

Commonwealth Update

JUDITH SOAL

ABSTRACT *A terror attack on a train in India kills 68 people but fails to disrupt peace talks with Pakistan, evidence of the improving relationship between the countries. Elections are postponed in Bangladesh, Fiji's military ruler says he will stay in power until 2010 and China's President Hu tours Africa (again). Australia announces plans to ban traditional light bulbs in favour of more energy efficient ones.*

India

Two bomb blasts on a train travelling from Delhi to Lahore kill 68 people (19 February 2007). The train service, called the Samjhauta (Friendship) Express, was meant to reunite families divided by Indian–Pakistani animosity. Leaders of the two countries condemn the attack, 50 miles from Delhi, which they say is intended to disrupt the peace process between them. After a similar attack on a commuter train in Mumbai in 2006, India angered Pakistan by blaming militants based there—derailing peace talks for several months. This time the responses are much more unified. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf says the leaders “will not allow elements which want to sabotage the ongoing peace process to succeed in their nefarious design”. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh says his country abhors “this heinous terrorist act” and telephones Musharraf to express his condolences, as most of the dead are Pakistani. Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Khurshid Ahmed Kasuri, in Delhi for talks with his Indian counterpart, visits the injured in hospital.

A controversial dam on the Narmada river is completed, 20 years after it began (1 January). Authorities say the £3.5 billion Sardar Sarovar dam, the subject of extended legal disputes and protests, will provide water to the drought-prone regions of Saurashtra and Kutch. Critics, including Booker prize-winning author Arundhati Roy, say it will displace up to 400 000 people and, like similar projects before it, fail to provide the promised benefits.

A rare vulture is bred in captivity for the first time. The oriental white-backed vulture is one of three species of Asian vultures under threat because of the use of the drug diclofenac in cattle. Populations have dropped by 95% in 15 years. Scientists

Correspondence Address: Judith Soal, Email: Judith.Soal@guardian.co.uk

Judith Soal is a journalist who has worked extensively in South Africa and is currently deputy night editor at *The Guardian* in the UK.

say the egg was laid in a breeding centre in Pinjore in November 2006 and hatched in early January.

The Ganges river is flushed with fresh water at the city of Allahabad to improve bathing for the 70 million devotees expected during the Ardh Kumbh festival (3 January). Offerings, waste and sewage have polluted the river over many years.

Six Delhi policemen are dismissed over the murders of 19 young women and children (4 January). Remains of the victims are found in a cellar in a Delhi suburb, and two men arrested. The officers lose their jobs after an investigation finds they ignored repeated reports of missing children. Residents say 40 children have disappeared in the area over the past two years, but that reports were not taken seriously because they were from poor families.

Four days of violence in Assam claim 70 lives (8 January). Police blame the separatist United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) for the attacks on Hindu-speaking migrants. One of those killed is local Congress Party leader, Ajit Deuri. Thousands of Hindu speakers flee the area, and authorities send in extra troops. Talks between ULFA and the government collapsed in 2006.

UK Chancellor Gordon Brown visits India, where he meets Singh, tours schools and announces a £200 million aid package for education (17 January). But his trip is dominated by claims that Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty has been the victim of racist bullying in the UK television show *Big Brother*. "I want Britain to be seen as a country of fairness and tolerance. Anything detracting from this I condemn," he says. Shetty goes on to win the show.

Investment bankers Goldman Sachs say India's economy will surpass the UK's, to be the world's fifth largest, within a decade if current trends continue (24 January). In February the government says it expects the economy to grow by 9.2% in the financial year.

Mumbai-based Tata Steel wins the auction for Anglo-Dutch steelmaker Corus (31 January). The £6.7 million deal makes Tata the world's fifth-biggest steel group. Chief executive Ratan Tata hails the takeover as "a moment of great fulfilment for all in India". Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath says: "It is a two-way street now. Not only India is seeking foreign investment, but Indian companies are emerging investors in other countries."

UK firm Vodafone buys a controlling stake in Indian mobile phone company Hutchison Essar for £5.7 billion (11 February). India has the fastest growing mobile market in the world, with around 6.5 million new subscribers a month.

Pharmaceutical firm Novartis challenges India's patent laws in a case that health charities fear will cut access to generic medicines in developing countries (15 February). The company wants to retain patent rights over the cancer drug Glivec, stopping the manufacture of cheaper copies. The Chennai case could set a legal precedent, making it easier for pharmaceutical firms to extend patents on medications by making minor alterations to the formula.

Parents will be able to leave unwanted babies in cradles strategically placed around the country as part of plans to stop the killing of female infants. Women and Child Development Minister Renuka Chowdry says the children, most of whom are expected to be girls, will be given new homes (18 February).

The Congress Party is defeated in state elections in Punjab and Uttaranchal (27 February). An alliance of the opposition BJP and the Sikh Akali Party wins in

Punjab, and the BJP in Uttaranchal. Analysts say the defeats reflect voter dissatisfaction over high inflation rates and the widening gap between rich and poor. Singh says the results will not affect the functioning of the federal government. "The elections are fought on local issues", he says.

Pakistan

US frustration with President Musharraf's apparent failure to crack down on militants operating from tribal areas near the Afghan border grows. US National Intelligence director John Negroponte tells a Senate committee that al-Qaida leaders are hiding in Waziristan and rebuilding the network's capabilities (12 January 2007). He says terror attacks against the USA are being plotted "from their leaders' secure hideout in Pakistan". Musharraf denies the claims, saying Pakistan has done more than other countries to flush out al-Qaida. Less than a week later the Pakistani military attacks a village in South Waziristan, killing 20 people (16 January). The army says the dead include fighters but locals say they were labourers and children. Analysts believe the attacks were timed to appease the USA.

