 black cabs. Later London Taxis International will build an assembly plant in Karachi and produce up to 4000 cabs in Pakistan each year.

Pakistan becomes the first country to forfeit a cricket Test after a row over ball tampering during the fourth Test against England at London's Oval in August. The umpires penalize Pakistan five runs for alleged ball tampering, but the team refuses to accept the verdict and stays in the dressing room after tea. The match is awarded to England, who win the series 3-0. The Pakistani Cricket Board complains and umpire Darrell Hair is sacked in November from the panel of international umpires.

India

Terror attacks continue around the country with alarming regularity. The most devastating strike is in Malegaon in Maharashtra, where 37 people are killed when three bombs explode in a Muslim graveyard on 8 September 2006 as worshippers leave afternoon prayers. The city, which is 75% Muslim, has a history of religious clashes. Violence also escalates in Assam after the collapse of talks between the rebel United Liberation Front of Assam and the federal government in September. The worst incident in the state occurs in Guwahati on 5 November, when a series of explosions kill 17 people. In West Bengal, at least 12 die in two blasts on a passenger train on 20 November. Police suspect separatist groups. In Manipur, a bomb attack at a Hindu temple on 16 August kills five people. On 2 December 14 policemen die in a landmine ambush near Bokaro in Jharkhand state. Maoist rebels are fighting for a communist state in the region.

Moves to ease discrimination against low-caste Indians, the former 'untouchables' now known as Dalits, continue to cause widespread controversy. Higher caste Indians take to the streets, saying affirmative action quotas will "lower standards", and some Dalit activists criticize the measures for not going far enough. Hundreds of thousands of Dalits gather in Mumbai on 6 December 2006, the 50th anniversary of the death of their leader, Bhim Rao Ambedkar, to call for equal rights. A week later parliament approves a bill to increase the number of places reserved for Dalits in all state higher-education facilities to 27%, leading to a hunger strike among doctors in Delhi. On 19 October the supreme court upholds a decision to set quotas for state job promotions—the subject of massive protests. The government also proposes

offering £580 to higher-caste Hindus marrying those from the lowest castes. In October thousands of Dalits convert to Buddhism or Christianity in mass ceremonies in Nagpur to escape the injustices of the caste system.

Monsoon floods across southern and western India in August kill 300 people and leave four million homeless. Nearly 90% of gem-cutting centre Surat, Gujarat, is submerged and diamonds worth millions are washed away.

In September British Conservative leader David Cameron arrives on a four-day trip. His stay is overshadowed when a minibus carrying aides and journalists knocks down an elderly woman in Mumbai, causing life-threatening injuries (5 September). She spends a month in hospital.

Fifty-four miners die in a coalmine explosion in Jharkhand state (6 September). Angry relatives criticize the state-owned mine for delayed rescue operations, which were hampered by poisonous gases.

The country's longest trial ends in Mumbai (13 September). Four members of one family are convicted of the 1993 bombings that killed 257. The case, against 123 men and women, began in 1995 and heard 686 witnesses.

More than 100 influential Indians call for the repeal of a "colonial-era" law making homosexuality a crime (16 September). In an open letter the signatories, including Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, Booker prizewinner Arundhati Roy and author Vikram Seth, say the law has been used to persecute sexual minorities and perpetuates Victorian-era bigotry.

Former French-ruled Pondicherry is renamed Puducherry (20 September). The territory was merged with India in 1963, 16 years after independence. In November the southern city of Bangalore, Karnataka state, changes its name to Bengaluru. The state government vows to enforce a 1994 language policy banning English classes in favour of the local language Kannada.

In Kerala a court lifts the ban on the sale of Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Co (22 September). The high court also unseats an MP by ruling that he broke the law while campaigning (1 November). P. C. Thomas loses out to the second placed candidate, despite winning the Muvattupuzha constituency by 529 votes in 2004. The court says Thomas, a Roman Catholic, should not have pictured Pope John Paul II on his election material. He is to appeal.

