

# Commonwealth Update

JUDITH SOAL

**ABSTRACT** *May–June 2007: Umaru Yar’Adua becomes president of Nigeria, despite ongoing criticism of the elections; South African president Thabo Mbeki facilitates crisis talks over Zimbabwe and the London High Court finds former Zambian president Frederick Chiluba guilty of stealing £23m. Pakistani militants step up their activities at the Lal Masjid mosque and Gordon Brown becomes prime minister of Britain. Traffic police in Kolkata are given extra oxygen because of severe pollution; New Zealand scientists discover a “skimmed milk” gene in some cows; and a Vanuatu bank decides to recognize traditional currency, including pig tusks.*

## Nigeria

Umaru Yar’Adua is sworn in as president (29 May) after widely disputed elections in April. Goodluck Jonathan, from Niger Delta, becomes vice-president. In his inaugural speech, Yar’Adua promises to tackle corruption and to address violence in the Delta region. He acknowledges shortcomings in the election and promises to reform the electoral process. Outgoing president Olusegun Obasanjo says he will retire to his farm in Ogun state after eight years in charge. Election observers reported severe irregularities in the voting, with the results rejected by the international community and many Nigerians. Trade unions organize a two-day strike in protest and a group of 48 Nobel laureates, including Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, calls for the polls to be re-run. The two main opposition candidates challenge the results in court, but on 27 June the opposition All Nigeria People’s Party (ANPP) says it will participate in the government. The parties agree to work together to improve the electoral process, although there is division within the ANPP, with second-placed presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari declaring the deal premature.

Four state governors go on the run ahead of the handover ceremonies. Elected officials are protected from prosecution, but the men would be vulnerable to arrest as their terms end. In Plateau state, Joshua Dariye, who skipped bail in the UK in 2004 on money-laundering charges, fails to arrive at the ceremony. Boni Haruna of Adamawa state, Chimaroke Nnamani of Enugu state and Saminu Turaki of Jigawa, all of whom have had brushes with the anti-corruption Economic and Serious Crimes Commission, also do not attend the ceremonies. In Abuja the winning candidate for governor, Theodore Orji, who was in custody on charges of embezzling

---

Correspondence Address: Judith Soal. Email: [Judith.soal@guardian.co.uk](mailto:Judith.soal@guardian.co.uk)

state funds, is released on bail and sworn in four days ahead of schedule on 25 May. His predecessor Uzor Orji Kalu, also accused of corruption, leaves the country after the ceremony. Justice Minister Bayo Ojo calls the move unconstitutional. On 8 June the ESCC says it is investigating almost all the 36 ex-governors, and calls on those who have gone missing to hand themselves over to police.

The militant group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), steps up its activity in May, capturing dozens more foreign oil workers in armed attacks—and later releasing many of them, presumably after a ransom has been paid. MEND also bombs oil pipelines and occupies installations. Attacks by the militants, who want a larger share of oil wealth for locals, cut production by more than 25% in 2006. In June MEND announces a month-long ceasefire to allow the new government to consider its demands and formulate a peace plan—although the kidnappings continue. On 14 June a high-profile oil militant is released on bail on health grounds. Mujahid Dokubo-Asari has been held for almost two years on treason charges.

Trade unions hold a four-day strike (21–24 June) over sharp increases in petrol prices and VAT. They call on the new government to reverse the rises instituted in late May or face indefinite stoppages. The strike is called off after a series of compromises by the government, including reducing the increases and freezing petrol prices for a year. Nigeria is Africa's biggest oil producer but has to import most of its petrol because of the poor state of its refineries.

Sharia police in Kano state demolish four theatres that they say have hosted acts of immorality, including a lesbian wedding (11 May). Lesbianism is illegal in Nigeria. The theatre owners deny the accusations and vow to take the case to court. "They are saying that we are committing crimes against Islam which is not true. They are giving people wrong perception about us, actually", says Magaji 'Yan Maidu. In Bauchi state, a *sharia* court sentences a man to death by stoning for raping two teenage girls (17 May).

The government seeks £3.5 billion compensation from pharmaceutical giant Pfizer in June, claiming it carried out irresponsible trials of an anti-meningitis drug. Of the 200 children who participated in the trial, 50 died and others developed mental and physical disabilities. A separate case against Pfizer in Kano state has been running for more than two years. Pfizer denies any wrongdoing, saying it obtained "verbal consent" from parents before the trials, which were conducted with government approval.

A satellite bought from China is successfully launched (14 May), also by China. The communications satellite is to offer broadcasting, phone and broadband services for Africa when it reaches its final position in late 2007. "It gives you bandwidth to enable you to communicate from point A to point B, from rural Africa to urban cities", said Dr Bashir Gwandu, director of the Nigeria Communications Commission.

The strength of Nigerian literature is recognized, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wins the Orange prize for fiction for her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Chinua Achebe claims the International Booker prize in honour of his career achievements.

## Sierra Leone

The trial of former Liberian leader Charles Taylor for crimes committed during the Sierra Leone civil war begins in The Hague (4 June). Taylor initially refuses to attend

proceedings, which are broadcast on four giant screens in Freetown. On 20 June a Freetown court finds three rebel leaders, Alex Tamba Brima, Brima Kamara and Santigie Borbor Kanu, guilty of crimes against humanity during the 10-year conflict.

MPs pass a bill banning underage marriage but drop a clause to outlaw female circumcision (8 June). The press and public are asked to leave the chambers during the debate on female genital mutilation and when they return the clause has been removed, drawing condemnation from campaigners.

