

Commonwealth Update

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ABSTRACT *July–August 2007: Pakistan and India celebrate 60 years since partition at a time of political instability in the former and economic boom across the border; Bangladeshis begin to lose patience with the military government as Sheikh Hasina is imprisoned; voters in Sierra Leone hand power to the opposition and Canada asserts its claim to the Arctic. Floods devastate parts of Southeast Asia; drought provokes a food crisis in Lesotho and Hurricane Dean delays elections in Jamaica. A South African wine farm becomes the third in the world to be declared carbon neutral and Nigeria overtakes Ireland in the market for Guinness.*

Pakistan

Exiled former prime minister Benazir Bhutto says she is close to finalizing a power-sharing deal with President Pervez Musharraf (30 August). Bhutto says the agreement is “80–90% complete”, and that Musharraf has agreed to relinquish his role as head of the military before elections later in 2007. She says he has also agreed to drop corruption charges against her, her husband and dozens of other legislators. Under the deal, Bhutto would return from exile to become prime minister and Musharraf would become a civilian president with responsibility for counterterrorism and security affairs. “We’re not quite at the end of our discussions—and it’s unclear whether we can get there,” she says. “The next step is to resolve the balance between president and prime minister.” Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s party is divided over her negotiations with Musharraf, with some fearing she will lose popularity because of her association with an increasingly isolated president. Significantly, the general fails to confirm the details of the alleged deal.

The Supreme Court rules that another former prime minister living in exile, Nawaz Sharif, be allowed to return (23 August). Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry says: “(The Sharifs) have an inalienable right to return and remain in the country as citizens of Pakistan.” At a press conference in London, Sharif declares the verdict as a “defeat for dictatorship” and promised to return “fairly soon”. He also criticizes Bhutto for considering a deal with the government, saying her negotiations with Musharraf, who overthrew him in a military coup in 1999, are “an insult to

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democracy". Despite the ruling, Pakistani officials hint that Sharif risks jail or deportation on his return.

On 9 August Musharraf quells rumours that he is preparing to declare a state of emergency. Analysts say the about-turn was influenced by pressure from the US in the form of a phone call from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Earlier, a spokesman said "all options were being considered" because of an onslaught of "internal and external threats". But later his party spokesman says there is "no possibility" of an emergency being declared.

The Supreme Court restores its chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, suspended by Musharraf four months earlier on charges of corruption (20 July). The decision is a serious blow to the president, who appeared determined to remove the independent-minded judge ahead of the election. The issue has galvanised and unified his opponents and ordinary citizens, with demonstrations across the country in support of the Chaudhry. Supreme Court judges rule by 10 votes to three to quash all charges against the chief justice, and declare his suspension illegal. Musharraf says he will accept the decision.

Security forces storm the Red Mosque in Islamabad, where hundreds of militants, including children, have been holed up for eight days (10 July). Clashes erupt at the mosque after a long campaign by students to impose Sharia law in the city. Police also seize control of a nearby seminary linked to the mosque. More than 100 people are killed during the siege, including one of the most militant clerics, Abdul Rashid Ghazi. About 100 students are arrested. The Supreme Court investigates the incident and calls on the government to justify its decision to send in the troops (28 August). The court gives the government four weeks to submit an explanation.

The number of attacks by Islamic militants increases after the storming of the Red Mosque, with more than 200 people dying in rocket and suicide attacks in North West Frontier province and Balochistan in the following weeks. On 24 July a Taleban commander wanted for kidnapping two Chinese engineers in 2004 blows himself up to avoid arrest. Abdullah Mehsud, who fought for the Taleban against the Northern Alliance and was imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, kills himself with a hand grenade after soldiers raid his hideout in Balochistan.