A corruption inquiry is launched against former defence minister George Fernandes (10 October). Fernandes is said to have approved the purchase of anti-missile defence systems from Israel in 2000 after the leader of his Samata party, Jaya Jaitley, received £240 000 in bribes. He denies the allegations. Fernandes resigned as defence minister in March 2001 after secret footage emerged of politicians, army officers and bureaucrats allegedly accepting bribes from reporters posing as arms traders.

Indian author Kiran Desai, 35, wins the £50 000 Man Booker prize for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (10 October). In earlier years her mother Anita was shortlisted three times for the Booker.

Defence Minister and veteran congress party politician Pranab Mukherjee, 70, becomes foreign minister (24 October). Mukherjee, who has close ties with the Gandhi family, takes over after nearly a year in which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has doubled up as foreign minister since Natwar Singh was removed over allegations of involvement in Iraq's oil-for-food scandal.

A severe outbreak of dengue fever, for which there is no vaccine, infects 5000 people in October, including members of the prime minister's family.

UK High Commissioner Sir Michael Arthur reopens Nicholson cemetery in Delhi in October after a two-year renovation. The burial ground, named after the brigadier-general who led the British force retaking the Mughal city in 1857, has long been overrun by monkeys and litter. Author William Dalrymple, supporting the controversial renovation, says Nicholson was the ultimate racial psychopath with a passion that horrified even the most bloodthirsty British.

Chinese President Hu Jintao visits Delhi for talks with Singh (20–23 November). The countries pledge to double trade to £21 billion a year by 2010 and keep trying to resolve long-running border disputes. Indian police ban an exiled Tibetan activist, Tenzin Tsundue, from leaving his Dharamasala base during the trip to stop him organizing anti-Chinese protests.

The world's largest oil multinationals, including BP, Shell and ExxonMobil, bid for the rights to explore India's continental shelf. More than 60 companies are competing for 55 blocks, the largest such auction in India. Recent finds, notably Cairn Energy's billion-barrel Mangala discovery, have ensured high interest. Malaysian state oil company Petronas becomes the biggest investor in Cairn with £429 million (23 November).

An Indian version of the reality television show 'Big Brother' makes its debut in November.

The US Congress approves a nuclear energy deal with India following an agreement between George Bush and Singh earlier in 2006 (8 December). Under the deal India will get access to nuclear technology and fuel in return for opening its civilian nuclear facilities for inspection. Weapons sites will remain closed.

A rogue elephant, named Osama bin Laden, is shot dead in Assam (17 December) after trampling 14 people to death in six months.

India and Pakistan

The countries' leaders meet at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Cuba in September 2006 and agree to resume peace talks, on hold since explosions in Mumbai in July killed 186 people. India linked Pakistan's ISI to the blasts. The resulting negotiations take place in Delhi from 14 to 16 November between Foreign Secretary Riaz Mohammad Khan and his Indian counterpart, Shivshankar Menon. The pair agree to set up a joint panel to share information to fight terrorism, and to discuss ways to limit the risk of nuclear conflict. Pakistan promises to act against militants if India provides proof of their involvement in the bombings. India has arrested 16 people in connection with the blasts; seven claim the police forced them to make false confessions. A special court is set up to speed their trial. Thirty people are charged (30 November), including Pakisani Azam Cheema—the alleged mastermind. At least half of the suspects are from Pakistan.

Police in Mysore arrest two suspected Pakistan-based militants (27 October), said to be planning attacks on Mysore and Bangalore. The men are stopped by a police patrol outside the city. Police say guns, a satellite phone and a laptop were seized and that information in the laptop indicates they are members of the separatist group al-Badr.

On 6 December Musharraf boosts peace hopes by saying Pakistan is prepared to give up its claim on Kashmir if India agrees to withdraw troops and support self-governance for Kashmiris. The response in India is mixed, with a government official saying it does “not want to remain in conflict” with Pakistan.