Transport Minister Prince Harding is suspended after a helicopter crash kills 22 people (3 June). The helicopter had previously been grounded for failing safety checks, and an investigation is launched into why it was allowed to resume flights. Togolese Sports Minister Richard Attipoe is among the dead.

Outgoing British prime minister Tony Blair is made a paramount chief of the village of Mahera on his last state visit to Africa (31 May). Blair is honoured for his role in helping to end the civil war.

### **Ghana**

A British oil firm announces the discovery of 600 million barrels of light offshore oil (18 June). Tullow Oil says the reserves far exceeded forecasts, but could take up to seven years to start flowing. President John Kufuor says the discovery will give a major boost to the economy, turning Ghana into an African tiger. "Oil is money, and we need money to do the schools, the roads, the hospitals", he says.

The World Bank approves a £55 million aid package to Ghana to help reduce poverty (25 May). The money will be used to try to halve 1991 poverty rates of 51.7% within a year, says World Bank's Ghana representative Mats Karlsson.

### **Cameroon**

A Kenyan Airways plane crashes in Cameroon, killing all 114 people on board (5 May). Rescuers take 36 hours to find the plane, which plunged into mangrove swamps minutes after taking off from Douala airport. An investigation into the reasons for the crash is launched.

### **Uganda**

A ceasefire signed between the government and Lords Resistance Army rebels in April appears to hold, although there are accusations of infringements on both sides. On 30 June the sides sign a deal agreeing to use Ugandan justice to address human rights abuses rather than sending suspects to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The UN says it will take up to four years to rebuild the north of the country after 20 years of war, if the ongoing talks succeed.

Opposition leader Kizza Besigye, who is on trial for treason, files a private prosecution against the head of the police investigations unit over rape charges brought against him before the 2006 presidential election (18 May). He was found not guilty and the judge described the investigation into the case as "crude and amateurish". Besigye accuses Elizabeth Kuteesa, the investigations chief, of misconduct.

Violent protests force the government to suspend a plan to give thousands of acres of rainforest to an Indian-owned sugar company (22 May). Environmentalists warned that the planned sugar cane plantation would cause extensive soil erosion and threaten endangered species. Three people were killed in protests against the plant in Kampala in April. Environment minister Maria Mutagamba says the government is trying to find alternative land for the Mehta Group.

Jaffar Amin, son of former ruler Idi Amin, sets up a website trying to gather support for an inquiry which he says would restore his father's reputation. The former leader has been accused of responsibility for 500 000 deaths during his eight years in power, but his family says his legacy has been "misinterpreted". They first spoke out after the release of the film *The Last King of Scotland*, which portrays Amin, in 2006. The government rejects the call (22 May), saying there is sufficient proof of the atrocities.

Former health minister Jim Muhwezi is charged with embezzling money from a £2.1 million immunization grant (28 May). The Global Fund to Fight AIDs, Tuberculosis and Malaria suspended grants to Uganda in 2005 after finding a shortfall in accounts. Three officials have also been charged.

Uganda and Kenya join Tanzania in banning thin plastic bags to limit environmental damage. The bans come into effect in June and July.

## Kenya

Uhuru Kenyatta is reinstated as head of the Kenya Africa National Union after a High Court battle (28 June). His rival Nicholas Biwott assumed the leadership in 2006 when the party split over whether to join an opposition alliance, the Orange Democratic Movement-Kenya. Kenyatta, son of the country's first president, is in favour of the alliance and could stand as its candidate in presidential elections.

Police raid a Nairobi slum, home to 500 000 people, killing at least 33 members of the outlawed Mungiki sect (5 June). President Mwai Kibaki orders the crackdown after a spate of beheadings blamed on the sect. The Mungiki, who claim to be inspired by the Mau Mau rebellion, control many public transport routes and have links with senior politicians. Some analysts fear their recent activity is an attempt to destabilize December elections. Amnesty International criticizes the police for using excessive force rather than prosecuting suspects. On 21 June former Mungiki leader John Kamunya is jailed for five years for possessing an illegal weapon and cannabis. The next day 11 people are murdered in or around Nairobi.

The USA promises £7 million worth of training and equipment to boost counter-terrorism forces (4 May). Washington sees Kenya as a crucial ally in the so-called war against terror, but Islamic leaders accuse the government of working with the USA to persecute Muslims.

Kibaki announces plans to scrap high school fees from 2008 (1 May) after introducing free primary education in 2002. He says it will cost the government £31 million.

## Seychelles

President James Michel's ruling Seychelles Progressive People's Front wins early elections (12 May), claiming 57% of the vote. Voting was brought forward after

opposition MPs boycotted parliament over moves to ban political parties from owning radio stations.

### **Malawi**

The Supreme Court rules that MPs who switch parties can be expelled from parliament (15 June), in a blow for President Bingu wa Mutharika. The ruling could affect more than 70 MPs, about half of them from Mutharika's minority Democratic Progressive Party government (DPP). Mutharika himself was elected for the United Democratic Front before setting up the DPP.

### **Zambia**

The London High Court finds former president Frederick Chiluba guilty of stealing £23 million in state funds (4 May). The judge says Chiluba took part in two conspiracies to siphon off public funds and was aided by his UK law firms, Meer Care & Desai and Cave Malik & Co. He says Chiluba shamelessly defrauded his people and flaunted his wealth at a time when the majority of Zambians lived on 50p a day—singling out £250 000 spent on clothes from a Swiss boutique. The civil case was brought by the Zambian government against Chiluba and 19 of his associates, and was held in private so as not to prejudice a parallel criminal trial in his home country.