Jailed opposition leader Javed Hashmi is granted bail after the Supreme Court rules he has effectively served his sentence (3 August). The former acting president of a Pakistan Muslim League faction was sentenced to an effective seven years in jail in 2004 for inciting mutiny in the army, forgery and defamation. Chief Justice Chaudhry says his imprisonment before trial should be included in the sentence. Hashmi is the leader of the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy, a group loyal to Nawaz Sharif.

The Pakistani Human Rights Commission blames authorities in Sindh province for violence that killed 41 people in Karachi in May. Sindh's ruling MQM party, which backs Musharraf, is accused of doing little to stop gunmen attacking demonstrators welcoming Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. Authorities reject the report.

India

Former Rajasthan governor Pratibha Patil is sworn in as president, the first woman to take the role (25 July). The 72-year-old replaces Abdul Kalam after receiving

nearly two-thirds of votes in state assemblies and parliament. The presidency is largely a ceremonial post, but can play a key balancing role in coalition governments.

A nuclear deal with the United States threatens to destabilize the government because of objections from the main communist party, who provide crucial support to the ruling Congress party. Under the deal, India will get civilian nuclear technology and fuel despite not signing a non-proliferation treaty. But the communists say they cannot support the agreement as it gives the Americans leverage over foreign policy. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh refuses to back down, saying the deal is essential for energy security and to sustain economic growth. The standoff is one of the worst crises to face the government since 2004, and leads to speculation that Singh will be forced to call early elections.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe arrives on his first tour to India (21 August), and calls for strengthening ties between the countries. He signs a series of bilateral agreements aimed at doubling trade, and addresses parliament saying that Japan has “rediscovered” India as a “partner and a friend”. Analysts say India and Japan are fostering a strategic relationship aimed at countering the influence of China.

Rioting in the city of Agra forces the one-day closure of the Taj Mahal (28 August). The violence begins after a lorry crushes to death four Muslim men participating in a religious festival. At least 42 people are killed in twin bomb attacks in Hyderabad (25 August). More than 30 people are killed in rebel attacks in Assam in August, most of them Hindi speakers. The outlawed ULFA says migrants are threatening the indigenous people of Assam. On 10 July at least 24 troops and 20 Maoist insurgents are killed in gun battles in Chhattisgarh.

A Tamil Nadu court convicts 153 people in connection with a series of explosions in 1998 that killed nearly 60 people. The man described as a mastermind of the plot, SA Basha, is among the guilty, who all face the death penalty. Eight people are acquitted. Hindu nationalist leader LK Advani is said to have been the target of the bombs.

The Supreme Court rejects a government plan to reserve 50% of university and college places to lower caste Indians. The court, which had put the programme on hold until August, extends its decision to the end of 2007.

An Orissa court awards nearly £10,000 to a man kept in jail nine years after being acquitted of murder. Pratap Nayak should have been released in 1994 but an official failed to notify the relevant authorities. After his release in 2003, Nayak, who was 13 when he went to prison, fought a long battle for compensation.

Young couples in a Maharashtra district are offered cash incentives to delay having children as authorities try to control rising birth rates (15 August). Newlyweds in Satara will be given £60 if they wait two years before their first pregnancy, or £90 if they wait three years.

Police in Orissa find 30 bags filled with infants’ body parts near a maternity clinic near Nayagarh (22 July). The find is thought to be linked to the practice of aborting female fetuses. Similar incidents have been reported around the country, and the government has promised to crack down.

India says the number of its people with HIV is about half of earlier official tallies. Health Ministry figures put the total at between 2 and 3.1 million cases, compared with previous estimates of more than 5 million.

Some of the worst floods in 30 years devastate parts of northern India, with ongoing rain in August hampering relief operations. About 28 million people across India, Bangladesh and Nepal are affected, with more than 500 thought to have died.

India overtakes the United States to become the second-largest market for phone manufacturer Nokia, after China. There are 118 million mobile users in the country in July, with six million new users signing up each month.