On 26 January Pakistan makes its first arrest of a senior Taliban commander, Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, said to be one of the few confidants of the organization's leader Mullah Muhammad Omar. The arrest follows an unannounced visit by US Vice-President Dick Cheney, during which he urges Musharraf to do more to stop cross-border raids into Afghanistan. Earlier Musharraf rejects a claim from a captured Taliban that Omar is living in Quetta under the protection of the ISI security service. But Akhund's arrest in Quetta adds weight to suggestions that the city has become a Taliban headquarters.

The Supreme Court orders the government to speed up the search for missing Pakistanis said to have been abducted by the ISI security agency (8 January). Human rights groups say more than 1000 people have disappeared after being detained in the name of the war of terror. In February a human rights activist disappears from jail hours before he is due to be released. Khalid Khawaja was to have been freed after being granted bail by a judge in Rawalpindi, but prison officials are said to have handed him over to intelligence officers.

On February 17 a suicide bomb in a Quetta court kills 17 people, including the judge. Earlier, security guards foil a suspected terror attack at Islamabad's international airport after confronting a group of armed men in the car park (6 February). One of the men dies while trying to throw a grenade.

Further examples of the 'Talibanization' of the tribal areas emerge. In February barbers in Bajaur receive leaflets ordering them to stop shaving men's beards. "This is to inform those people who are in violation of the Prophet's tradition by shaving people's beards that if they don't stop they will be responsible for the consequences", the leaflets say. Several schools in North West Frontier Province close because of fears of bomb attacks. The rumours begin when a school in Mardan is threatened with attacks if all female teachers and students do not wear veils and burkas, authorities say. There are also reports of pro-Taliban militants attacking a video shop in Bannu and destroying stock. On 28 February a cleric who has spoken out against Islamic militants is found beheaded near the town of Jandol, with a note accusing him of being a US spy.

Health workers say extremist clerics are hampering a polio vaccination campaign by telling parents the injections are part of a US plot to sterilize Muslim children (25 January). The World Health Organisation recorded 39 cases of polio in 2006, up from 28 in 2005. The disease is concentrated in North West Frontier Province, where 60% of the refusals are attributed to 'religious reasons'.

A journalist captured in Peshawar on 2 January escapes after 50 days in captivity. Sohail Qalander says he does not know who his kidnappers were, but that he was held near the border with Afghanistan. At least two journalists were killed and more than a dozen kidnapped during 2006.

A Scottish schoolgirl who ran away to join her father in Pakistan is to remain in the country despite a court ruling that she return to her mother. The parents of Molly Campbell, also known as Misbah Rana, agreed that the 12-year-old would live with her father, while her mother will have visiting rights (18 January).

Sectarian violence increases during the festival of Ashura, when Shias mark the death of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussein. On 26 January a suicide bomber in Islamabad kills himself and a hotel security guard. The next day at least 14 people die in a suicide bomb blast during a religious procession in Peshawar. On 29 January a bomber kills himself and two others near a Shia procession in Dera Ismail Khan. In nearby Bannu 11 worshippers are injured during a rocket attack on a mosque. A day later a Shia mosque in Hangu is attacked with mortar and rockets, killing two people. Police impose a curfew and stop further processions.

Six members of the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) are shot dead in the town of Attock (9 February). The party is led by former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, who lives in self-imposed exile. A PPP spokesman says the attack was meant to frighten party officials ahead of an election due in late 2007 or early 2008. Bhutto has promised to contest the election but Musharraf says she will not be allowed to stand.

A bill to improve women's legal rights is tabled in parliament (13 February). The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Bill bans customs that deny women the right to marry, force them to marry or deprive them of property. It also proposes that husbands who charge their wives with infidelity under Islamic law but lose the case face charges of slander.

India and Pakistan

Talks resume after the Delhi train attacks and foreign ministers sign an agreement to reduce the risk of an inadvertent nuclear war (21 February 2007). Pakistan's Kasuri and his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee finalize the deal, which officials say includes confidence-building measures related to each country's nuclear arsenal. In 2005 India and Pakistan agreed to give each other notice of missile tests and in 1985 they signed an accord not to attack each other's nuclear installations. On 23 February the Pakistani military says it has successfully tested a new nuclear-capable missile with a 1250-mile range.

Thousands of Pakistanis attend a rally in Islamabad (19 January) protesting against Musharraf's suggestion that he will drop a claim to the disputed area of Kashmir if India reciprocates and agrees to self-governance in the region. India has so far rejected the proposals. Many of the protesters are relatives of those killed in fighting in Kashmir.

Bangladesh

The opposition Awami League (AL) announces a boycott of parliamentary elections (3 January 2007), due on 22 January. League leader Sheikh Hasina accuses the caretaker government of favouring its rivals the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and says elections cannot be free and fair. Hasina calls a transport blockade, and her supporters take to the streets in their thousands, calling for the vote to be postponed. The violence continues as troops are deployed to prepare for the poll. On 10 January Secretary General Don McKinnon says the Commonwealth will not send an observer group to the elections and calls for a negotiated solution. The UN and EU also suspend their observer missions. The next day President Iajuddin Ahmed declares a state of emergency and steps down as interim leader. He postpones the vote, saying it is “not possible” to hold it on schedule, and promises that the electoral roll will be updated—one of the Awami League’s central demands. Former central bank governor Fakhruddin Ahmed is sworn in as the head of a new interim government.

