

# Commonwealth Update

JUDITH SOAL

**ABSTRACT** *March–April 2007: Nigerians go to the polls to replace one elected leader with another for the first time, but the occasion is marred by logistical problems, violence and fraud. Robert Mugabe survives another political crisis in Zimbabwe while Pervez Musharraf triggers one in Pakistan. Former enemies agree to share power in Northern Ireland, a tsunami hits the Solomon Islands and Australia wins the cricket World Cup. In Malaysia Buddhist monks grapple with their beliefs over an infestation of ants.*

## Nigeria

Ruling party candidate Umaru Musa Yar'Adua is declared the winner of April presidential elections, despite reports of widespread fraud and violence. The People's Democratic Party's Yar'Adua gained 70% of the vote (24.6 million), against 6.6 million for the former military ruler Muhammadu Buhari and 2.6 million for the outgoing vice-president, Atiku Abubakar. The result is widely disputed after severe logistical problems and violence at polling stations, including an attempt to blow up the election headquarters. There are reports of extensive fraud, including missing or stolen ballot boxes, boxes being stuffed with votes for the ruling party, people being forced to vote against their will and opposition papers being spoiled. The country's largest election monitoring organization, the Transition Monitoring Group, says the voting was so flawed that the results were meaningless. The Commonwealth Observer Group declares the poll a "missed opportunity", saying organization fell below 2003 standards. "We have concluded that there were impediments in the ability of voters to express their will fully, freely and fairly", a statement says. The EU says the process "cannot be considered to be credible". The local press is similarly dismissive, with the Nigerian *Guardian* writing: "Elections in the country have always been marred by rigging, manipulations of results. . . this is the first time a grand plan was ever conceived to deliberately and blatantly disenfranchise a very large part of eligible voters". Outgoing President Olusegun Obasanjo admits the polls were not perfect but insists the results are valid.

The PDP also gains majorities in elections for the Senate and House of Representatives, held at the same time. Similar problems beset State elections on 14

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April, in which the PDP wins 27 of the 36 governorships, with Buhari's All Nigerian People's Party winning five. Abubakar's Action Congress wins one governorship, in Lagos, and the Progressive People's Party wins in Abia, although its candidate, Theodore Orji, is in prison on corruption charges. Elections in Imo and Enugu are to be rerun because of irregularities.

Opposition politicians reject all the results and call for the dismissal of the organizing Independent National Electoral Commission, the installation of an interim government and a fresh round of voting.

Yar'Adua says losing parties should take their concerns to the courts. "I have extended a hand of friendship and I will continue the effort at reconciliation . . . But I have also recognized their rights within the law to take all the necessary actions to seek redress", he says (26 April). South African President Thabo Mbeki is the first international leader to congratulate Yar'Adua, saying he is looking forward to closer ties between the countries. The new government is to take over at the end of May.

Adebayo Adefarati, a presidential candidate for the Alliance for Democracy, dies during campaigning, aged 79 (29 March). Adefarati, seen as an outsider in the race, was governor of Ondo State from 1999 to 2003.

The Supreme Court reinstates Joshua Dariye as governor of Plateau State after his impeachment in November (27 April). He is the fourth governor this year to have his dismissal declared illegal by the courts. Dariye skipped bail in the UK in 2004 after money-laundering claims. He was accused of embezzling £4.5million in public funds.

An Islamist group known as the Taliban storms a police station in Kano, killing at least 13 people (17 April). Police say as many as 500 people, some heavily armed, joined the attack. The violence follows the death of an Islamic cleric on 13 April. Ustaz Ja'afar Adam and one of his followers were killed at dawn prayers. He was once a senior member of the state government but had fallen out with the governor.

The head of the anti-corruption agency, Nuhu Ribadu, is promoted to Assistant Inspector General of Police and given another four-year term. Ribadu, an ally of Obasanjo, and his Economic and Financial Crimes Commission have convicted more than 150 people since 2003, although he has been accused of bias against Obasanjo's enemies. The commission barred many politicians from running in the election.

Four foreign oil workers—one British, one Dutch and two Lebanese—kidnapped in the Niger Delta in March are released (4 April). Two Turkish oil workers are taken hostage on 6 April. Militants demanding a larger share of oil revenues for the impoverished region have kidnapped nearly 70 foreigners in 2007. Most are released after a ransom is paid.

More than 100 people die in a petrol tanker explosion in Kaduna state. The victims had been trying to scoop up fuel from the tanker, which crashed in Katagul village carrying 33 000 litres of fuel (28 March).

Muhammadu Sada Abubakar is inaugurated as the Sultan of Sokoto, the spiritual head of Nigeria's 70 million Muslims, at a ceremony in the ancient city of Sokoto (3 March). He was named sultan after his brother, Sultan Maccido, was killed in a plane crash in 2006.

Finance Minister Nenadi Usman announces a deal with US investment bank Merrill Lynch to take on most of the country's £257million debt owed to the London

Club of investor nations (2 March). Usman says the deal will give Nigeria a “clean start” and make it more attractive to foreign investors.

### **Sierra Leone**

Freetown streets are renamed in March to mark the 200th anniversary of the slave trade, with British names being purged in favour of those of Africans who fought against slavery. Among others, Percival Street becomes Thomas Peters Street in memory of the slave who worked with abolitionists to establish a colony for freed slaves, now Sierra Leone. Mayor Winstanley Bankole Johnson says Africans’ contribution to ending slavery has been obscured in the history books.