### **Zimbabwe**

The government meets opposition leaders in South Africa in June for crisis talks facilitated by Thabo Mbeki, the first time a government team has had direct contact with the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). A news blackout is imposed on the talks, which are planned to continue during July. The economic crisis deepens, with annual inflation reaching 3700% in April. A leaked report predicts the economy will collapse within six months.

Police raid the MDC offices and arrest 200 activists (26 May). They are all released within two days, but some say they were beaten in custody. The arrests came a day after police extended a ban on political rallies in the capital. On 8 May police break up a lawyers' march in Harare, beating up several protesters. The demonstration was over police harassment.

Parliament passes a law to allow the government to monitor emails, phone calls, internet usage and letters (14 June). The Interception of Communications Bill obliges internet service providers to install equipment, at their own expense, which will allow a monitoring service to intercept emails.

Junior hospital doctors go on strike for the second time in six months to press for higher wages (1 June). Many nurses also stay away, saying their salaries do not cover the cost of transport. In May authorities announce that electricity will only be available for four hours a day to ration usage. The move is designed to support wheat farmers who need power to irrigate their crops. Electricity will only be available for domestic use between 5 pm and 9 pm local time.

Zimbabwe is elected to chair the UN commission on sustainable development (12 May), despite objections from Western governments. Developing countries are said to have voted for Zimbabwe in a secret ballot to show they cannot be pushed around by more powerful nations.

A court agrees to a request from Equatorial Guinea to extradite Simon Mann, a Briton said to have masterminded a coup plot (9 May). The former SAS officer was arrested in Zimbabwe for apparently trying to buy arms as part of the plot. His lawyers appeal.

The Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo, Pius Ncube, calls on Mugabe to resign (6 May), days after the president warns the clergy to stay out of politics.

### **South Africa**

Hundreds of thousands of public sector workers go on strike to demand a 12% pay rise, resulting in the closure of most schools and hospitals. The stoppage lasts for four weeks, ending on 28 June when the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) accepts a revised government offer of 7.5%. It is the largest strike since the end of apartheid, when unions entered an alliance with the ruling African National Congress. Relations in the alliance have become strained, with COSATU criticizing government economic policies which it says favour big business over workers and have not done enough to alleviate poverty. Some see the strike as a direct challenge to the leadership of President Thabo Mbeki.

An ANC policy conference in June is dominated by the question of who will succeed Mbeki, although party leadership elections will not be held until December. The president has indicated that he may stay on as ANC leader, although the constitution rules out a third term in charge of the country when he steps down in 2009. Other contenders are deputy leader Jacob Zuma and heavyweight businessmen Tokyo Sexwale and Cyril Ramaphosa.

The prospect of new corruption charges against Zuma is raised when a court grants prosecutors permission to use documents from Mauritius thought to contain fresh evidence (5 June). The former deputy president's corruption trial collapsed in 2006, but the 14 documents said to offer information about payments offered to Zuma by French arms company Thint could lead to a new trial. Both the company and Zuma have appealed against the decision by the Durban High Court.

Cape Town mayor Helen Zille is elected leader of the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), succeeding Tony Leon who steps down after 13 years (6 May). The DA is the largest opposition party but only holds 12% of the seats in the National Assembly. It has long been criticized for being too white and middle class.

Annual police statistics show a rise in the number of murders to 19 202, an increase of 2.4%. Bank robberies, burglaries and hijackings also increased, but there was a fall in reported rapes and common robberies.

### **Lesotho**

The country experiences its worst drought in 30 years, with one in five people needing food aid. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation says the price of maize has doubled in a year (21 June).

## Namibia

An agency to improve air safety standards in Africa opens in Windhoek (28 June). The Africa Civil Aviation Agency will train pilots and coordinate policy across the continent. Although Africa only accounts for 3% of global air traffic, its airlines are responsible for 17% of fatal crashes.

## India

The government drafts ambitious social security legislation to benefit the 390 million non-unionised workers. The bill, which offers life insurance and disability benefits, is approved by cabinet (24 May) and will be put before parliament in August. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi described it as a “revolutionary step”. Casual workers will contribute one rupee (50p) a day to join the scheme, which is expected to cost the state £11 billion.

Fourteen people are killed in an explosion at one of India’s largest mosques and subsequent rioting in Hyderabad (18 May). The explosion at Mecca Masjid during Friday prayers kills nine people, and more die when police fire on protesters. Police say they have defused another two bombs nearby. A suspect is arrested on 25 May.

The World Bank approves a £300 million loan to help Indian farmers (27 June). The money will help thousands of rural cooperative banks offer cheaper loans to struggling farmers.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pays tribute to the “inspired revolutionaries” of the Indian rebellion on the uprising’s 150th anniversary. Thousands of people retrace the steps of soldiers who marched from Meerut to Delhi in 1857, and celebrations are held at the Red Fort in Delhi (11 May). The uprising began when Hindu and Muslim soldiers revolted against the British East India Company over new gun cartridges said to be greased with pork and beef, forbidden by their religions. It was eventually crushed by the British.

Maoists burn down a railway station at Baramdi in West Bengal as part of ongoing anti-government protests (27 June). They also kidnap two guards and blow up rail tacks. More than 6000 people have died during the rebels’ 20-year fight for a communist state.