Ahmed promises to hold elections “as soon as possible” and says he will crack down on corruption and violence. The High Court declares the voters’ lists faulty and says elections cannot be held for at least three months (30 January). A new election commission is appointed, headed by retired bureaucrat A. T. M. Shamsul Huda.

Ex-military ruler Hussein Muhammad Ershad, leader of the country’s third-largest party, becomes eligible to stand in elections after a judge declares he has served sufficient prison time for a corruption conviction (17 January). Ershad, who had been barred from taking part, is greeted by thousands of Jatiya Party supporters outside court.

Prominent politicians from both the BNP and the AL are arrested under emergency laws in February, including several former ministers. There are reports that other senior politicians have gone into hiding to escape arrest. Police say they have detained more than 30 000 people since Ahmed took office.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of the Grameen bank Muhammad Yunus announces plans to form a new political party, Nagarik Shakti (Citizen’s Power) (19 February). Yunus says he is disillusioned with the two main political parties and has had enough of “the politics of disunity and divisions”: “I am now determined with my decision to join politics by floating a new political party which aims to present a fresh democratic culture to the nation”, he says.

Sri Lanka

Fighting between government forces and rebel Tamil Tigers continues. A peace rally in Colombo, due to be addressed by Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim leaders, is abandoned after the intervention of a government minister (9 January 2007). Witnesses say Deputy Labour Minister Mervyn Silva arrived with “about 100 thugs” and encouraged them to beat up people attending a rally by a new anti-war group, the United People’s Movement.

On 19 January the military says it has captured a key town from the rebels, the Tamil stronghold of Vakarai. Thousands of civilians have fled the town, the scene of

heavy fighting. The defence ministry says 45 members of the security forces and 331 rebels have been killed in the battle for Vakarai, which began in October 2006.

The first meeting of the new cabinet is postponed, reportedly because officials cannot find a room big (and secure) enough to accommodate all the dignitaries (31 January). President Mahinda Rajapakse swore in the cabinet on 28 January. It has 53 members for a population of 19.5 million, proportionately one of the largest in the world. The UK cabinet has around 23 members for a population of 60 million. On 9 February Rajapakse sacks three ministers, apparently over a policy disagreement.

The navy says it has recovered more than a million steel ball bearings intended for rebel attacks after destroying two Tamil Tiger boats (16 February). A navy spokesman says they were being smuggled from India to be used in claymore mines.

The US and Italian ambassadors are hurt in a suspected Tamil Tiger attack at an airbase in Batticalo (27 February). Robert Blake and Pio Mariani, who are not seriously injured, were on their way to a development meeting.

Malaysia

More than 100 000 people are evacuated from their homes in Johor state after heavy rains cause a second round of flooding in two months (15 January 2002). Rivers burst their banks and many towns are cut off. Aid workers say relief centres are full and running out of food.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi says he will not bow to pressure from the USA to break an energy development deal with Iran (2 February 2007). Washington has raised concerns about relations between Malaysia and Tehran, but Badawi says he will not let upcoming trade negotiations with the USA affect the £8 billion agreement to develop Iranian gas fields.

Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam sign a deal to protect the rainforest on Borneo, home to several rare species (12 February 2007). The area, known as the Heart of Borneo, is threatened by logging and plantation companies. Environmentalists welcome the move, but say the agreement is short on concrete commitments.

Singapore

Two men are executed for drug smuggling after authorities reject international appeals for clemency (26 January 2007). Iwuchukwu Amara Tochi, 21, of Nigeria, and 35-year-old Okeke Nelson Malachy, who is stateless, are hanged.

Hong Kong

Chief Executive Donald Tsang announces he will seek a second term in office during elections in March (1 February 2007). The leader is chosen by an 800-member election committee loyal to Beijing, which is expected to endorse Tsang. He will be challenged by pro-democracy activist Alan Leong, the first time the post has been contested.

A man is arrested at Hong Kong airport with suitcases full of endangered animals, including a live crocodile, 46 turtles and tortoises, six snakes and 11 flying squirrels

(10 January). He is charged with illegally importing animals and given a £1000 fine and a six-month suspended sentence. Authorities believe the animals were intended for mainland China, for use as food or traditional medicines.

As of 1 February restrictions are placed on pregnant women from the mainland coming to Hong Kong to give birth. More than 12 000 women came to the territory in 2006 to avoid China's one-child policy and benefit from better medical facilities. Hong Kong hospitals impose a quota on appointments and those without appointments are turned back at the border.

Australia

Prime Minister John Howard declares water shortages to be the biggest problem facing the country and announces a £3.9 billion package to tackle the crisis (25 January 2007). He suggests that the federal government will take over management of the Murray–Darling river system, currently run by Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria states, which are controlled by the opposition Labor Party. The four state governments call the proposal “an unacceptable power grab”. Howard's critics say the move is designed to improve his image on the environment ahead of an election expected in the second half of 2007. His ruling coalition is trailing Labor in opinion polls. On 29 January Queensland Premier Peter Beattie says recycled water will be introduced in 2008, despite the unpopularity of the move. A referendum on the issue is scrapped. “We're not getting any rain; we've no choice”, he says.

Howard announces the appointment of a new environment minister (23 January), Malcolm Turnbull, a former merchant banker who tried (and failed) to make Australia a republic in a 1999 referendum. One of Turnbull's first moves is to announce plans to ban traditional light bulbs by 2010 and replace them with energy efficient models (19 February). Fluorescent bulbs use about 20% of the electricity needed by the old incandescent filament bulbs. Mr Turnbull says bulbs that do not comply with energy efficiency targets will be gradually banned from sale.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer says uranium exports to China will begin “within 30 days” (5 January). Australia has 40% of the world's recoverable uranium, and China needs energy for its large population and rising economy. Downer says the uranium will not be used in nuclear weapons programmes.