### **Ghana**

A lavish ceremony is held to celebrate 50 years of independence from the UK (6 March). Thousands of people, many painted in the national colours of red, gold and green, throng the streets of Accra and President John Kufuor lights a flame in Independence Square, replicating a ceremony led by Kwame Nkrumah in 1957. African leaders, including Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, join the celebrations. The Duke of Kent and the leader of the House of Lords, Baroness Amos, attend for the UK. The celebrations are tempered by criticism of the expense, about £10 million. Former president Jerry Rawlings refuses to attend because of what he says are unfounded allegations by the present government about brutality during his rule.

### **The Gambia**

Ten men are sentenced to 10 years in prison after a military court convicts them of plotting a coup (20 April). The suspected mastermind, former army chief Ndure Cham, fled the country in 2006.

### **Cameroon**

Hundreds of homes and businesses are bulldozed in Douala to make way for a road-widening scheme. Residents say the demolitions are being carried out at short notice and without compensation, but authorities insist the buildings were erected illegally. Traffic congestion is a huge problem in Douala.

### **Uganda**

The government and Lord’s Resistance Army rebels announce a new ceasefire and resume peace talks on 26 April. The chief mediator, South Sudan’s Vice-President Riek Machar, says he is confident the negotiations will succeed this time because both sides are committed to ending 20 years of civil war. Under the deal the LRA has six weeks to assemble its fighters at Ri-Kwangba near the Democratic Republic of Congo border. Similar deadlines in 2006 passed without success when rebels refused to go to assembly points, fearful that they would be arrested under International Criminal Court warrants. Rebel leader Joseph Kony, one of five LRA commanders

indicted for war crimes, says he will not sign a treaty until warrants on the leadership are withdrawn.

First judges then lawyers go on strike in March to protest against government interference in the courts. Police earlier stormed the High Court and re-arrested opposition supporters who had been granted bail. President Yoweri Museveni says the High Court judges had been wrong to grant bail to the six men, but that security officers “may have overreacted”. The arrested men, who remain in custody on fresh charges of murder, are supporters of opposition leader Kizza Besigye, who was charged with treason ahead of the 2006 presidential elections.

### **Kenya**

A newspaper report in April suggests Security Minister John Michuki hired hit men to kill the son of former president Daniel arap Moi. The government withdraws advertising from *The Standard* and Michuki accuses it of conducting a campaign against him. Managing editor Chaacha Mwita says the report was accurate: “We have given the police the tape which has recordings of the confession by one of the Artur brothers, who was approached to assassinate Mr Gideon Moi”, he says. The Artur brothers, who have been linked to members of the government, were deported to Armenia last year after police found weapons at their home.

Kenya secures a £57 million loan from the World Bank to help roll out high-speed internet networks (4 April). Analysts say the absence of a broadband infrastructure is hampering competitiveness.

### **Tanzania**

Student nurses are called up and others redeployed to battle an outbreak of Rift Valley Fever, which has killed 16 people so far with at least 80 others infected (20 March). The government also launches a campaign to vaccinate livestock, the source of the disease.

### **Mozambique**

More than 100 people are killed by a series of explosions at a depot for discarded weapons in Maputo (23 March). An inquiry blames poor storage conditions and high temperatures at the depot, where 20 tonnes of armoury left over from the civil war are awaiting destruction. It is the second time in two months that aging explosives in the depot have detonated, and President Armando Guebuza orders all obsolete weapons to be destroyed and depots to be moved to remote areas. He allocates £6 million to rebuilding damaged homes.

### **Seychelles**

President James Michel dissolves the legislature in March and calls an early election for 10 May. Opposition parties have been boycotting the National Assembly since October 2006, when members clashed with police during a demonstration against laws banning political and religious groups from owning broadcasting stations. The opposition Seychelles National Party and the Seychelles Democratic Party form an alliance to oppose the government.

## **Mauritius**

President Anerood Jugnauth threatens to leave the Commonwealth to protest against the UK's treatment of Chagos Islands residents (7 March). The inhabitants of Chagos were forced out in the 1960s after the UK leased the island to the USA for a military base. Jugnauth says he is considering taking the UK to the International Court of Justice over its refusal to allow the islanders to return. Mauritius claims the islands as its territory.

## **Zambia**

The government agrees to pay £7.7 million to Donegal International to settle a so-called 'vulture fund' case (27 April). Donegal had taken Zambia to the London High Court claiming an outstanding debt of £27.5 million after it bought a debt of £1.6 million owed to Romania. In a decision that angered anti-debt campaigners, the court ruled Zambia had to pay a proportion of the amount. Vulture funds are companies that buy up the debts of poor nations cheaply and then sue for an inflated amount.

Lands Minister Gladys Nyirongo is sacked after claims she distributed plots to family members, and a demolition campaign begins in Lusaka (9 March). Police use sledgehammers to knock down hundreds of houses they say were built on land obtained illegally.

## **Zimbabwe**

Robert Mugabe survives yet another political crisis over the treatment of opposition activists. The confrontation begins on 11 March when Movement for Democratic Change leader Morgan Tsvangirai is arrested at an opposition rally at which another member is shot dead and many others injured. Tsvangirai is beaten up in police custody and photographs of his injuries draw widespread condemnation inside and outside the country. Protests gain momentum but police crack down harshly, arresting anyone out after dark in Harare and seizing the body of a slain activist to prevent his funeral providing a rallying point for the opposition. Even South Africa, normally reluctant to criticise Mugabe, speaks out, with Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad calling for human rights to be respected. On 23 March, South Africa meets opposition leaders for the first time in three years and hosts separate talks with the country's vice-president, Joice Mujuru. Mugabe shrugs off criticism and threatens to expel Western diplomats.