The government takes a series of moves to cool inflation, including setting new limits on overseas borrowing. Companies are to be limited to less than £10 m of foreign capital without special permission (8 August). The Central Bank also increases the proportion of funds that lenders must keep in reserve from 6.5% to 7%.

Bollywood actor Sanjay Dutt, jailed for buying weapons from bombers who attacked Mumbai in 1993, is released from prison on temporary bail because of a legal technicality (20 August). Dutt is sentenced for six years in July after being found guilty of illegally possessing weapons. The blasts killed 257 people. The court orders his release because he has not been given a copy of the judgment against him, but warns he will have to return to jail when the legal requirement has been fulfilled. His lawyers say they will appeal. The mastermind of the attacks is sentenced to death (27 July).

Another Bollywood star, Salman Khan, is arrested in Jodhpur (24 August) in connection with a 2006 conviction for hunting a protected gazelle. Khan is also facing trial in Mumbai after a 2002 hit-and-run case in which one person was killed.

Eighteen-year-old Arvind Aradhya wins a £45,000 scholarship to study at a British university in a reality television show (18 August). He beat thousands of entrants to be named winner of Scholar Hunt: Destination UK, and plans to study engineering at Warwick.

India and Pakistan

The countries celebrate 60 years of independence, albeit in very different styles (15 August). In Pakistan, reeling from a series of political and religious crises, the response is muted with fireworks banned and public gatherings discouraged. Across the border in India, enjoying an unprecedented economic boom and a vibrant democracy, the occasion is marked with a series of parades, speeches and gun salutes. Relations between the neighbours have improved significantly. Analysts say the bitter rivalry is losing its poison, with improved diplomacy between governments and increased cooperation in fighting terrorism. Progress is also being made to resolve the dispute over Kashmir. On the anniversary of partition, 15,000 people gather on the border in Punjab to call for an end to hostilities.

Bangladesh

Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is arrested in a pre-dawn raid and charged with extortion (16 July). Her Awami League supporters take to the streets in protest, but are dispersed by police firing tear gas. The case against her apparently relates to a bribery payment for an electricity contract issued while she was in office in 1999.

Sheikh Hasina, her sister and her cousin are named in court papers as receiving thousands of pounds. Hasina's rival Khaleda Zia, who is facing tax evasion charges, puts aside personal animosity to join calls for Sheikh Hasina's release. She calls Hasina's treatment "disgraceful and indecent".

The government imposes a curfew in six major cities, including Dhaka, after violent student protests demanding an end to emergency rule (22 August). The clashes begin when the army ignores student demands to leave Dhaka university gym. For three days, stone-throwing and stick-wielding students fight pitched battles with police. Five senior academics and dozens of students are detained, accused of participating in the protests—which are illegal under emergency legislation. The curfew is lifted on 27 August. Analysts say the protests reflect the population's growing discontent with the military government's heavy-handed tactics and its failure to make progress towards holding elections.

UN human rights expert Sigma Huda, a special envoy on people trafficking, is jailed for three years after being found guilty of bribery (27 August). Her husband, the former Bangladesh Nationalist Party Communications Minister Nazmul Huda, is sentenced to seven years "rigorous imprisonment" on the same charges.

Former minister Aminul Huq is jailed for 31 years for helping Islamic militants who murdered two judges in March (26 July). The six militants, who were demanding the implementation of Sharia law, were sentenced to death. Huq was in charge of telecommunications in Zia's government.

The head of the Anti-Corruption Commission, Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury, says about 200 people have been questioned or detained in custody so far, and more arrests are expected.

The first train between India and Bangladesh for 40 years arrives in Dhaka carrying Indian government officials (8 July). The 310-mile journey marks the resumption of direct passenger rail services between the countries.

Sri Lanka

The government holds a victory parade in Colombo to celebrate defeating Tamil Tiger rebels in the east of the country and gaining control of the region for the first time since the mid-1990s (19 July). President Mahinda Rajapaksa says local and provincial elections will be held by the end of 2007. The rebels say they still have forces in the east who will continue to attack military and economic targets. Colonel Karuna, an ex-Tamil Tiger who helped the army defeat his former comrades, says he will not disarm his fighters. The Tigers still control territory in the north of the country, and clashes between rebels and the military continue.