Howard sparks another row by criticizing US presidential hopeful Barack Obama for saying US troops should withdraw from Iraq in 2008, hours after the Illinois senator officially announces his candidacy (11 February). Mr Howard says in a television interview: “If I were running al-Qaida in Iraq, I would put a circle around March 2008 and be praying... for a victory, not only for Obama but also for the Democrats.”

An Aboriginal tribe wins joint control of New South Wales rainforests after a major land rights claim (2 January). The Githabul people will be allowed to hunt protected native animals, including turtles and anteaters, and tribal chiefs will jointly manage the 2300 square mile forests and national parks. The agreement with the New South Wales state government follows a decade of talks and legal arguments.

A man convicted of murdering British backpacker Peter Falconio in the Australian outback loses an appeal against the sentence (10 January). Bradley

Murdoch was jailed for 28 years in 2005 after being convicted of shooting Mr Falconio and kidnapping and assaulting his girlfriend, Joanne Lees. Murdoch applies for leave to appeal to Australia's highest court.

A treasure trove of fossils found in southern Australia is analysed in the journal *Nature* (25 January). Palaeontologist Gavin Prideaux says the discovery comprises 69 species of mammals, birds and reptiles, including eight new species of kangaroo. The creatures were found in limestone caves under the Nullarbor Plain and date from about 400 000–800 000 years ago. The most impressive find is the first complete skeleton of the marsupial lion, *Thylacaleo carnifex*.

Scientists warn that the Great Barrier Reef could die within decades because of global warming (9 February). A report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says the reef will become “functionally extinct” because rising sea temperatures will kill the animal organisms, leaving a white limestone skeleton—known as coral bleaching.

Alcohol abuse among indigenous Australians claims a life every 38 hours, researchers say (12 February). Suicide is the biggest cause of death among Aboriginal men; for women it is liver cirrhosis or strokes. The National Drug and Research Institute says Aborigines are twice as likely to die from alcohol as their non-indigenous counterparts. Researcher Tanya Chikritzhs believes the problems are societal. “There's so much poverty and unemployment and lack of health services, lack of decent education”, she says.

The Australian cricket team reclaims the Ashes by beating England 5–0 in the series ending in January. But preparations for the World Cup are disturbed (and England's pride somewhat restored) when the visitors win the one-day Commonwealth Bank Trophy in February.

New Zealand

Prime Minister Helen Clark criticizes Japan over a fire on board a whaling ship in Antarctic waters (15 February 2007). She warns of an international backlash against the whaling programme if the *Nisshin Maru*, stranded close to the world's largest colony of Adelie penguins, damages the environment. Clark's attack is prompted by the Japanese refusal of an offer of help from the environmental group Greenpeace. “We have a huge concern for the environment, a pristine environment in the area of Antarctica where New Zealand has a claim”, she says. After 10 days at sea the *Nisshin Maru* restarts its engines and heads home for repairs.

Fishermen catch a record-breaking colossal squid in Antarctic waters south of New Zealand (22 February 2007), the first adult of the species to be landed intact. It weighs about 71 stone and witnesses say if calamari rings were made from it, they would be the size of tractor tyres.

Fiji Islands

After a coup in December 2006 the military ruler announces that he will remain in power until 2010 (20 February 2007). Frank Bainimarama says economic and electoral reforms are necessary before a free and fair vote can be held. In January Bainimarama declares himself interim prime minister and begins appointing his

government, dominated by the military. He restores the presidency he had assumed to Ratu Josefa Iloilo. Former prime minister Laisenia Qarase remains in exile. Bainimarama says the coup was necessary because of the former government's corruption and racism against the ethnic Indian minority. The Council of Chiefs, which represents the indigenous majority, has criticized the take-over, as has the international community. Fiji was suspended from the Commonwealth on 8 December 2006 after the coup, its fourth in 20 years.

Solomon Islands

Tensions with Australia escalate as Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare accuses John Howard's government of offering a reward for his murder. An Australian expat is arrested and charged with plotting to kill Sogavare (29 January 2007), but the charges against Bill Johnson are later dismissed.

On 12 February the government demands a timeframe for the withdrawal of Australian-led peacekeeping troops. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was formed in 2003 after years of ethnic unrest. A few days earlier a Solomons' newspaper publishes a letter from Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer accusing Sogavare of trying to destroy RAMSI. "Before RAMSI, Solomon Islands sovereignty had been seized at the point of a gun, by bands of thugs and criminals", he says, urging islanders to support the mission.

Papua New Guinea

Villagers kill four women accused of using witchcraft to cause a fatal car accident, police say (26 January 2007). The women were apparently forced to confess after being tortured with hot metal rods. Their bodies are found in an old pit. Human rights groups say women, particularly older ones, are often blamed for deaths or unusual illnesses and that prosecutions of the killers are rare.

Tonga

Emergency laws put in place after riots in November 2006 are extended (13 February 2007). Pro-democracy groups defy the laws, which prohibit gatherings of more than four people, by meeting in the capital Nuku'alofa and challenging police to arrest them. Australia and New Zealand offer grants worth nearly £1 million to businesses whose premises were destroyed in the riots.

Canada

Parliament rejects Prime Minister Stephen Harper's attempt to extend controversial anti-terror laws introduced after the 11 September attacks in the USA (28 February 2007). The measures, which allow detention without trial for three days, were introduced for five years and expire on 1 March. Harper, whose ruling Conservative Party has a minority of 125 of 308 parliamentary seats, accuses the opposition Liberals of being soft on terror. A few days earlier the Supreme Court overturns a law allowing foreign-born terror suspects to be detained indefinitely or deported.