Fifteen people are killed in ethnic clashes in Moreh town in Manipur (10 June), leading police to impose a curfew and a shoot-on-sight policy.

Gujjar protesters win an inquiry into affirmative action policies after a week of clashes in Rajasthan state, in which at least 23 people are killed (29 May). State authorities promise to consider their demand to be able to benefit from quotas giving better access to government jobs and education places. During the clashes, hundreds of Gujjars block roads into Delhi setting fire to vehicles and diverting trains. The rival Meena group in Rajasthan, who at present benefit most from the quotas, have threatened their own protests if Gujjar demands are met.

Thousands of Sikhs demonstrate in Punjab and Haryana after the leader of the Dera Sacha Sauda sect appears in an advert dressed as the last Sikh guru, Gobind Singh. After a general strike and prolonged clashes, the sect apologizes (28 May).

More than 600 prisoners are released from Tahir Jail in Delhi because of overcrowding (19 June). The jail has more than double the 6250 inmates it can cater for, and six prisoners died in the week before the releases because of excessive heat.

A Bhagalpur court convicts 14 Hindus of killing and burying 116 Muslims during riots in 1989 (18 June). More than 1000 people died in the riots, which came after Hindus marched on the holy site of Ayodhya in Bihar.

A school in Kerala refuses to readmit five HIV-positive children expelled in 2006 (6 June). Despite appeals from education authorities, the school says other parents would not accept the pupils. The children, aged between five and 11, will be taught in a private orphanage.

The low-caste Bahujan Samaj Party wins a significant victory in Uttar Pradesh elections, gaining enough seats to form its own government—the first time any party in the state has been able to avoid a coalition government since 1991 (11 May). Analysts say it is a major setback for mainstream parties, and shows the increasing support base of lower caste politicians.

Heavy rains kill more than 140 people in June, with the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka the worst hit. In May a violent storm in Uttar Pradesh kills 27 people.

Two doctors are arrested (25 June) after allowing their 15-year-old son to perform a caesarian section to get into the Guinness Book of Records as the youngest person to carry out surgery. Tamil Nadu police say the parents have been charged with endangering life.

The economy grows at an annual rate of 9.1%, boosted by the manufacturing sector. Tata Steel announces a 41% rise in quarterly profits to £96 million.

The state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) announces plans to invest £1 billion in expansion projects over five years. The ONGC produces about 1.6 million tonnes of crude oil a year in Assam and hopes the investment will double production (15 May).

Five oil refineries in Assam are given a year to stop discharging effluents into local rivers or be shut down (29 June). Pollution control board chief Jawaharlal Dutta says the levels of discharge are 15 to 20 times higher than acceptable federal limits. “The refineries have done huge damage to the rivers in the past 40 years. A lot of marine life, like fish, tortoises and the river dolphin, has almost disappeared”, he says.

Traffic police in Kolkata are given access to extra oxygen because of severe pollution in the city. Traffic stations across the city are equipped with oxygen concentrators normally used in hospitals so that officers can take oxygen before and after their shifts. Kolkata is one of the most polluted cities in the world and has the highest rate of lung cancer in India. Other respiratory diseases are also prevalent, with traffic officers being among the most vulnerable.

Wildlife officials in Orissa are to use satellites to track endangered gharials released into the wild. For the past 20 years Nandan Kanan zoo staff have been rearing the crocodile-like reptiles and releasing them into the Mahanandi river, but only a handful of the 500 set free have survived. They hope the monitoring programme will help improve survival rates.

The Taj Mahal needs a mud pack to restore the whiteness of the marble, MPs are told. A restoration report says the 17th century mausoleum needs to be caked in clay, which will draw out impurities (15 May).

A Bollywood star is forced to apologize after wearing a burqa inside a Muslim shrine (26 June). Himesh Reshanniya says he is sorry for causing offence. He explains that he went to the Ajmer shrine to offer thanks for the success of his latest film, but was mobbed by fans at the entrance so donned the burqa to pray in peace.

Walt Disney signs a deal with a Bollywood film company to make animated movies using the voices of Indian stars (12 June). The animations will be made in Hindi, and overseen by Yah Raj Films. The first project, provisionally called *Roadside Romeo*, will feature the voices of Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor.

### **Pakistan**

More than a million people are affected when heavy storms and then a cyclone hit the south, destroying hundreds of thousands of homes in late June. Several hundred people are killed and many victims go for days without drinking water, food or shelter as relief efforts are hampered by bad weather. In Turbat police fire tear gas at crowds who storm local government buildings demanding help. Much of Karachi, where 200 people died, is without electricity or running water for several days. Before the storms Karachi is hit by a heat wave and repeated power cuts.

President Pervez Musharraf continues to face severe challenges to his authority, with criticism of his suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry refusing to die down. He is forced to withdraw tough new media restrictions after fresh waves of protest (10 June). The powers would have allowed authorities to punish broadcasters who criticize the armed forces or ‘undermine national unity’. Thousands of lawyers, opposition supporters and journalists march against the curbs in cities across Pakistan. Demonstrations calling for Chaudhry’s reinstatement continue, with at least 41 people dying in clashes with police in Karachi in May. The Chief Justice goes to the Supreme Court to challenge both his suspension and the powers of a judicial panel investigating his alleged wrongdoing.