The Southern African Development Community convenes a summit to discuss the situation (28 March), agreeing that Mbeki will mediate between the sides. The summit also "reaffirms its solidarity" with the Zimbabwean government and calls on the West to end sanctions. Later Mbeki says he believes Mugabe will step down voluntarily and that the challenge is to ensure free and fair elections in 2008. But on 31 March Zanu-PF endorses Mugabe as its 2008 presidential candidate.

A two-day national strike called for 3 April fizzles out after thousands of troops and police are deployed to discourage protests.

Zimbabwe marks 27 years of independence on 17 April. In an independence day speech Mugabe blames "unbridled greed" and "saboteurs" for its economic

problems. A week later the Central Bank announces that inflation reached 2200% in March.

### **South Africa**

Finance Minister Trevor Manuel says the country's Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies need to be reviewed after claims that only a small group of wealthy investors, many with links to the ruling ANC, are benefiting. In an interview with *The Financial Times* (10 April) he says both "good and bad, genuine and cynical" BEE deals have been done under the policies intended to correct apartheid inequalities.

Mbeki visits Sudan to try to persuade the government to accept a UN–African Union peacekeeping force to help end the violence in Darfur (10 April).

A farmer who killed his Zimbabwean worker claiming he mistook him for a baboon is jailed for 20 years (6 April). Jewell Crossberg told the court he fired to scare the animals, accidentally killing Jealous Dube. Crossberg is also found guilty of attempting to murder four other workers he accused of laziness.

Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang has a liver transplant after being diagnosed with auto-immune hepatitis following months of speculation about her health (14 March). Transport Minister Jeff Radebe takes over her portfolio. Tshabalala-Msimang has been nicknamed Dr Beetroot after claiming that a diet of garlic, beetroot and lemon is more effective against HIV than anti-retroviral drugs. The latest statistics show that only 24% of South Africans with AIDS are getting the medication they need.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is accused of driving out journalists who refuse to take a pro-government stance after the resignation of veteran presenter John Perlman. Campaigners place a full-page advert in the weekly *Mail and Guardian* (2 March), endorsed by the Congress of South African Trade Unions, criticizing his departure. Cosatu says it is "symptomatic of a wider problem at the SABC... to impose a certain [pro-government] view on their presenters". Critics say the SABC has also barred commentators calling for a tougher stance on Zimbabwe.

### **Botswana**

Travel restrictions are imposed on 17 foreign activists and journalists, including the BBC's John Simpson, in an apparent attempt to silence criticism of the treatment of the Basarwa bushmen (23 March). Simpson and the others have reported on the plight of the Basarwa, evicted from their ancestral lands in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. In December 2006 a court ruled that they were entitled to return, but there have been concerns that the government is hampering their efforts.

### **Lesotho**

Opposition parties call a three-day strike in Maseru to protest against the allocation of parliamentary seats after the February election (19 March). The strike is widely observed, and peaceful.

### Swaziland

The World Food Programme warns that the country faces severe food shortages because of the failure of maize crops (17 April). Farmers are encouraged to diversify to more drought-resistant crops.

### Namibia

The Okatumba Wildlife Research project is launched in March to count the cheetah population, known to be the largest in the world.

### Pakistan

President Pervez Musharraf triggers a political crisis by suspending Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry for allegedly abusing his office and by referring his case to the Supreme Judicial Council (9 March). Analysts declare the move illegal and public outrage quickly spreads, with court boycotts, strikes and demonstrations around the country. "Go Musharraf, go" and "Musharraf is America's pet dog", are among the chants. The heavy-handed police response causes even more anger. Several private television stations have their coverage suspended and police ransack the offices of one, Geo TV, smashing equipment and beating staff. Chaudhry is a former ally of Musharraf, and was among the half of the Supreme Court judges who validated his 1999 military coup. (The others resigned in protest.) But recently he has opposed the government in cases involving the privatization of state assets and the fate of missing people allegedly abducted by the security forces. Commentators say Musharraf needs a more compliant chief justice in a year when elections are due and he may have to change the constitution to ensure his continued authority. But the move appears to have backfired as protests continue through April, with Chaudhry's case becoming a rallying point for all those with grievances against the government.

Islamabad becomes embroiled in a row over religious extremism, after armed female students of the Jamia Hafsa *madrassa* occupy a children's library, kidnap a group of women (and a baby) they accuse of running a brothel and threaten the owners of CD and video shops. The authorities seem unwilling to challenge the students, giving in to demands to stop the demolition of illegal mosques. Two policemen who try to rescue the kidnapped women are themselves taken hostage. Much is made of the fact that the militants are teenage girls wearing black burkhas, but they are usually accompanied by male students from the adjoining Jamia Faradia *madrassa*, also part of the Lal Masjid (red mosque) complex. On 5 April hundreds of Islamabad residents protest against the mosque, calling on the government to act. Human rights activists say the students are "terrorizing ordinary citizens of Pakistan in the name of Islam". The next day at Friday prayers the head of the mosque, Maulana Abdul Aziz, threatens suicide attacks in Islamabad and demands that all video shops and brothels be closed within a month. "If the government fails we will take action", he says. Outside the mosque supporters set fire to a pile of videos and CDs. The mosque's unofficial *sharia* court system declares a *fatwa* on the Tourism Minister, Nilofar Bakhtiar, after she is photographed hugging a man following a paragliding flight to raise money for earthquake victims (8 April).

In Karachi tens of thousands of people protest against the mosque (15 April), calling its followers 'religious terrorists'.