Bangladesh

Conflict over elections due in January 2007 leads to months of political uncertainty and violence. Street demonstrations led by the opposition Awami League secure the temporary resignation of the chief election commissioner, M. A. Aziz, on 21 November. The 14-party opposition alliance accuses Aziz of favouring the outgoing government, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and putting millions of ‘ghost voters’ on the electoral roll. Under Bangladesh’s constitution, which establishes a quarantine period between administrations, the BNP prime minister, Khaleda Zia, should hand over to K. M. Hassan, the last chief justice to retire, in October. But the opposition alliance objects to Hassan, who is a former BNP member. To try to defuse the crisis, President Iajuddin Ahmed takes over as temporary head of government on 29 October. Still the protests continue, culminating in a four-day national blockade in November. Aziz’s decision to stand aside for three months ends the blockade, but demonstrations resume in December with demands for a new voter list and other electoral reforms. The deployment of troops to quell the protests (9 December) leads to the resignation of four members of Ahmed’s interim cabinet (11 December). The election is delayed to 23 January, two days before the caretaker government’s mandate expires.

Bangladeshi Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank are jointly awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize on 13 October. Yunus founded the bank, one of the pioneers of micro-credit lending schemes for poor people, especially women. He says he will use the £730 000 prize to “find more innovative ways” to help the poor launch businesses.

After five years at the top of the table Bangladesh is replaced by Haiti as the world’s most corrupt country, according to the watchdog Transparency International (6 November). It remains in second place.

An investigation into the garment trade finds that workers, generally women, earn as little as 5p an hour making cheap clothes for UK high street stores such as Tesco, Asda and Primark (7 December). The organization War on Want says women earn about £8 a month (a third of the minimum wage), despite working long hours in extremely poor conditions.

Human Rights Watch accuses the crime-fighting force of killing more than 350 suspects in custody (14 December). The Rapid Action Battalion, which draws members from the police and military, was set up by the BNP government in 2004 to tackle rising crime. Human rights lawyers have expressed concerns about its tactics, said to include torture, in the past.

Sri Lanka

Fighting between Tamil Tiger rebels and the government escalates, with the worst clashes since the 2002 ceasefire starting in the northeast in August 2006. Hundreds of

civilians are killed and tens of thousands are forced to flee their homes, according to the UN. Seventeen French charity workers are among the dead. The military denies claims by truce monitors that it is responsible for killing the Action Against Hunger employees.

Twelve men are arrested and charged in the USA with trying to buy arms for the Tamil Tigers and trying to bribe government officials to have the group's name removed from a list of terrorist organizations, after an FBI sting operation in August.

Suicide bombs, reprisals, attacks and counter-excursions are rife. The two sides meet for talks for the first time in eight months in Geneva on 28 October, but the negotiations end in failure after two days. No date is set for a new meeting.

A pro-Tamil Tiger MP, Nadarajah Raviraj, dies after being shot in Colombo (10 November). His supporters blame the government, who deny the claims. His killing comes after another former Tamil MP, Sinnathamby Sivamaharajah, is shot dead on 20 August. Both were members of the Tamil National Alliance. Thousands march in Colombo on 13 November over Raviraj's assassination. The day before he died the MP took part in a protest against the deaths of civilians from military shelling in the east.

The country's main foreign donors, Norway, Japan, the USA and the EU, condemn ceasefire violations by both government and Tamil Tiger rebels. In a statement after a meeting in Washington (November 21), the countries criticize the rebels for initiating hostilities from populated areas and the government for firing back and killing civilians.

The cabinet introduces sweeping emergency laws (6 December), giving security forces greater power to search, arrest and question suspected rebels. It says 3400 people have been killed in the conflict since late 2005.

The Tamil's top negotiator, Anton Balasingham, dies of cancer in London aged 68 (14 December).

Two men who pushed a woman into the sea during the 2004 tsunami after stealing a gold chain from around her neck are sentenced to hang (14 December). The actions of Ruwan Mapalagama and Ajith Kumar were caught on video, and Dineti Dishika's body was found when the water receded.