Militant students from the Lal Masjid mosque in Islamabad step up their activity, kidnapping nine hostages—including six Chinese women they accuse of being prostitutes. The pro-Taliban students break into an acupuncture clinic (22 June), saying it is a brothel. The hostages are released the next day after clerics say authorities have promised to close down mixed-sex massage parlours. The mosque has been openly defying the government for months and calling for *sharia* law in the capital, with Musharraf under increasing pressure to crack down.

Punjab police drafted in to Islamabad to help with the mosque crisis demonstrate on the streets over the death of a colleague they say was denied medical leave and the “extremely unhygienic conditions” they are experiencing in barracks near the Aabpara market (19 June).

Pakistan summons the UK ambassador to protest against a decision to award a knighthood to Salman Rushdie, whose 1989 novel *The Satanic Verses* was declared blasphemous by Islamic leaders. The Foreign Ministry says the award shows an “utter lack of sensitivity” towards Muslims. Religious Affairs minister Ejaz ul-Haq causes an outcry by appearing to suggest that the knighthood justifies suicide attacks

(18 June). In parliament he says: “If someone commits suicide bombing to protect the honour of the Prophet Muhammad, his act is justified”. He later denies supporting extremism.

An explosion in a Taliban-controlled area of North Waziristan kills at least 32 people (19 June). The army says the dead were militants who lost their lives when a bomb being made at a training base exploded prematurely, but locals say the site was a *madrassa* (religious school) which was bombed during an air strike and that many of the dead were children.

Clashes in the tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan continue, with the two governments alternatively blaming each other, foreign militants, the USA or NATO.

Balochistan separatists are blamed for a series of explosions in Quetta that kill two people (26 May). Another four die in subsequent battles between rebels and police. Twelve suspects are arrested on 30 May, but hours later another bomb explodes outside a government building not far from Quetta.

A bomb explodes in a hotel in Peshawar, killing at least 24 people (15 May). The blast demolishes parts of the four-storey Marhaba hotel near a busy market, trapping people inside. Up to 30 people are injured. The motive for the attacks is not known. There have been a series of recent attacks in Peshawar, with some blaming militants from nearby tribal areas.

A man is acquitted on charges of masterminding a series of suicide bombs in Karachi in May 2004 that killed at least 80 worshippers in Shia mosques (7 May). Gul Hasan wins his Supreme Court appeal after being convicted of the offences in 2004 and sentenced to death.

### **India and Pakistan**

Thirteen people are killed in clashes between militants and security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir (29 June), the most severe of several incidents in the region. Although clashes continue, the level of violence has decreased since India and Pakistan began peace talks in 2004.

A US watchdog accuses Pakistan of building a nuclear reactor able to produce weapons grade plutonium (22 June). The Institute of Science for International Security says photographs taken in June show work is “rapidly progressing” at Khusab, west of Islamabad. Plutonium-based weapons carry more explosive power in smaller, lighter missiles than those made with uranium, which Pakistan has used for years. “By going plutonium . . . we have to interpret that as an attempt to make smaller, more powerful weapons that are going to be more destructive in India”, the report says. Foreign Ministry officials deny suggestions the work could trigger a new arms race with India. “We were not the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the region or test them”, the ministry says.

India and the USA fail to reach a deal on nuclear cooperation after three days of talks in Delhi (3 June). Foreign Minister Shiv Shankar Menon says progress was made but there are still areas of disagreement. Under the deal India would get access to US civilian nuclear technology if it opens its facilities to inspection. The crucial sticking points are on the issues of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel and carrying out more nuclear tests.

## Bangladesh

Interim leader Fakhruddin Ahmed denies claims that the military is running the country, saying that he is in charge (9 May). He says the state of emergency is necessary to stop violence between supporters of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

An anti-corruption court established by the military-backed government convicts its first former minister, sending Amanullah Aman to jail for 13 years (21 June). It says the minister for labour and employment in Khaleda Zia's previous government amassed wealth incompatible with his status. He is ordered to pay a £7000 fine. On 21 May Zia's former political secretary, Harris Chowdhury, is jailed for three years after being found guilty of corruption. Lawyers for Chowdhury, who is in hiding, say he will appeal. Another 60 former MPs and ministers and hundreds of activists from the two main political parties are awaiting trial as part of the anti-corruption drive implemented in January. The government says it will hold elections by the end of 2008.

Former prime minister Sheikh Hasina is prevented from leaving the country (15 June). A court order says her absence could damage the corruption investigations against her. In April Sheikh Hasina was stranded abroad for two weeks without permission to re-enter the country. Then in May authorities lift restrictions on the movements of both Sheikh Hasina and Zia, but aides say they still face curbs on their movements.

A court tells police to investigate murder charges against Zia and 27 members of the BNP over a grenade attack on an Awami League rally in 2004 that killed 20 people (5 June).

The government refuses permission for a UN human rights expert to leave the country (14 May). Sigma Huda, who faces corruption charges, says the court has withdrawn her permission to travel because she is a "security threat". Her husband, Nazmul Huda, was communications minister in the BNP administration.

A newspaper editor and former government minister is sentenced to five years in jail for possessing alcohol without a licence (26 June). Anwar Hossain Manju, who is abroad, is found guilty in his absence. A permit is required to keep alcohol in Bangladesh, but the law is rarely rigidly enforced.

More than 100 people are killed in mudslides and floods in Chittagong after the heaviest rain for years. Many others are missing after a hill partially collapsed on a shanty town (11 June).

The state-owned airline Bimam is to cut more than 1400 jobs as part of a privatization move (9 May). The government has announced plans to turn the cash-strapped airline into a public limited company.