Fighting between local and foreign militants breaks out in South Waziristan in March, with unconfirmed reports of 250 dead by the end of April. Most are fighters from Uzbekistan suspected of links with al-Qaida. The Uzbek and Wazir militants have been anti-Western allies since 2001, but tensions between them have grown since local Wazir tribesmen signed a deal with the government in 2006. The reasons for this are complex: some say local militants opposed to the peace deal used the Uzbeks to murder pro-government village elders. There are also claims that the Uzbeks and their local allies killed an Arab al-Qaida fighter being sheltered by another group of Wazirs. And many locals criticize the Uzbeks' 'un-Islamic' lifestyles and involvement in crime. In early March a Wazir Taliban commander orders the foreigners to disarm or leave. When they refuse, he attacks the area they live in, near the town of Wana. The government says the fighting is proof that locals are finally turning against the al-Qaida-linked foreigners, whose presence has long been a bone of contention with the USA. Musharraf later admits that the army is helping locals fight the Uzbeks.

Pakistan and Afghan troops exchange fire on the border in the tribal areas, apparently after Afghan soldiers tear down part of an anti-Taliban fence erected by Pakistan (19 April). Kabul is opposed to the fence, which it believes is making the disputed border between the countries more permanent. On 30 April the Afghan leader Hamid Karzai meets Musharraf in Turkey in an attempt to ease tensions. In a joint statement seen as largely symbolic, the presidents promise "to deny sanctuary, training and financing to terrorists and to elements involved in subversive and anti-state activities in each other's countries".

The government signs a deal with tribesmen in Bajaur, who promise not to shelter foreign militants (26 March). More than 500 elders from the Salarzai and Utmankhel tribes are present at the signing ceremony in Khar. The government says a similar accord has been reached with the Mamond, the largest tribe in Bajaur.

Sectarian violence rages in the North West Frontier Province, with about 50 people dying in week-long clashes between Shia and Sunnis around Parachinar. The trouble begins on 6 April over a rally organized by Sunnis to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. The minority Shias accuse Sunnis of insulting them at the rally. At least four people are killed in sectarian attacks in Dera Ismail Khan.

Interior Minister Aftab Khan Sherpao is injured in a suicide attack that kills 22 people in North West Frontier Province (28 April). Sherpao, a close ally of Musharraf, had just finished addressing a rally when the bomber struck.

Musharraf opens a strategic port in Balochistan, financed by Beijing (20 March). The multibillion pound Gwadar port is China's first foothold in the Middle East, and viewed with suspicion by India and Iran. The Balochi population, involved in an insurgency against the government over mineral rights, also oppose the scheme, which they say does not benefit locals. Hundreds have been killed in fighting since 2003, and Chinese engineers working at Gwadar have also been targeted.

The EU bars 35 of Pakistan International Airlines' 42 planes from its airspace over safety concerns for the ageing fleet (5 March). The airline says the ban is not justifiable.

The military says it has successfully tested two missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads. The Hatf-II Abdali surface-to-surface missile tested on 3 March has a 125-mile range. A Hatf-VII tested on 22 March is said to have a 430-mile range.

Amnesty International says Pakistan has more people on death row than any other country. Nearly a third of the 24 000 prisoners facing execution around the world are in Pakistan.

## **India**

Widespread opposition forces the government to rethink plans to appropriate farmland to create industrial zones. Fourteen people are killed in clashes with police in West Bengal on 14 March during demonstrations against the seizure of nearly 10 000 acres to set up a special economic zone for Indonesian-owned chemical plants. Plans for several other industrial zones were suspended in January after protests turned violent, resulting in 11 deaths. The zones, which offer tax and duty breaks, are seen as a way to attract foreign investment, with about 15 already established and 150 approved. In April the government lifts a freeze on the zones, but limits them to 5000 acres and says no state can force farmers to sell land.

The West Bengal police chief is sentenced to six months in jail for contempt of court (2 March). Anup Vohra is found guilty of obstructing the High Court, which has recently called the state government to account over several issues, including the acquisition of farmland in Singur for a proposed motor factory by the Tata Group.

An MP is arrested apparently trying to smuggle a woman and teenager on board a plane by passing them off as his family. Babubhai Katara's party, the BJP, suspends him after he is stopped at Delhi airport on 18 April. Officials say the woman was travelling on a diplomatic passport in the name of Katara's wife. He faces charges of fraud and forgery.

Women civil servants are outraged at a new requirement to provide their employer with details of their menstrual cycles. A compulsory appraisal form asks them to write down their "detailed menstrual history and history of LMP [last menstrual period] including date of last confinement [maternity leave]". The government removes the questions after the intervention of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (13 April).

The Supreme Court delays the introduction of quotas for Dalits at colleges and universities (29 March). The government wants to institute an affirmative action policy reserving 50% of places for the disadvantaged, but the court rules that this should be put on hold until August to allow updated statistics to be collected. Singh has committed himself to improving the representation of Dalits in all aspects of Indian life, but has experienced a great deal of opposition.

Maoist rebels attack a remote police station in Bijapur in Chhattisgarh state in the early hours of 15 March, killing 55 police and civil militia members. The guerrillas then set fire to the post before escaping with a massive arms haul including machine guns and rifles. This follows a landmine attack on 1 March that killed eight people, six of them policemen. The militants, known as Naxalites, are extremely powerful in some districts, running their own parallel administrations.

MP Sunil Mahato is shot dead by suspected Maoists while watching a football match in Jharkhand state (4 March). A party leader and two of Mahato's security

guards are also killed. Hundreds of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha Party supporters take to the streets in protest, attacking vehicles and blockading roads.

Separatist violence continues, with five migrant workers killed in Manipur (9 March). In April tribal leaders in Meghala order all migrant workers to leave, threatening “dire consequences” if they are not out by 1 May. Ulfa rebels in Assam kill one and injure 17 in an explosion in a shop (8 March).