The government apologizes (26 January) to a terror suspect deported to Syria by the USA, partly on the basis of Canadian intelligence. Harper announces a £4.5 million compensation package to Maher Arar, a victim of the USA's extraordinary rendition practice. A Canadian inquiry cleared Arar of terror links and found he had been tortured in Syria.

French Socialist presidential candidate Segolène Royal causes controversy (22 January) by calling for "sovereignty and liberty" for Quebec after meeting the leader of the pro-independence Parti Québécois, Andre Boisclair, in Paris. Harper accuses her of meddling in domestic politics, and she later backtracks, saying she meant that "in any democracy people who vote are sovereign and free". The people of Quebec would freely decide their destiny if and when the time comes, she says.

On 15 February MPs vote to force the government to abide by Kyoto targets. Canada is a signatory to the international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but the Conservative government has rejected the targets, calling them unattainable. The new bill gives the government 60 days to draw up a plan to reduce emissions.

The government announces a £13 million fund to preserve the Great Bear Rainforest, home to 1500-year-old trees and wildlife including cougars, wolves, salmon, grizzly bears and the Kermode bear, a white subspecies of the black bear (22 January).

Trinidad and Tobago

The state-owned BWIA West Indian Airlines shuts down at the end of 2006 after generating a deficit of £30 million in that year. A government grant of £150 million creates its replacement, Caribbean Airlines, which is to employ a third of the staff and offer a reduced service. There are concerns that the cuts will affect visitors to the cricket World Cup in March 2007.

Grenada

Prime Minister Keith Mitchell promises an investigation into why the Taiwanese national anthem is played instead of the Chinese one at the opening of a stadium paid for by Beijing (3 February 2007). Chinese ambassador Qian Hongshan and Chinese workers who built the new £20 million Queen's Park stadium are visibly uncomfortable as the Royal Grenada Police Band plays the wrong anthem in the 20 000-seat venue. Grenada broke ties with Taiwan in 2005 in favour of China.

The Bahamas

Immigration Minister Shane Gibson resigns after claims that he fast-tracked a residency permit for the late *Playboy* model Anna Nicole Smith (19 February 2007). Gibson says Smith was a family friend, and denies any wrongdoing. Smith died in Florida on 9 February and is buried in the Bahamas.

Nigeria

A court overturns the impeachment of Anambra state governor Peter Obi (28 December 2006), making him the third governor to be reinstated in 2006 after allegations of corruption. Anambra's chief judge and three other senior judges are suspended over their roles in these sackings. Critics say corruption charges are being used by rival politicians to gain control ahead of elections in April, when President Olusegun Obasanjo steps down after eight years in power. The vote will lead to the first transfer of authority from one elected leader to another since independence in 1960.

Katsina governor Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, favourite to win the presidential election, denies rumours that he is ill by challenging opponents to a squash game (5 January 2007). The 55-year-old, who has a kidney condition, accuses rivals of spreading lies about him. "If they can play 12 straight sets with me, they are welcome", he says. The Muslim governor became the ruling People's Democratic Party's presidential candidate after being backed by Obasanjo.

The appeal court rules that Vice-President Atiku Abubakar, who was stripped of his vice-presidential privileges after leaving the ruling party, should have the perks restored (12 January).

On 7 February the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission releases a list of 135 politicians it says are "unfit to stand for office" because of corruption. The list, which includes Abubakar, is rejected by opposition parties, who call it a ploy to neutralize Obasanjo's rivals. The ruling PDP removes 52 of its blacklisted candidates and challenges other parties to do the same.

A Senate investigation accuses Abubakar of diverting £51 million of public funds to private interests and calls for him to be prosecuted (28 February). He is protected from charges while in office, but could face impeachment and disqualification from presidential elections. Abubakar denies the allegations, which he says are politically motivated because of a falling out with his former ally Obasanjo. The Senate upholds findings by the anti-graft agency that £6 million of the funds were diverted to iGate, a Kentucky-based firm that tried to do business in Nigeria in 2004. William Jefferson, a Louisiana Democrat, is being investigated in the USA for allegedly taking bribes for helping iGate. The FBI says it found £45 000 in his freezer.

An oil pipeline explodes in Lagos, killing at least 260 people (26 December). Obasanjo blames the disaster on vandals trying to siphon off fuel. About 2000 people have died in similar incidents in recent years in Nigeria, which suffers frequent fuel shortages despite being Africa's largest oil producer.

The treason trial of oil militant Mujahid Dokubo-Asari begins in Abuja (5 February). Asari was arrested in 2005 for vowing to topple Obasanjo's government, and uses the court appearance to repeat this threat. The government had hoped his arrest would deter rebels calling for local control of oil wealth in the Niger delta, but kidnappings of foreign workers and attacks on installations have intensified. The finance ministry says the violence has cost more than £2 billion in lost oil revenue.

Census results show that Nigeria's population has grown to more than 140 million, an increase of 63% since 1991.

Sierra Leone

Former defence minister Sam Hinga Norman, a key defendant in the UN war crimes tribunal, dies aged 67 (22 February 2007) while awaiting the verdict in his case. Norman was accused of several crimes, including murder and terrorism, while leading a pro-government militia during the 10-year civil war. Doctors say he died of heart failure after a hip replacement operation in Senegal.

Ghana

Eighteen months after he died, Ga king Nii Amugi II is buried in Accra (27 January 2007). The funeral, delayed because of disputes over succession, brings the capital to a standstill and attracts tens of thousands of mourners.