## Sri Lanka

The civil war continues despite an official ceasefire, with the army claiming significant gains over the Tamil Tiger rebels. On 20 June the military says it has killed 30 rebels in the east and predicts it will soon defeat rebel strongholds there. The rebels describe the developments as a "tactical withdrawal" and say the government will be unable to maintain its advance. Fighting also continues in the north, where the Tigers control a large area.

A popular Tamil website is blocked in June, reportedly on government orders. TamilNet is used as a source of information by the substantial Tamil diaspora, as well as journalists and diplomats. The independent Free Media Movement describes the move as censorship.

International experts monitoring a commission to investigate human rights abuses warn of shortcomings in the proceedings (15 June). The President's Commission was established to probe abuses, including political assassinations and the killing of 17 French charity workers. The observers say there are several problems with the investigation, including the involvement of the attorney general's office and the absence of a witness protection programme.

The Supreme Court orders an end to the evictions of Tamil residents of Colombo (8 June). Nearly 400 Tamils have been expelled amid police claims that they pose a security risk. President Mahinda Rajapakse orders the police chief to explain the evictions.

Two Red Cross volunteers abducted in Colombo are found dead in Ratnapura (3 June). The pair were taken by gunmen claiming to be police.

A bomb blast in Colombo on 28 May kills six civilians and wounds 20 people. Police blame the Tamil Tigers, who deny any involvement.

The UK suspends aid payments to Sri Lanka in May over human rights concerns. The USA also defers some aid.

University lecturers Rajan Hoole and Kopalasingham Sritharan win the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders for documenting abuses during the civil war (4 May). They share the honours with a former policeman from Burundi. The pair is commended for chronicling wrongs committed by both the Tamil Tigers and the security forces, often "at great personal risk".

## **Maldives**

Global warming is blamed for tidal flooding on the islands in June. Authorities fear rising sea levels threaten the future of the low-lying islands.

The coastguard fires on a suspected Tamil Tiger boat in Maldivian waters (17 May). After a 12-hour stand-off the boat sinks and five people are captured.

## **Malaysia**

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's anti-corruption campaign receives a setback when a high-profile case against a businessman collapses (26 June). The court dismisses fraud charges against Eric Chia, former head of Perwaja Steel.

A senior government advisor, Abdul Razak Baginda, goes on trial for the murder of a Mongolian woman (18 June). Altantuya Shaariibuu's body was found near Kuala Lumpur in November 2006.

## **Singapore**

Shares in Singapore Airlines rise after confirmation that it is close to concluding a £500 million deal to buy a share in China Eastern Airlines (23 May).

Economic growth of 7.6% in the first quarter of 2007 exceeds expectations, led by a property and service sector boom.

## **Hong Kong**

A Beijing loyalist is named home secretary in the new cabinet (23 June). Tsang Tak-sing's appointment is seen as part of a shift by Chief Executive Donald Tsang towards a more pro-China establishment, ahead of the 10th anniversary of the handover of the territory from Britain on 1 July.

Shares of firms listed in Hong Kong surge when China announces plans to allow corporate investors to invest abroad (14 May).

One of the USA's most wanted suspected sex offenders, Kenneth Freeman, is arrested in Hong Kong (3 May). He faces extradition to his homeland.

## **Papua New Guinea**

Voting begins in a general election scheduled to last until mid-July. Authorities hope to avoid a repeat of the 2002 poll, which was marred by violence and corruption. The Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum secretariats send a joint election assessment team.

A UNESCO report says 15% of teachers on PNG school payrolls do not exist (7 June).

Parliament votes to allow online gambling, hoping it will boost the economy (7 May).

Coconut oil becomes a popular alternative to diesel fuel in Bougainville, with backyard refineries supplying local vehicles with cheaper coco-fuel.

## **Vanuatu**

A Vanuatu bank begins to recognize the island's traditional currency, including pig tusks, mats, shells and giant rocks. The items have been used for trading for centuries, but the Taria Bunia Bank is the first to boost the traditional economy by recognizing their value.

## **Samoa**

King Malietoa Tanumafili II dies at the age of 94 (13 May). The king had ruled since independence from New Zealand in 1962, and was the architect of the Samoan constitution.

## **Fiji Islands**

Military ruler Frank Bainimarama suggests elections may be held by March 2009, a year earlier than planned, after pressure from the Pacific Islands Forum and international sanctions.

Fiji expels the New Zealand High Commissioner Michael Green after accusing him of interfering in domestic politics (14 June). Media reports suggest Green upset the leadership by meeting members of the deposed government.

A state of emergency declared after the coup in December 2006 is lifted (31 May), although restrictions on media and public gatherings remain in place.

## Australia

Prime Minister John Howard announces compulsory medical checks for children and a six-month ban on alcohol and pornography in Aboriginal areas in response to a report highlighting widespread child sexual abuse (21 June). Howard says the measures, which include sending more police, supported by the military, to Aboriginal settlements, are necessary to tackle this “national emergency”, but critics accuse him of using the issue to boost his election prospects. The plan is described as racist, draconian and unworkable. Alan Carpenter, premier of Western Australia, said: “If he thinks it’s an emergency, one could ask the question: why hasn’t he done anything about it in the last 11 years?” Leaders of Mutitjulu, an Aboriginal settlement at Uluru, or Ayers Rock, propose banning tourists from the area to protest against the plan. A Mutitjulu elder, Vince Forrester, says many women have fled with their families, fearing their children will be taken away as they were in the 1960s under ‘assimilation’ policies. “The community is bewildered as to why there is a military operation against the most poverty stricken members of Australia”, he says.