The Supreme Court orders an investigation into the assets of the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav, and his sons (1 March). Yadav’s Samajwadi Party says the case, brought by a man with links to the Congress Party, is politically motivated. State elections, to be spread over a month, begin on 7 April.

The country’s first commercial rocket launches on 22 April, carrying an Italian satellite into space. India is said to have received £5.5 million for the launch. The space programme is planning an unmanned mission to the Moon in 2008.

India successfully tests its longest-range nuclear-capable missile off the coast of Orissa (12 April). Analysts say the Agni-III has a range of more than 1900 miles. A test in July 2006 failed after the missile crashed in the Bay of Bengal. The latest test sparks a row with Indonesia, whose government says it did not receive sufficient warning. An Indonesian passenger jet is forced to turn around mid-flight for safety reasons.

Ratan Tata, head of the Tata Group, lobbies the government to drop legal action against the owners of Union Carbide over the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster. According to documents released in April, Tata has written to the government calling for the £12 million case against Dow Chemicals, which owns Union Carbide, to be withdrawn. The money would go towards an environmental clean-up of the site, which is still contaminated. Campaigners, who say 170 tonnes of toxic waste is still leaching into the soil and poisoning groundwater, deride Tata’s claim that his company will fund the clean-up.

Interest rates rise for the second time in three months to 7.75% as the Reserve Bank tries to tackle inflation (30 March).

BMW opens a new plant in Chennai (30 March), adding to the booming automobile industry. Motor manufacturers are flocking to India, which has the 11th largest auto market in the world, with 1.14 million cars sold in 2006. The industry employs about 10 million people, with this expected to rise to 25 million by 2016.

The first of 15 schools funded by the sale of Audrey Hepburn’s iconic black dress opens in Laxmikantapur, near Kolkata (1 March). The dress, worn by Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, fetched £470 000 at auction in December 2006, with the proceeds going to the charity City of Joy Aid.

An arrest warrant is issued for US actor Richard Gere after he kisses Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty at an AIDS awareness rally in Delhi (14 April). The court in Jaipur calls it “an obscene act”. Protestors in Mumbai set fire to effigies of Gere.

Two of Bollywood’s biggest stars, Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan, marry at an exclusive ceremony in Mumbai (20 April). Police struggle to control the thousands of people who gather outside hoping to catch a glimpse of the couple.

## **India and Pakistan**

Foreign secretaries meet in Islamabad to discuss outstanding disputes between their countries (13 March). Issues on the agenda include Kashmir and security. Pakistani

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz says the talks could “change the destiny of South Asia”, although in April both countries say they will not ‘rush’ into a settlement.

A joint anti-terrorism panel holds its first meeting, agreeing to exchange information to help fight extremists. A joint statement (6 March) says the panel will meet four times a year, but that the two heads can directly discuss any urgent issues. On 14 March two people are arrested in India over an explosion on the Friendship Express in February.

## **Bangladesh**

The head of the military-backed caretaker government, Fakhruddin Ahmed, delays elections until the end of 2008. He says it will take that long to tackle widespread corruption, compile a new voters’ roll and reform voting laws.

The son of former prime minister Khaleda Zia is one of about 160 high-ranking politicians and business people arrested since January as part of the corruption crackdown. Tarique Rahman, senior joint secretary of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, is held in raids in Dhaka on 8 March. The house of another former prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, is also searched. Many of those held have had their cars seized and bank accounts frozen. On 13 April former law minister Moudud Ahmed is also arrested.

The anti-corruption drive affects the poor as well as the rich. In the first two months of emergency rule more than 50 000 people are evicted from slums in Dhaka, and tens of thousands more have had their livelihoods destroyed along with their illegally constructed roadside stalls and shops.

The government reportedly tries to force Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia into exile. Sheikh Hasina is barred from returning to Dhaka from a trip to the USA (22 April) and Zia is held under virtual house arrest. But after pressure from the USA the government lifts restrictions on the women, allowing Sheikh Hasina to return home. Along with 55 Awami League members she faces murder charges over the death of five rivals during a riot in October 2006.

Six Islamist militants whose bomb attacks in 2006 killed two judges are executed (30 March). During their trial, the men said they targeted the judiciary because it obeyed secular rather than *sharia* law. Two weeks later the lawyer who acted as a special prosecutor at the trial, Haider Hossein, is shot dead in Jhalakathi.

A former army officer linked to the 1975 coup is arrested in the USA (14 March). Mohiuddin AKM Ahmed has been sentenced to death in absentia in Bangladesh for his role in the coup that led to the assassination of Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman. He is expected to be deported home.

A campaign to vaccinate 24 million children against polio is launched (3 March). About 700 000 volunteers and health workers are mobilized to vaccinate children in 140 000 camps.

## **Sri Lanka**

Clashes between the Tamil Tiger rebels and government forces continue unabated, with the military claiming success in overrunning rebel bases in the east and a strategic naval headquarters in the northern town of Mullaitivu (4 April). The

Tamils back up their claim to have an air force with three bombing raids over Colombo—one as residents are watching their country play Australia in the final of the cricket World Cup (30 April). “We thought it was firecrackers at first because [Sanath] Jayasuriya had scored three fours in an over”, says fan Sirial Ranasinghe. “One moment we were all cheering and partying and then the screen went dead and we heard gunfire and explosions”. Another air raid on 26 March causes the international airport to be shut and flights suspended. The Tigers drop several bombs from two light aircraft, killing three airmen. Authorities say the aircraft were smuggled in during relief efforts after the 2004 tsunami. Three airlines cancel flights to Sri Lanka, causing concern in a country reliant on tourism.