Maldives

Opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed is released after a year under house arrest (20 September 2006). The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) leader, an outspoken critic of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's government, was charged with terrorism and sedition after allegedly calling for the president's forced removal in a speech in July 2005.

An MDP rally planned for 10 November in Male is cancelled at the last minute. The party says it has faced a sustained campaign of harassment from the government, with more than 100 of its activists arrested and some tortured. The government says the protest would have been illegal, and accuses the MDP of trying to stage a coup.

The Commonwealth Secretariat carries out a programme of human rights training for police instructors and legal officers in Male (4–8 November).

Amnesty International criticizes the government for taking “repressive measures” against its opponents (29 November).

Malaysia

The son of the Islamic opposition party’s spiritual leader is one of several alleged militants to be released under an amnesty on 18 October, ahead of Eid. Nik Adli Nik Aziz has been held without charge for more than five years. He is the son of Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the chief minister of Kelantan state and spiritual head of the conservative Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party.

China and Malaysia sign a gas deal (31 October) said to be worth £12.5 billion. Under the 25-year agreement the state-owned oil company Petronas will supply gas to the Chinese firm Shanghai LNG.

Malaysia’s longest serving prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, has a mild heart attack on 9 November. He retired in 2003, to be succeeded by his protégé, Abdullah Badawi. Recently, however, Mahathir has accused his successor of running a “police state” and of widespread corruption and economic mismanagement. Mahathir, 81, still has considerable influence on domestic politics and business affairs.

Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin is sworn in as the next king (13 December). The new monarch, 44, and his deputy, Tuanku Abdul Halim, will serve five-year terms. The Sultan will be the 13th king since Malaysia gained independence from the UK in 1957. The rulers take turns to ascend the throne, a largely ceremonial role.

Singapore

The annual World Bank/IMF meeting is held in Singapore from 19 September 2006, but the run-up to the event is marred by controversy when authorities ban all protests and then bar several anti-globalization activists. The World Bank chief Paul Wolfowitz says he is “very displeased” with the move, which breaks an earlier agreement. Singapore later backtracks and allows all but five of the campaigners to attend. Protests are permitted, but only in designated indoor areas. Demonstrators are given special, soft placards to wave.

Malaysian company Genting International wins a £1.6 billion contract to operate Singapore’s second casino, beating Bahamas-based Lertzner and a Las Vegas consortium (8 December).

Hong Kong

A millionaire wins a £4.24 million lawsuit against her former salsa teachers (6 October 2006), ending a high-profile courtroom drama. The high court rules that Mimi Monica Wong, 61, the head of HSBC’s Asian private banking business, should be reimbursed for lessons she cancelled after her teacher Mirko Saccani called her a “lazy cow” and threatened to throw her “out of the f***ing window”. Wong told the court she suffered an emotional breakdown after repeated insults, which Saccani and his wife Gaynor Fairweather said were intended to motivate her.

Hong Kong's first budget airline, Oasis, takes off on its maiden flight on 26 October—a day behind schedule. Oasis promises low-cost long-haul flights with in-flight services. An economy class ticket to London costs £112.

HSBC says documents allegedly showing that Augusto Pinochet stashed £85 million in gold at the bank in Hong Kong are forgeries (26 October). An investigation did not uncover any accounts in the name of the former Chilean dictator, who dies on 10 December.

One of the city's foremost cultural landmarks, the Central Piers, closes (11 November). The piers, which served the Star Ferry for 48 years, are being moved further out into the ever-shrinking harbour to make way for highways and shopping malls in the latest stage in a land reclamation programme that has almost halved the distance between Kowloon and Hong Kong island. Residents protest against the plans.

A Chinese court rejects an appeal by a Hong Kong reporter jailed on spying charges (24 November). Ching Cheong, who works for Singapore's *Straits Times*, was jailed on 31 August after being found guilty of spying for Taiwan. Human rights groups have criticized the verdict and called for Ching's release.