In May Howard warns that his Conservative government risks “annihilation” by the Labor Party in elections due in late 2007. Labor’s support in opinion polls is the highest since Howard was elected prime minister in 1996.

A police officer is found not guilty of assaulting and killing an Aboriginal man who died in police custody (21 June). The death of Cameron Doomadgee, arrested for being drunk and swearing at police in 2004, caused riots in Palm Island in Queensland. The officer, Chris Hurley, admits he was to blame for the injuries that caused Doomadgee’s death but said he tripped and fell on the victim.

Bradley Murdoch, convicted of killing British backpacker Peter Falconio, is refused leave to appeal to the High Court after an earlier appeal failed (21 June). He was sentenced to life in prison in December 2005.

The navy announces plans to buy five new warships for £4.5 billion.

Heavy rains in June bring some relief to drought-stricken farmers, leading to forecasts of a record winter wheat crop. But the storms cause severe flooding in eastern Australia, with thousands being forced to evacuate their homes and at least nine people dying.

Howard angers trade ally China by meeting the Dalai Lama in Sydney (15 June).

Controversial Muslim leader Sheikh Taj el-Din al-Hilali steps down, despite being re-elected as leader of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (11 June). Sheikh Hilali, who sparked outrage in 2006 by likening immodestly-clad women to “uncovered meat”, will be replaced by Sheikh Fehmi Naji El-Imam.

Nine men arrested in 2005 plead not guilty to plotting a terror attack in Sydney (31 May). Police say the men downloaded bomb-making instructions from the internet and were stockpiling chemicals at their homes. Their trial will begin in 2008.

David Hicks, an Australian detained in Guantanamo Bay for five years, arrives home (20 May). Under a deal with military prosecutors, he will serve seven more months of a seven-year sentence in Adelaide after admitting training with al-Qaida in Afghanistan in 2001.

A British-born Muslim who plotted to blow up Israel’s embassy in Australia is released after serving half his nine-year sentence (17 May). Jack Roche, 53, was jailed in 2004 after he admitted planning the attack, which was never carried out.

Two teenage girls in Western Australia are sentenced to life in prison for killing a friend to see whether they would feel remorse (9 May). The girls, aged 16 at the time of the murder in 2006, strangled Eliza Jane Davis then buried her under a house. They told police they knew it was wrong to kill but said it “felt right”.

A private equity group admits failure in its attempt to take over Qantas airlines (8 May). Airline Partners Australia says it will pull out of the deal after missing a deadline for winning 50% support from shareholders.

A gay pub in Melbourne wins the right to ban heterosexuals (28 May). Managers say the pub has attracted unruly groups on hen nights and stag parties, which is dehumanizing for its gay clientele.

Food critics are up in arms after the High Court rules that an unfavourable restaurant review was defamatory (15 June). The Coco Roco restaurant in Sydney closed in 2003, a few months after reviewer Matthew Evans declared the food unpalatable. Further hearings will be held to determine damages.

### **New Zealand**

The New Zealand dollar soars to a 22-year high after an unexpected interest rate hike to 8%, leading the Central Bank to sell NZ dollars to steady the currency (12 June).

An Auckland woman on an oxygen machine dies in May after an energy firm cuts of her power supply because of unpaid bills. Folole Muliaga, who had a heart and lung condition, had been off work and fallen behind on payments, according to her family. Police say they will investigate her death.

Scientists discover a ‘skimmed milk’ gene in some cows, giving them the ability to produce low-fat milk.

### **Canada**

Aboriginal groups hold a day of marches and protests to highlight poverty and social issues facing their communities (29 June). More than 1000 people march in Ottawa, and 50 events are planned around the country. “We want our people to be treated with dignity and respect”, says First National leader Phil Fontaine. A large source of frustration is the 800 unresolved land claims cases, which take an average of 13 years to settle. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has promised legislation to cut this time to three years. On 1 June an inquiry finds that racism and cultural insensitivity were partly to blame for the death of an Aboriginal protester in 1995. Dudley George was shot dead when police dispersed demonstrators occupying land they said was a sacred burial site. The government had appropriated the land in 1942 and then reneged on a promise to return it to the Stoney Point First Nation people.

Anglican bishops defeat a proposal to bless same-sex relationships at a general synod meeting in Winnipeg (25 June).

South African anti-apartheid activist Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is refused a visa to attend the premier of an opera about her life in Toronto (6 June). The refusal is thought to relate to her conviction on kidnapping, fraud and theft charges.

Hollywood studio Warner Bros cancels preview screenings of its films over the government's failure to outlaw the practice of videoing films directly off the screen. It says camcording is rampant in Canadian cinemas (8 May).

### **Antigua and Barbuda**

Authorities call for sanctions on the USA for failing to obey a World Trade Organization (WTO) order to lift a ban on gambling sites based outside its border. The WTO has ruled that the USA cannot block foreign sites if it does not crack down on domestic horse betting websites. Antigua, where online betting forms a large part of the economy, wants the WTO to give it permission to ignore US trademark and copyright laws in retaliation.

### **Trinidad and Tobago**

A judge refuses bail for three men accused of plotting to blow up JFK airport in New York (11 June). The USA has requested the extradition of the two Guyanese and a Trinidadian accused of conspiring to blow up fuel tanks serving the airport. They will be held in custody until the extradition hearing in August.