UN under-secretary general Sir John Holmes visits Sri Lanka, and angers the government by calling it one of the most dangerous countries in the world for aid workers (9 August). Humanitarian agencies say 34 workers have been killed since 2006. President Rajapaksa calls the comments "sensational and irresponsible".

Ministers announce plans to take a six-month 50% pay cut because of economic problems facing the country (2 August).

Human Rights Watch accuses the government of overlooking abuses by its security forces, saying there has been an increase in unlawful killings and enforced

disappearances in the past 18 months (6 August). From January 2006 until June 2006, more than 1,000 abductions have been reported. Spokesman Brad Adams says the military has been given the green light to use the dirty tactics. The Tigers are also criticized for targeting civilians and using child soldiers.

Maldives

A referendum supports a presidential rather than parliamentary government, seen as an endorsement for President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom who has been in power for 29 years (19 August). The opposition says the vote was rigged. Three cabinet ministers resign, saying democratic reform has been stalled.

Malaysia

Thousands attend celebrations in Kuala Lumpur to mark 50 years of independence (31 August). Britain's Prince Andrew is among the guests who enjoy speeches, dancing and drumming in Merdeka Square. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi calls on Malaysians to unify as a nation. "We must ensure that no region or community is left behind," he says.

A Tamil-language newspaper is shut down for a month after publishing a picture of Jesus holding a cigarette and a beer (25 August). Badawi personally admonishes the editors of Makkal Osai. The newspaper has apologized for the image, which it says was printed in error.

A man who has worked as a dentist for 29 years without any medical training or qualifications is arrested in Kuala Lumpur (15 August). He says he learned the trade when he carried the bag of an army dentist in the 1970s.

Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group buys a 20% stake in Air Asia X, a new Malaysian budget long-haul airline (10 August). The value of the deal is not disclosed.

Singapore

The government's investment arm joins forces with the China Development Bank to buy a stake in Barclays for £2.4 bn. Temasek will control a 3% share. Another £6.5 bn will be invested if Barclays takes over Dutch bank ABN Amro.

Hong Kong

The territory marks the 10th anniversary of its handover to China on 1 July. A new government under Chief Executive Donald Tsang is sworn in, and promises to create a more democratic system. The occasion is marked by parades as well as protests.

The high court gives the go-ahead for the demolition of Queen's Pier, rejecting an appeal to declare it a historic monument (10 August). The pier was built in 1954, and has become the focus of a campaign to preserve Hong Kong's colonial heritage. It will now be destroyed to make way for a highway and shopping centre.

Papua New Guinea

Parliament elects Michael Somare to his fourth term as prime minister. Somare, 71, gets the support of 86 members of the 109-seat parliament, seeing off a challenge from another former leader, Julius Chan. Somare's National Alliance party won just 27 seats in recent elections, but forms a coalition government with smaller parties and independents.

The descendants of cannibals who killed and ate four Fijian missionaries in 1878 apologize for their ancestors' actions (16 August). They hold a ceremony of reconciliation, attended by thousands in the East New Britain, where the four died. Fiji's High Commissioner Ratu Isoa Tikoca accepts the apologies.

Solomon Islands

A man facing paedophile charges in Australia is sworn in as attorney general, despite widespread protests. Julian Moti, a friend of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, avoided extradition to Australia in October 2006 by escaping custody in Papua New Guinea. He denies the charges. His inauguration further strains ties between Canberra and Honiara, with Australian Prime Minister John Howard describing it as "provocative and insensitive".

The opposition calls a no confidence vote in Sogavare over Moti's appointment, the second he has faced since coming to power in 2006 (9 August). The motion is dropped after the government challenges its legality in court.