The main opposition party says it will boycott parliament after one of its leaders is jailed for fraud (5 February). Dan Abodakpi, a trade and industry minister in Jerry Rawlings' government, is given a 10-year sentence for paying for a feasibility study that was never completed. The National Democratic Congress accuses the government of selective prosecution of opposition members while ignoring corrupt practices in its own ranks.

Kofi Annan returns to his homeland after his term as UN leader ends. His retirement plans are unknown: while some commentators have called for him to enter domestic politics, the former secretary-general has hinted at a future in farming.

The Gambia

President Yahya Jammeh's party wins a landslide in legislative elections (25 January 2007), a follow-up to the presidential election in September 2006. The Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction claims 42 of 48 elected seats.

Jammeh angers health workers by claiming to have developed a herbal treatment that cures HIV/AIDS in three days. Two members of the country's AIDS secretariat resign in protest, and a UN coordinator is expelled (23 February) for criticizing the claims. Dr Fadzai Gwaradzimba warns that Jammeh's purported cure could hamper prevention efforts and encourage people to have unsafe sex.

Cameroon

Chinese President Hu Jintao continues his focus on Africa with a 12-day tour starting in Yaounde (30 January). He meets Cameroonian leader Paul Biya and announces £1.5 billion in credit to African countries, along with new aid money and interest-free loans—emphasizing that the money comes without the conditions attached to Western aid. It is Hu's third trip to Africa since taking office in 2003, and trade between Beijing and the continent has risen fivefold since 2001. Hu has been criticized for selling arms to renegade regimes such as Zimbabwe, flooding local markets with cheap Chinese imports and providing loans that poor governments may not be able to repay.

A mass wedding for more than 50 couples, most of them living polygamously, is held in Yaounde (12 January). The government pays for the ceremony, which it says is aimed at giving concubines and their children legal protection.

Uganda

A fragile truce between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government expires on 28 February 2007, with no new deal on offer. The rebels refuse to resume negotiations in Sudan in January, citing security fears. They want talks to end the 20-year civil war moved to Kenya or South Africa, but neither has expressed interest and the government refuses to change the venue. Both sides accuse the other of violating the 2006 ceasefire. The government says rebels failed to gather at two agreed assembly points in south Sudan; the rebels say the army used the meeting points to attack their fighters. Hours before the deadline for troop withdrawal, rebel leader Vincent Otti says the LRA will not return to the table until a different venue is found. He says the rebels do not intend to resume hostilities, but will defend themselves if necessary. President Yoweri Museveni warns that military attacks are still possible. "Peace in Uganda will be maintained with or without peace talks", he says. "Talks were mainly for the benefit of the terrorists. If they don't give in, that will be their problem."

Former rebel leader and spiritualist Alice Lakwena dies (17 January) in a refugee camp in Kenya aged 50. She was born Alice Auma, but claimed to be possessed by the spirit of a dead Italian army officer called Lakwena (messenger). She led an uprising against Museveni in the 1980s, promising her thousands of followers divine protection from bullets. Her Holy Spirit Movement was defeated but regrouped to form the LRA, led by Lakwena's nephew, Joseph Kony.

Free secondary schooling is offered to all pupils who achieve a certain grade in primary school (5 January). Less than half of Uganda's children complete secondary school because of fees of up to £50 a term in a country where average income is about £150 a year. Free primary education was introduced in 2007. One of Museveni's re-election pledges was to improve access to further schooling, and his Education Ministry says 234 000 pupils will qualify for the programme in 2007.

Heavy fighting between the army and Karamojong warriors in the northeast kills 52 people (12 January). The clashes begin when the armed Karamojong try to recover stolen cattle the army has retrieved. A UN report in November 2006 accuses the army of using excessive force in its attempt to disarm tribal warriors in the region.

Kenya

An outbreak of Rift Valley fever spreads, with health authorities saying 140 people have died since December 2006. The illness spreads from remote areas, and cases are reported in neighbouring Somalia and Tanzania. The viral disease, which usually only affects cattle, can be passed to humans by mosquitoes. In February authorities say they have the outbreak under control, but sales of meat continue to fall.

The UN refugee agency criticizes Kenya for closing its border with Somalia, preventing refugees fleeing intense fighting there (3 January). Tanks and helicopters

are deployed to enforce the closure, and 420 Somali refugees are deported. There are clashes near the Kenyan border with Islamist militias pursued by Ethiopian and Somali troops. Kenyan Foreign Minister Raphael Tuju dismisses the criticisms, saying Western countries should do more to help the refugees.

The World Social Forum opens in Nairobi (20 January). The annual poverty summit is attacked for being too expensive, and organizers are forced to waive registration fees after a protest by local squatters. Police stand by as hungry street children invade a food tent and eat meals meant for sale to delegates.

Tanzania

President Jakaya Kikwete says he will demand a refund from UK firm BAE Systems if a corruption probe finds his country was overcharged for a military radar system (2 February 2007). The UK Serious Fraud Office (SFO) is investigating the 2001 deal, amid allegations that a middleman was paid £6 million to win the order. "We shall lodge formal request for refund from the British government upon proof that BAE inflated the price of the radar to squeeze extra money out of our poor country", Kikwete says. The SFO is also investigating a 1999 BAE deal with South Africa. Foreign Minister Asha-Rose Migiro is named new UN deputy secretary-general (5 January). She is replaced by Bernard Membe.

Mozambique

Severe flooding in the Zambezi valley displaces hundreds of thousands of people in January 2007. A disaster relief official warns that the refugees are at risk because many evacuation centres are no longer accessible by road. Paulo Zucula says the country only has one UN helicopter to get supplies to the camps. "They are starving and some diseases such as malaria and cholera are looming", he says. About 40 people have died, but rescue workers fear the casualties will rise before the water recedes.