### **Jamaica**

After a three-month investigation police say Pakistani cricket coach Bob Woolmer died of natural causes at the cricket World Cup, not murder as originally suggested (12 June).

### **Bahamas**

The opposition Free National Movement wins elections (3 May), ousting Prime Minister Perry Christie's government. Hubert Ingraham, who led the country from 1992 to 2002, is reinstated as prime minister. During campaigning Ingraham said too much was being done to accommodate foreign investors.

### **Belize**

Authorities back a petition to the UN calling for acknowledgement that climate change is damaging world heritage sites, after evidence shows that warming sea temperatures are destroying Belize's Barrier Reef. If the UN accepts the case at a hearing in July, it might lead to developing countries suing Western countries for damages from their carbon emissions.

### **Cyprus**

Fire destroys several homes and leads to the evacuation of two villages in the Troodos mountains (29 June). Strong winds and a scorching heatwave help the fire to spread rapidly.

The European Court of Justice is to hear a legal battle over ownership of villa in northern Cyprus. A London court has ruled a British couple can keep the home they bought for their retirement, but a Greek Cypriot claims his family owned the land before fleeing the Turkish invasion in 1974. The Appeal Court refers the decision to Luxembourg (19 June).

Cyprus and Malta move closer to adopting the euro when the European Commission and European Central Bank approve their applications in May. If EU finance ministers and leaders also approve, the countries will adopt the currency in 2008.

### **Malta**

The spring hunt of migrating turtle doves is ended early because of attacks on other protected species (15 May). Malta is one of the few countries to allow spring hunting, which conservationists say hampers breeding patterns.

Authorities appeal for help to cope with the thousands of Africans who arrive in Malta after crossing the Mediterranean to get to Europe. The country has received at least 3500 migrants in two years. On 22 June 24 Africans die when their dinghy capsizes off the coast. In May Malta is heavily criticized for refusing to rescue 27 people who spent three days clinging to a tuna net.

### **Falkland Islands**

The Falklands commemoration season concludes on the 25th anniversary of the end of the war (14 June). The Queen, Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher join veterans for a remembrance service in the Falkland Islands Memorial Chapel in Berkshire, and a service in Stanley is attended by 1982 minister Lord Parkinson and Prince Edward. Argentine President Nestor Kirchner says Britain won a “colonial victory” and vows that the Malvinas will return to Argentina by peaceful means.

### **UK**

Former chancellor of the exchequer Gordon Brown takes over as prime minister (27 June) after Tony Blair steps down. Brown promises a “government of all the talents”, but early efforts to recruit opposition Liberal Democrats fail. Brown’s coronation gives the Labour party a boost in opinion polls, putting it four points ahead of the Conservatives.

Two days later two car bombs are discovered in London. Both fail to explode. The next day two men drive a burning car into Glasgow airport. The terror attacks are a baptism of fire for the new Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, the first woman to hold the post.

The Scottish National Party wins May elections, and leader Alex Salmond is named first minister after forming a minority government. In Wales inconclusive elections lead to a coalition agreement between Plaid Cymru and Labour. The Irish election also fail to provide an outright winner, but Bertie Ahern’s Fiana Fail gets

the most votes and forms a coalition with the Progressive Democrats, several independents and the Greens. Ahern wins a third term as taoiseach.

### **Around the Commonwealth**

The Eighth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting is held in Uganda, 11–14 June, ending with a call to governments to provide adequate resources to finance gender equality. The meeting notes that only five of the 53 member states have achieved 30% women's representation in Parliament.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon visits Uganda to discuss arrangements for the November Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. He says he is confident facilities will be ready on time.

The second meeting of the Committee on Commonwealth Membership is held in London on 14 May. The committee will report to the CHOGM summit in November 2007.

Commonwealth health ministers meet in Geneva on 13 May, calling for national health systems to be strengthened to cope with an increase in non-infectious diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General Ransford Smith tells a pre-Global Forum on 'Migration and Development' at the Commonwealth Secretariat's headquarters in London on 17 May that unmanaged migration is risking basic service delivery, leaving individuals vulnerable to human rights violations.

Public servants from Commonwealth Asian countries meet in Kuala Lumpur from 11 to 22 June for a workshop on negotiation skills.

Human rights experts meet in London from 21 to 22 June to help draft a model plan to help small states develop national action plans on human rights.

New Zealand writer Lloyd Jones wins the 21st Commonwealth Writers' Prize for his novel *Mister Pip*.

Elizabeth Randall, 17, from the UK, and Sonde Emmanuel, 19, from Nigeria, share top prize in a new art competition organized by the Commonwealth Youth Programme.

### **New Commonwealth Secretariat Publications**

#### *The Commonwealth Yearbook 2007*

An annual guide to the Commonwealth, its member countries, organizations and activities. £59

#### *The Commonwealth Local Government Handbook 2007*

Comprehensive and up-to-date information on the local government systems of all 53 Commonwealth countries. £50

#### *Financing Gender Equality: Commonwealth Perspectives, 2007*

Official publication of the Eighth Conference of Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers. £49

*Levelling the Playing Field—International Co-operation in Tax Information Exchange*

Economic Paper Number 77 provides the background to a continuing international debate on appropriate arrangements for the international exchange of tax information. £10

All the above titles are available online at [www.thecommonwealth.org/publications](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/publications). They are available in USA from Stylus Publishing LLC, PO Box 605, Herndon, VA 20172-0605, USA. Email [styluspub@aol.com](mailto:styluspub@aol.com).