Kiribati

A new parliament is elected after two rounds of voting but it is not yet clear which party will control the government as a number of new MPs have yet to declare their allegiance (30 August). MPs will vote for a president in October, with incumbent Anote Tong expected to be returned for another term.

Tonga

Tonga joins the World Trade Organization, 12 years after applying for membership (27 July).

Australia

A controversial immigration detention centre in South Australia is closed (20 August). The government says the move reflects its success at stopping illegal immigration. Human rights activists hold a vigil outside, saying the decommissioning ends a "shameful period in Australian history". In its five-year existence the centre has been beset by demonstrations, hunger strikes and suicide attempts by asylum seekers, who are automatically locked away while their claims for refugee status are investigated. The government's latest policy is to send asylum seekers arriving by boat to Nauru and Christmas Island.

Prime Minister John Howard comes under fierce criticism for agreeing to sell uranium to India—overturning a long-standing rule of not exporting to countries that have not signed the non-proliferation treaty. Howard says the deal will curb global warming and help bring India in line with mainstream nuclear policy. But the Labor Party promises to block the deal if it comes to power in late 2007 elections.

Labor leader Kevin Rudd apologizes after revelations that he visited a strip club during an official trip to New York in 2003 (19 August). Rudd, who has a reputation as a religious family man, is widely tipped to win the next election. The revelations appear to do little to dent his popularity.

Defence Minister Brendan Nelson admits that securing oil supplies is one of the main reasons for the presence of Australian troops in Iraq (5 July). He tells the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “Obviously the Middle East itself, not only Iraq but the entire region, is an important supplier of energy, oil in particular, to the rest of the world . . . It’s in our interests, our security interests, to make sure that we leave the Middle East, and leave Iraq in particular, in a position of sustainable security.” It is the first admission of its kind, but is quickly downplayed by Prime Minister Howard, who says troops are there to “give the people of Iraq a possibility of embracing democracy.”

An Aboriginal man taken from his family as a baby is awarded compensation in a landmark case (1 August). Bruce Trevorrow is awarded £220,000 after the Supreme Court of South Australia finds he was imprisoned and treated unlawfully when he was taken from his family in 1958. He is the first of Australia’s so-called stolen generation of Aborigines to win compensation.

An Indian doctor detained in Australia for three weeks on suspicion of being involved in a terror attack in the UK is cleared any involvement (27 July). Mohammed Haneef, who has since returned to India, appeals against the cancellation of his Australian work visa.

Norfolk Island

A New Zealand man is jailed for 24 years for the murder of a restaurant manager, the first murder on Norfolk Island for 150 years (25 July). Glenn McNeill was convicted in March of stabbing Australian Janelle Patton to death in 2002. He will serve his sentence in Australia, as the territory has no jail.

New Zealand

A couple is barred from calling their newborn son 4Real under a law that prevents names starting with numbers. Pat and Sheena Wheaton decide to call him Superman instead.

Nigeria

President Umaru Yar’Adua names his cabinet (26 July), choosing to keep four ministers who served under former leader Olusegun Obasanjo. He appoints eight women and two opposition members to the 32-member body, and doubles up as Energy Minister himself. Key positions include Yayale Ahmed as Defence Minister,

Shamsuddeen Usman as Finance Minister and Ojo Maduekwe as Foreign Affairs Minister. Two defeated presidential candidates, former vice-president Atiku Abubakar and former military leader Muhammadu Buhari, say they will continue to challenge Yar'Adua's election in court.

Yar'Adua scraps the state-owned oil corporation in an attempt to address corruption in the oil industry (30 August). It is replaced with a national energy council, led by the president, which has six months to create five new organizations out of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation. Yar'Adua has said that reform of the oil sector is one of his key aims.

The Central Bank announces plans to redenominate the currency, making 100 naira worth 1 naira, and promises to ease foreign exchange controls (14 August). But 10 days later the government says the move has been put on hold as Yar'Adua had not given permission, calling into question the future of the head of the Central Bank, Chukwuma Soludo.