The pro-democracy movement claims a measure of success in elections for a committee to decide the territory's next leader (10 December). Results show the democrats, led by Alan Leong, won more than the 100 seats needed to nominate a candidate. Only 5% of the population—those belonging to political, business or professional communities—are allowed to vote for the 427 seats being contested. Donald Tsang, the incumbent backed by China, is expected to easily win re-election in March 2007.

Cyprus

A team of scientists begins excavating mass graves all over Cyprus in November 2006, searching for the remains of some 1500 Greek Cypriots and 500 Turkish Cypriots reported missing in fighting between the two sides in the 1960s and 1970s. The team is made up of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots working alongside international experts—one of the few joint ventures on the divided island.

Turkey's refusal to recognize Cyprus continues to threaten its progress to EU membership. Hopes of getting Cypriot and Turkish officials to meet for peace talks in Helsinki on 4 November are dashed when Turkey refuses to attend.

UK

Metropolitan police say they have uncovered a "major terrorist plot" to blow up 10 transatlantic aeroplanes (10 August). The announcement causes chaos for travellers, with many flights in and out of the UK being cancelled and almost all delayed. Strict restrictions on hand luggage are introduced after reports that the suicide bombers planned to use liquid-based explosives. Metropolitan police Deputy Commissioner Paul Stephenson describes it as "a plot to commit mass murder on an unimaginable scale". MI5 is said to have been monitoring the plotters for more than a year, culminating in raids on houses around the UK and the arrest of 24 suspects. The Pakistani ISI is said to have aided the investigation. Fifteen people are later charged.

Travel disruptions continue for weeks, with some airlines, notably Ryanair, accusing the authorities of overstating the threat. In November British Airways says the terror alert cost it around £100 million.

Simmering tensions between Tony Blair and his chancellor, Gordon Brown, erupt in September. After the resignation of seven junior ministers Blair is forced to announce he will stand down in 2007. He stops short of anointing Brown as his successor. The row continues into the Labour Party conference (23–28 September). There is talk of a leading Blairite (possibly Education Secretary Alan Johnson or Home Secretary John Reid) standing against Brown, but this likelihood diminishes as relations improve over the next few months.

Escalating violence in Iraq increases criticism of the role of the UK in the region. As the number of British casualties grows, Foreign Secretary Margaret Becket announces (22 November) that troops may withdraw from Basra by spring 2007.

A former Russian spy living in exile in London dies after apparently being poisoned (23 November). Traces of radioactive polonium 210 are found on the body of Alexander Litvinenko, an outspoken critic of the Vladimir Putin. Before he dies Litvinenko issues a statement blaming the Russian president for his fate. The investigation strains relations between London and Moscow.

Blair is interviewed by police as part of an ongoing cash-for-honours investigation (14 December). Detectives hope to establish whether loans given to both the Conservative and Labour parties breached funding laws. Lord Levy, Labour's unofficial fundraising chief, is one of three people arrested since April.

Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG)

The group meets in New York (23 September 2006) during the UN meetings. Of the nine foreign ministers, five are represented by deputies. Maltese foreign minister, Michael Frendo, is elected chair. Only one item is on the agenda—Pakistan. The group acknowledges some steps towards promised reform, but reaffirms “that the holding by the same person [Musharraf] of the office of Head of State and Chief of Army Staff is incompatible with the basic principles of democracy and the spirit of the Harare Commonwealth principles”. CMAG repeats the CHOGM 2005 call for the issue to be resolved before the end of the current presidential term in 2007. The current membership is: Malta (chair), Malaysia (vice-chair), Canada, Lesotho, Papua New Guinea, St Lucia, Tanzania, Sri Lanka and UK.

At an extraordinary meeting in London on 8 December, CMAG suspends the Fiji Islands from the Commonwealth after its military coup. The Secretary-General, Don McKinnon, says the group “unanimously and unequivocally condemned the military takeover of Fiji’s democratically elected government”. The islands are banned from all Commonwealth meetings and technical assistance programmes are stopped.