The UN says it is running out of funds to feed tens of thousands of displaced people in the east. The World Food Programme estimates that around 155 000 civilians have fled fighting and are based in refugee camps near Batticaloa. The camps are overcrowded, with poor sanitation and food increasingly scarce.

### **Maldives**

The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) accuses the police of beating a man to death in custody, sparking street protests. Hussain Salah’s body was found near Male on 15 April. Police say he was released unharmed and drowned. The MDP accuses President Mamoun Abdul Gayoom, in office since 1978, of dragging his feet on reforms.

British billionaire Sir Philip Green hosts a four-day 55th birthday party on a private island, said to cost more than £6 million. Guests arrive in specially chartered planes, and George Michael is reportedly paid £2 million to sing. Opposition politicians condemn the celebrations, saying they are inappropriate for a poor and conservative Muslim nation.

### **Malaysia**

Speculation grows that Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi will call an early election before the end of 2007, after several high-profile moves on corruption. The last time Badawi was seen to be acting against graft was in 2004, shortly before calling a vote. This time the head of the anti-corruption agency, Zulkipli Mat Noor, is questioned by police and removed from his post amid accusations of financial and sexual misconduct. Deputy Minister Johari Baharom is accused of taking bribes and an investigation is launched (5 March).

Former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim says he will defy a legal ban to re-enter politics (15 March). Anwar was fired in 1998 and arrested on charges of corruption and sodomy. He was released in 2004 and the sodomy charge dismissed, but his criminal record bars him from holding political office until 2008. He says he will run for president of the People’s Justice Party, led by his wife Wan Azizah.

Buddhist monks at the Ang Hock Si Temple on Penang island appeal for help with an infestation of ants, which are biting visitors. According to their religion the monks cannot harm any living creature, but chief monk Boon Keng says that if someone else gets rid of them it will be “the will of the universe” (12 March).

## Singapore

The authorities ban a film about Said Zahari, a journalist arrested in 1963 and jailed for 17 years without trial on charges of subversion. *Zahari's 17 Years* is "against public interest", say censors, ordering all copies to be handed over (12 April).

Seven members of the European parliament accuse the island of being an 'authoritarian state' after they are refused permission to speak at a conference on democracy. The MEPs were invited to speak by the Singapore Democratic Party, opponents of the People's Action Party, which has ruled since 1959.

A search for new suppliers of sand is launched after Indonesia bans exports (19 March). For years Singapore has been importing vast quantities of sand for construction and land reclamation schemes, and Indonesia says some of its islands are disappearing.

## Brunei Darussalam

Conservationists report a marked decline in the number of turtles nesting on the coastline, blaming pollution and poaching (30 April).

## Hong Kong

Chief Executive Donald Tsang is reappointed for five years after winning the first contested election since the territory returned to Chinese rule. Tsang gains 694 votes to 123 for the Civil Party candidate, Alan Leong (25 March). Leong is an outspoken critic of Beijing and used his election campaign to demand democratic reforms. Of Hong Kong's seven million citizens, only 795 members of an election college are eligible to vote, most of them pro-Beijing business and professional leaders.

A week before the election more than 1000 people march through the city centre to demand the right for all citizens to vote (18 March). Tsang says he favours an open democratic system and will work for a new constitution, but has not provided a timetable or specific proposals.

Hong Kong's richest woman, Nina Wang, dies aged 69 (4 April). She leaves an estate worth £2.1 billion—reportedly to her feng shui adviser. The scene is set for a court battle similar to the one Wang fought over her husband's fortune when a charitable trust says there is second will, leaving it the money to create a foundation in her name.

## Papua New Guinea

A cult leader known as 'Black Jesus' goes on trial for 30 charges of murder and rape (20 March). Police say Steven Tari killed and ate three young women he recruited as sex slaves.

## Solomon Islands

A tsunami hits the northwest islands after a strong sea quake (2 April). The UN puts the death toll at 34. Thousands of people, many from the town of Giza, are left homeless.

### **Tuvalu**

Environment Minister Minute Alupi Taupo appeals to the international community to cut carbon emissions to save Tuvalu from rising seas after a study shows that the islands will be underwater in 50 years because of climate change (11 April).

### **Vanuatu**

A two-week state of emergency is declared in Port Vila (5 March) after street violence in which three people are killed. Clashes between villagers from Tanna and Ambrym islands living in the Blacksands squatter camp break out after the death of a woman is blamed on a sorcerer. About 200 people are arrested.

### **Tonga**

Prime Minister Feleti Seveli visits China, where he secures promises of loans of up to £27.5 million to help rebuild Nuku'alofa business district after pro-democracy riots in 2006 (27 April).

The state of emergency declared after the riots is extended in April for the fifth month, despite calls from the leader of the pro-democracy movement, Akilisi Pohiva, for it to be lifted and a timetable for the hand-over of power by the king to be drafted. Pohiva is one of hundreds to have been charged with sedition over the riots.

### **Fiji Islands**

Foreign ministers at a Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Vanuatu call on the military regime to restore democracy within 18 months (16 March). Fiji's army commander Frank Bainimarama, who took over in a military coup in 2006, has said elections will not be held until 2010.

Former prime minister Laisenia Qarase says he faces treason charges over phone calls made to the Australian and New Zealand prime ministers before the coup. The military government claims he was seeking foreign help to prevent the coup, but Qarase says he was inquiring about aid. He has been under house arrest on Vanuabalavu since fleeing the capital in December 2006.

### **Nauru**

A World Health Organisation survey names Nauru the fattest place on Earth, with 94% of adults overweight. Eight of the world's 10 most obese countries are in the South Pacific, with experts saying the problem is linked to poverty and a reliance on cheap food high in calories but low in nutrition.