In February a tropical cyclone destroys hundreds more homes. Cyclone Favio hits land in Inhambane province, uprooting electricity pylons and tearing the roof off a jail in Vilanculos, allowing hundreds of prisoners to escape. At least three people are killed and 70 injured.

Seychelles

China's President Hu ends his African tour in Seychelles (9 February 2007), after signing five agreements with the government worth £5 million. The deals include funding new schools and a parliamentary building.

Zambia

The government loses its case against a so-called vulture fund, which is claiming £21 million in unpaid debt (15 February 2007). The company, Donegal International, bought the debt for less than £2 million from Romania in 1999. Romania had loaned Zambia money to buy tractors in 1979. Donegal subsequently sued Zambia for £21 million, claiming the difference was made up in interest and costs. A UK high court

rules that Zambia must repay the money, although the judge is expected to set the amount at less than half that demanded. The ruling angers anti-debt campaigners, who say it will undermine efforts to reduce poverty. UK Chancellor Gordon Brown has declared vulture funds “perverse and immoral”.

After talks in Lusaka with President Levy Mwananasa, Chinese President Hu announces new investment in Zambia worth £400 million (3 February). As part of the agreement a special economic zone will be created in the copper region, allowing Chinese companies to operate without paying some taxes. Beijing also agrees to write off part of Zambia’s debt.

In January a Chinese-owned textile firm shuts down following massive losses. At least 700 jobs will be cut at Zambia China Mulungushi, the country’s largest textile company.

Zimbabwe

Political protests are banned in Harare ahead of President Robert Mugabe’s lavish 83rd birthday celebrations after police use tear-gas and water cannons to break up an opposition rally (18 February 2007). Mugabe announces that he has no intention of standing down in the near future, but splits in his ruling Zanu-PF party are exposed when Vice-President Joice Mujuru stays away from the birthday party (24 February). In an interview to mark his birthday Mugabe says a faction led by Mujuru’s husband is plotting against him. He complains of “vicious, ambitious people” in his party manoeuvring to topple him. Of the leadership, he says: “There are no vacancies. The door is closed.”

The chairman of a pro-democracy coalition escapes after his home is doused with fuel and set alight in the early hours of 30 December 2006. The National Constitutional Assembly says the attack on Lovemore Madhuku coincides with its campaign against the extension of Mugabe’s term in office by two years.

The High Court orders the government to return the passport seized from government critic and newspaper publisher Trevor Ncube (25 January). Ncube owns two papers in Zimbabwe and South Africa’s *Mail and Guardian*. “My faith in the Zimbabwean judiciary has been vindicated”, he says.

A deadline for Zimbabwe’s remaining 400 white farmers to leave their lands passes (3 February), with Lands Minister Didymus Mutasa saying they can stay long enough to harvest crops but must leave or face arrest after this. The Commercial Farmers Union has advised members to resist eviction and argue their case in court.

Finance Minister Herbert Murerwa is fired as inflation nears 1600% (7 February). Murerwa, who has had public disagreements with the head of the Reserve Bank, was appointed five years ago but failed to turn around the economy. Later in the month Reserve Bank governor, Gideon Gono, admits the country is hungry and broke, and that the government is unable to provide adequate food or basic services. He says Zimbabwe needs more than £1.3 billion “to function well” but does not have the hard currency. “If we were talking about local currency, I would say, ‘Don’t worry, in the next 30 minutes we will print money’”, he says, adding that he cannot print US dollars or British pounds.

Police arrest more than 30 000 people, one of them a magistrate, between December and February in efforts to curb illegal mining. Officers burn temporary

homes in the mining area northwest of Harare and seize large quantities of gold and gold ore, and nearly 8000 diamonds. Thousands of Zimbabweans have turned to mining because of unemployment and the collapse of agriculture. Most of the suspects are released after paying fines.

South Africa

A leading anti-apartheid activist turned businessman is rumoured to be launching a bid for the presidency (7 January 2007). Tokyo Sexwale, a major player in the mining and diamond industries, would challenge ANC deputy president Jacob Zuma for the party leadership in December. Whoever leads the ANC is almost certain to become president when Thabo Mbeki retires in 2009. The ruling ANC is deeply divided between supporters of Mbeki and Zuma, who was acquitted on rape charges in 2006 and had a corruption case thrown out of court. Sexwale, who became premier of Gauteng province after 1994 elections, is a close confidante of former president Nelson Mandela. Another politician turned businessman, Cyril Ramaphosa, is also touted as a possible contender.

Anglo-Zulu war expert David Rattray is shot dead by intruders at his KwaZulu-Natal home (26 January). Rattray was known as an extraordinary storyteller who entertained thousands of tourists, including Prince Charles, with his tours of 19th century battlefields. Sibusiso Ndebele, premier of KwaZulu-Natal, calls Rattray “a huge asset to our country who helped develop cultural tourism to promote economic development and alleviate poverty”. The killing again calls attention to high crime rates in South Africa, where 50 people are said to be murdered a day. In his state-of-the-nation address Mbeki acknowledges the extent of the problem and promises to increase the police budget (8 February). “We... cannot claim the happiness that comes with freedom if communities live in fear, closeted behind walls and barbed wire”, he says. The president has been criticized for not doing enough to tackle crime.

The government expropriates its first farm after negotiations with the land’s owners break down (26 January). The Evangelical Lutheran Church will receive about £2.5 million for the farm in the Northern Cape, which has been claimed by local families. The ANC has vowed to return land seized from black farmers under apartheid, but progress has been slow. In 2006 the land ministry set a six-month deadline for price negotiations after accusing owners of inflating prices and stalling change.