Finance Ministers

The annual meeting, held in Colombo (12–14 September), pushes for efforts to reform the international aid architecture. A panel on system-wide coherence has been established by the UN and it is agreed a group will be set up to decide how best the Commonwealth can influence the debate. Ministers urge key players to revive the

Doha talks, suspended in July, and call for another drive to implement debt write-off under the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative.

Education Ministers

The 16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers is held in Cape Town (10 December 2006). A Teachers Group is launched to address education issues. McKinnon says urgent action is needed to meet Millennium Development Goals. “The clock is ticking. The small print of the second Millennium Development Goal reads that all children must complete a full cycle of primary school by 2015. That means they must be in primary school by the end of 2007”, he says.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

Former Minister William Shija of Tanzania becomes the first African to be Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) (1 January 2007), succeeding Denis Marshall of New Zealand. The 52nd meeting of the CPA takes place in Abuja, Nigeria (1–10 September 2006), where the theme is enhancing the standards of democratic governance and public perceptions of parliament in the Commonwealth.

Somnath Chatterjee, speaker of the Lok Sabha of India, is elected president for the coming year. His parliament hosts the 2007 conference. The new vice-president is Tan Sri Dato’ Seri Di Raja Ramli Ngah Talib, speaker of the lower house. Malaysia will host the 2008 conference.

Commonwealth Business Council (CBC)

Four hundred ministers, industry leaders and economists meet in Johannesburg for the fifth Africa Investment Forum (9–11 October 2006). The series, launched by the CBC, is helping mobilize investment in 11 countries. The CBC convenes 250 UK and Indian business leaders in London (27 June) to step up economic relations between UK and India. The UK is losing the race to invest in India and the CBC decides to readdress the issue. Indian Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath is there.

Around the Commonwealth

South Africa becomes the 46th country to join the Commonwealth Foundation (14 November 2006), which is separate to the Secretariat. Only seven Commonwealth countries do not now belong.

Several meetings are held to improve relations with the EU. EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso meets Don McKinnon in London (16 October) to discuss governance in Africa and EU–Commonwealth cooperation in Pacific development. Ministers from the six Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) regions meet at the secretariat (1–2 November) to try to revitalise the ACP–EU talks.

The fourth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, run by the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver, takes place in Ocho Rios, Jamaica (30 October–3 November). The Virtual University for Small States of the

Commonwealth will become a reality in August 2007, it is announced in Seychelles by Sir John Daniel, president of the Commonwealth of Learning based in Vancouver. The £1.5 million project will help small states produce, adapt and use courses and learning materials difficult for one state to produce alone.

The special envoys who help to further the Secretary-General's Good Offices work in areas of conflict meet in London (16–17 November) to develop strategies for conflict prevention and resolution. They include former prime minister Joe Clark of Canada, former deputy prime minister Musa Hitam of Malaysia and former governor-general Sir Paul Reeves of New Zealand.

A workshop of 20 government officials from Commonwealth countries on combating corruption in infrastructure service delivery is held at Loughborough University, UK (11–15 September).

The 22nd Commonwealth Agricultural Conference takes place in Calgary (13–16 July). On the agenda: scientific advances in cereal production, developments of new markets and farming in Canada and Africa.

Implementation of principles for election observing is discussed at a meeting in the Commonwealth Secretariat (31 May–1 June). Delegates come from the EU, African Union, Organization of American States and the UN Development Programme, as well as from such non-Commonwealth countries as Switzerland, Ireland and Japan.

MacKinnon attends the meeting of Caribbean Community Heads of Government in St Kitts and Nevis (3–5 July), the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Havana (15–17 September) and visits Fiji Islands, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Singapore in November. In December he visits Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

Erin Soros of Canada wins the 2006 Commonwealth Short Story competition for her story 'The Moon, the Cat and the Donkey'. The competition is funded by the Commonwealth Foundation.

The Foundation, with the Seychelles government, holds a conference in Mahe (9–12 October) on climate change—expected to be a major topic at the next CHOGM meeting (Kampala, November 2007).

A workshop on HIV/AIDS education attended by 40 officials and experts is held in Boksburg, South Africa (12–15 September).

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