### **Australia**

In April Prime Minister John Howard says farmland irrigation will be banned unless heavy rains fall in the next few weeks. He says the Murray–Darling river system can

only provide drinking water, acknowledging that this will have a devastating effect on agriculture.

Australia and the USA announce plans to swap up to 200 asylum seekers every year. Migrants held in Guantanamo Bay will be resettled in Australia, while Canberra will send people held in its offshore detention camps to the USA, in an attempt to deter would-be refugees by stopping them reaching their destination of choice. Critics say the move will backfire, with more people coming to Australia in the hope of reaching America (18 April).

Howard says he is to double the number of troops in Afghanistan fighting the Taliban. "We're not losing the war but we will not win it without renewed and increased effort", he says (10 April). Australia has about 550 soldiers fighting with NATO forces in Uruzgan province.

Plans to outlaw books and films glorifying terrorism anger free speech campaigners. Under already strict censorship laws the publication or dissemination of materials that promote, incite or instruct people to carry out terrorist acts is illegal. The amended law will outlaw publications thought to speak out in favour of terrorist violence (13 April).

Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks pleads guilty to charges of supporting terrorism under a plea bargain (27 March). The USA and Australia agree that Hicks, who has been held for five years since his capture in Afghanistan, can serve out his sentence in his homeland. He receives a seven-year term, with all but nine months suspended.

Labor is elected to a fourth term of government in New South Wales, beating the Liberal-Nation coalition that rules nationally (24 March). Morris Iemma will return as premier. A former Guantanamo Bay detainee, Mamdouh Habib, fails in his bid for election as an independent.

Wild camels in Western Australia face a cull because drought conditions are putting them in competition with native animals and livestock (14 March). Thirsty camels have gone on the rampage in outback towns, destroying property in their search for water.

Outspoken Muslim cleric Taj el-Din al-Hilali announces plans to form a political party to contest federal elections in 2007. Sheikh Hilali has caused an outcry by comparing women not wearing the veil to "uncovered meat", leading to calls from mainstream Muslim leaders for him to stop talking to the media and concentrate on giving pastoral care.

Lights are switched off in Sydney for an hour to raise awareness about global warming (31 March). So-called Earth Hour is supported by the majority of businesses and residents in the city, with landmarks such as the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge in unaccustomed darkness.

The Harbour Bridge is closed to traffic as part of celebrations of the 75th anniversary of its opening, giving more than 200 000 people the rare opportunity to walk across (18 March).

National airline Qantas buys a 30% stake in Vietnam's Pacific Airlines, hoping to turn the company into a low-cost carrier (26 April). Qantas is itself the subject of an ongoing takeover attempt from Airline Partners Australia.

The discovery of troglobites in Western Australia halts plans for a £5 billion iron ore mine. Environmental officers say the Rio Tinto mine threatens the existence of the tiny spider-like creatures and refuse a permit (29 March).

A giant cane toad nicknamed Toadzilla is captured in the Northern Territory, weighing just under two pounds and the size of a small dog (27 March). Cane toads, introduced to Australia in the 1930s, are poisonous to some indigenous wildlife and pose a substantial environmental threat.

Australia wins the cricketing World Cup in the Caribbean after being in untouchable form throughout the tournament (28 April). The competition is overshadowed by the death of Pakistani coach Bob Woolmer in Jamaica, which becomes the subject of a murder investigation.

### **Norfolk Island**

New Zealand chef Glenn McNeill is convicted of killing restaurant manager Janelle Patton in the island's first murder trial in 151 years (9 March).

### **New Zealand**

An Auckland court fines the makers of Ribena £83 000 for misleading the public over the drink's vitamin content. GlaxoSmithKline pleads guilty to charges of breaching fair trade laws after two school pupils tested Ribena in science lessons and found it contained lower levels of vitamin C than fruit-based drinks, despite claims the syrup has four times more vitamin C than oranges (27 March).

MPs debate a proposed law banning parents from smacking their children, drawing angry street protests from critics who accuse the government of interfering in family life. The Green Party, which is sponsoring the bill, says it will stop parents who abuse their children using a "reasonable force" argument in their defence (28 March).

### **Canada**

The first person charged under anti-terrorism laws loses his bid to challenge their legality (5 April). Mohammed Momin Khawajam was arrested in March 2004 in a joint operation with UK police, accused of being part of the so-called 'fertilizer bomb' plot to attack the UK. His lawyers say the anti-terror legislation is unconstitutional but the Supreme Court refuses to hear the case, clearing the way for his trial.

Guantanamo Bay detainee Omar Khadr, a Canadian captured in Afghanistan in 2002 when he was 15 years old, is charged with attempted murder and supporting terrorism after five years in the prison (24 April). He faces a military tribunal.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor is under pressure from opposition parties after reports that prisoners handed to Afghan troops by Canadian soldiers have been tortured (24 April). At least 30 detainees told journalists they had been beaten, stripped and starved in Afghan prisons after being handed over by Canadian armed forces based in Kandahar.

Environment Minister John Baird admits Canada will not meet its Kyoto obligations and sets new targets to reduce emissions by 20% before 2020 (27 April). He says trying to abide by Kyoto would be too damaging to economic growth.

Halifax in Nova Scotia withdraws its bid to host the 2014 Commonwealth Games because of concerns about the budget, leaving Glasgow and Abuja in the race (9 March).

Prime Minister Stephen Harper joins the Queen at a ceremony near Lille in France to open a memorial to thousands of Canadians who died during the Battle of Vimy Ridge during the first world war (9 April).

### **Antigua and Barbuda**

Online gambling firms win a victory against the USA after the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules that Washington is unfairly targeting websites based offshore (30 March). The case was brought by Antigua and Barbuda, where many gambling sites are based, in 2003. The WTO says the USA can only continue to block the sites if the laws are applied equally to US firms.