Veteran anti-apartheid campaigner Adelaide Tambo dies in Johannesburg aged 77 (31 January). Tributes to Tambo, the widow of former ANC leader Oliver Tambo, are led by Mandela, who praises her as “a close personal friend, a comrade and one of the great heroines of our nation”. Mbeki says her death “amounts to a loss to the entire country and the international community”.

Diamond producer De Beers announces a collaboration with the government to set up a black-owned diamond-trading company to keep more South African-mined gems in the country (9 February). De Beers will give a 20% stake in its Namaqualand Mines to the government as part of plans to launch the State Diamond Trader by 2010.

A campaign to clamp down on tax avoidance helps South Africa achieve a budget surplus of £790 million. Finance Minister Trevor Manuel says the money will be spent on housing, education and health (21 February).

US television star Oprah Winfrey opens a girls school near Johannesburg (2 January). The £20 million facility provides places for 150 pupils from low-income families. At the opening ceremony Winfrey speaks of her impoverished childhood and says this is the proudest day of her life: "When you educate a girl, you begin to change the face of a nation". The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy will eventually provide 450 places to promising pupils.

The booming elephant population forces the government to consider restarting its culling programme. Experts say the population has doubled since culling stopped in 1995 and could double again to 34 000 by 2020.

Lesotho

Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili's ruling party wins a landslide victory in general elections (17 February 2007). The polls are called early after former foreign minister Tom Thabane and 17 MPs resign from the Lesotho Congress of Democrats to form the All Basotho Convention. The new party wins 17 seats, losing out to the LCD's 61. A Commonwealth expert team monitors the poll, which preliminary reports suggest will be declared free and fair.

Cyprus

A deal with Lebanon over oil exploration in the Mediterranean angers Turkey (30 January 2007), as did a similar agreement with Egypt in 2006. The deals mark out underwater borders to facilitate future oil and gas exploration. Turkey protests to both countries, saying it has "legitimate and legal rights and interests" in the area. Bidding for offshore oil and gas exploration licences begins on 15 February.

The government proposes paying £23 000 to women who have three or more children, to counter the falling birth rate (23 February).

Gibraltar

Direct passenger flights between Spain and Gibraltar are restored for the first time since 1979 after Madrid lifts its air blockade (16 December 2006). Iberia is to run a daily service from Madrid, and British Airways will operate a service from May.

UK

A bird flu outbreak at a turkey farm in Suffolk (3 February) leads to the culling of 160 000 birds and a 30% drop in turkey sales. Tests confirm that the H5N1 virus probably originated in Hungary, and the government considers prosecuting the Bernard Matthews factory for poor hygiene standards. Some restrictions on the movement of poultry are lifted in early March.

Tony Blair announces phased UK troop withdrawals from Iraq, with the return of some 1600 troops "within months" (20 February). The prime minister says an operation to hand over responsibility for security in Basra has ended. The government confirms that Prince Harry and his regiment will be sent to the country, despite fears the royal's presence will attract insurgent attacks.

The police investigation into claims political parties were given donations in return for honours continues, with Scotland Yard detectives questioning Blair for a second time (26 February). Labour's chief fundraiser, Lord Levy, is re-arrested, this time on suspicion of conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. Downing Street aide Ruth Turner is also arrested.

Around the Commonwealth

In his New Year's Message Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon says democracy remains the best way to give people freedom and control over their own lives. Describing democracy as a "work-in-progress" in all member countries, he says: "We will continue to promote improvements in the forms of democracy, like free and fair elections. We will also continue to promote the institutions of democracy—like parliaments, judiciaries, executives, the media and civil society. Above all else, we will continue to promote the culture of democracy; of citizens having freedom and a say in how they are governed."

A workshop on financial investigations to combat money laundering and terrorist financing is held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, from 22 January 2007, co-sponsored by the Commonwealth Secretariat, the UN and the USA.

The Secretariat's Law Development Section convenes a meeting in Jamaica to assess the achievements of the Caribbean Court of Justice in its first 18 months (22 January).

The Secretariat organizes talks in Brussels to discuss a partnership in fisheries between the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States and the European Commission.

The Commonwealth Broadcasting Association holds a Regional Conference for Africa in Nairobi in February. The theme is 'Moving Forward on Media Freedom'.

McKinnon meets his new UN counterpart, Ban Ki-moon, and other UN officials in New York on 6 February. They discuss the potential collaboration between the UN and the Commonwealth in Sierra Leone and other countries.

Deputy Secretary-General Florence Mugasha calls for the better representation of women during peace negotiations at a UN workshop in Tshawane, South Africa (7 February).

Commonwealth environment ministers meet in Nairobi to discuss climate change on 5 February under the umbrella of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment.

A Commonwealth Conference of National Human Rights Institutions is held in London from 26 February.

Applications are invited for the 2007 Short Story Competition. Entries of around 600 words must be received before 1 May.

New Publications

A Manual of International Dispute Resolution by Anthony Connerty, £30.00

Navigating New Waters: A Reader on the ACP–EU Trade Negotiations by Sanoussi Bilal and Roman Grynberg, £37.50

An Annotated Bibliography on Gender in Secondary Education: Research from Selected Commonwealth Countries, £25

After Hong Kong: Some Key Trade Issues for Developing Countries by Ivan Mbirimi, £15

Trade Facilitation: A Handbook for Trade Negotiators, £30

Boys' Underachievement in Education—An Exploration in Selected Commonwealth Countries by Jyotsna Jha and Fatimah Kelleher, £20

These and other titles are available at www.thecommonwealth.org/publications.