### **Trinidad and Tobago**

Former prime minister Basdeo Panday has his conviction for failing to declare a London bank account overturned (20 March) and vows to resume his seat in parliament. On 20 April Panday, leader of the main opposition United National Congress, is barred from entering the legislature, but says he will fight the ban in the courts.

### **Dominica**

Environmentalists accuse Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit of 'selling' the country's vote at the International Whaling Commission. After a visit to Japan, Skerrit announces a series of aid packages from Tokyo while renewing his support for commercial whaling (23 April).

### **St Lucia**

The government reestablishes diplomatic ties with Taiwan, a decade after they were cut in favour of China. Beijing, which has poured financial aid into St Lucia, calls the move a "brutal interference in China's internal affairs" and urges the authorities to reconsider (30 April).

### **Grenada**

The Privy Council rules that 14 prisoners sentenced to death over the 1983 coup should be re-sentenced (10 February). It says the sentences, handed down in 1986 and later commuted to life in prison, are illegitimate. Maurice Bishop, then the socialist prime minister, and 10 others were killed during the coup organized by the CIA.

### **Barbados**

An online archive listing the details of nearly 100 000 slaves owned by British colonists in Barbados is launched in April to mark the 200th anniversary of the

abolition of the slave trade. Ancestry.co.uk will eventually name three million slaves, to help relatives trace their ancestry.

The country releases its first full-length feature film, *Hit for Six*, a story about a cricketer accused of match-fixing (20 April).

### **Guyana**

President Bharrat Jagdeo announces plans for an ethanol plant in Skeldon in April, saying the alternative fuel could “add a new sector” to the economy.

### **Cyprus**

Greek Cypriots demolish a wall forming part of a barrier that has divided the capital, Nicosia, for over 30 years (9 March). Some residents liken the move to the fall of the Berlin wall, but analysts say it is largely tactical—intended to win international approval in its dispute against Turkish Cypriots. Before the opening can be used as a crossing point, crumbling buildings need to be shored up and the area checked for landmines.

A Greek Cypriot MEP is arrested at a UK military base after refusing to pay a £300 fine for painting slogans on British property in 2006 (12 April). Marios Matsakis is taken into custody while visiting as part of a European delegation. The Cypriot government and European parliament protest against the arrest, which they call unnecessary and divisive. Matsakis is released two days later after going on a hunger strike.

### **Falkland Islands**

The 25th anniversary of the Falklands war is marked with a ceremony at St Paul’s cathedral in London, attended by former prime minister Margaret Thatcher (2 April). Thatcher started the war after Argentina invaded the Falklands in 1982. Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary Margaret Beckett expresses ‘regret’ over the loss of life, although Prime Minister Tony Blair says Thatcher was right to go to war.

Argentina cancels a deal with the UK to share any oil found off the Falkland Islands, saying cooperation between the countries must be linked to reopening talks over the islands’ sovereignty (28 March).

### **UK**

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein agree to share power in Northern Ireland, ending decades of bitter and bloody enmity (26 March). The deal comes after the DUP wins the most seats in Assembly elections, securing 36 of 108. Sinn Fein takes 28, the Ulster Unionist Party 18, the Social Democratic and Labour Party 16 and the Alliance Party seven. DUP leader Ian Paisley and his Sinn Fein counterpart Gerry Adams meet for the first time in Stormont to thrash out the deal, a watershed in the province’s politics. They decide to form a devolved government on 8 May, with Paisley as First Minister and Martin McGuinness as his deputy.

Fifteen British sailors and marines are captured by Iran in the Shatt al-Arab waterway (23 March). They are held for almost two weeks and shown 'confessing' to having trespassed into Iranian waters in televised interviews. Relations between the UK and Iran are seriously damaged, with diplomats saying there will be "repercussions" from the incident. After their release two of the captives sell their stories to the media, prompting a public outcry. Defence Minister Des Browne, who authorized the move, is forced to apologize.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown delivers what is expected to be his last Budget before taking over as Prime Minister (20 March). Tony Blair announces his resignation after local elections in May, with signs that no senior Labour figure will challenge Brown for the leadership.

The House of Commons votes overwhelmingly for a fully elected House of Lords (7 March), only for the peers to vote for a fully appointed chamber a week later. The government says it will push ahead with reform plans.

### **Around the Commonwealth**

Queen Elizabeth calls for a celebration of diversity in her annual Commonwealth Day speech at Westminster Abbey on 12 March. The theme is 'Respecting difference, promoting understanding'.

Secretary-General Don McKinnon attends independence celebrations in Ghana (6 March) and a Commonwealth Day reception in Geneva. During March and April he also visits Sierra Leone, New Zealand, Bangladesh, India, Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam.

Deputy Secretary-General Florence Mugasha visits Uganda in April, where she reviews preparations for the November CHOGM and visits a Commonwealth project to rehabilitate former child soldiers.

Education officials from Commonwealth Pacific countries meet (13–15 March) in Papua New Guinea and call for a regional professional registration network of teachers.

Women MPs meet at Westminster (13–14 March) to discuss maternal and newborn health services. They cite lack of education, health facilities and skilled personnel as major challenges.

The Commonwealth Connects international e-partnership summit takes place in Delhi (23–24 March), with the aim of narrowing the gap between those with access to information and communication technology and those without.

Nutritionists meet at the Commonwealth Secretariat's headquarters in London to discuss the major causes of malnutrition and ways of improving child health (26 March).

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum is held in Auckland (26–27 March) with the theme 'Delivering Development through Local Leadership: A New Commonwealth Vision'.