The president suspends a multi-million pound contract to build clinics around the country, saying the deal negotiated by the previous government was "illegal" (7 August). The £75 m contract had been awarded to a company linked to a former aide of Obasanjo. In July Yar'Adua reversed the sale of two refineries to a consortium with ties to Obasanjo, his political benefactor.

Yar'Adua orders the retirement of 40 senior military commanders (31 July), repeating a similar purge by Obasanjo when he took power in 1999. The military describes the move as routine, saying the men had served the required 35 years of service.

The former governor of Bayelsa state is released after serving two days of a two-year sentence for money laundering. Diepreye Alamaieyeseigha, who pleaded guilty to six charges of corruption on 26 July, had served most of the time as he had been in custody since December 2005. He was arrested in Britain in 2005 but fled to Nigeria where he was arrested a few months later. Five other former governors are facing charges of corruption, theft and money laundering in Abuja and Lagos. The anti-corruption agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, called in all 36 former governors for questioning after the elections. Two who failed to respond, Saminu Turaki of Jigawa and Orji Kalu of Abia, were arrested in early July.

Security forces demolish the Sokoto headquarters of a Shia sect whose members are accused of killing a rival Sunni cleric. A school, clinic and homes are destroyed in an apparent attempt to expel the group from the city. Sect leader Kasimu Rimin Tawaye and about 100 followers are being held by police following the death of Umaru Danmaishiyya, a cleric known for his sermons against Shias. He was shot in a mosque on 18 July, leading to street clashes between Sunnis and Shias.

Several foreigners are kidnapped by suspected oil militants, including the three-year-old daughter of a British oil worker (5 July). Many captives are released, including Margaret Hill, but her 60-year-old father Michael Hill dies a month later of a heart attack. His family blames the stress of the kidnapping.

Rival militant gangs clash in Port Harcourt in August in what authorities describe as a turf war. Residents say buildings were set on fire and streets deserted except for men on motorbikes carrying automatic weapons. At least 15 people are killed.

Analysts believe the gangs have links to senior politicians and were involved in rigging the April elections. On 17 August police attack armed gangs, killing several militants and arresting many more.

Eighteen men are arrested in a Bauchi hotel room accused of sodomy and cross-dressing (4 August). Under Sharia law, the charges are punishable by stoning. On 21 August five of the men are released on bail by a Sharia court, leading to street protests. The men all plead not guilty to charges of indecent dressing and vagrancy. They are said to have been part of a group celebrating a wedding—which police claim was an illegal marriage between two men. But human rights groups say the wedding was a heterosexual one and the charges are being used to incite hatred against gay people.

Manufacturers of Guinness reveal that Nigeria has overtaken Ireland as the second-largest market for the beer, with sales up by 18% in the year ending June 30. Diageo attributes this to a new television advertising campaign that promotes Guinness as “the home of greatness”.

Sierra Leone

The opposition All Peoples’ Congress wins parliamentary elections in August, taking 59 of the 112 seats. The governing Sierra Leone People’s Party is defeated with 43 seats. A run-off in the presidential election between the two parties’ candidates is scheduled for September. The APC candidate, Ernest Bai Koroma, took 44 percent of the vote in the first round, and the SLPP candidate and Vice-President Solomon Berewa, 38 percent. International monitors suggested the polls were free and fair with a Commonwealth observer group led by former St Lucia Prime Minister Kenny Anthony commending the people of Sierra Leone for their “passion and commitment to the principles of democracy and a peaceful democratic process”. But campaigning for the presidential run-off is disrupted by street clashes between the rival parties in late August. Outgoing President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah threatens to declare a state of emergency if the violence continues.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone finds two former leaders of a pro-government militia guilty of crimes committed during the 10-year civil war (2 August). The UN-backed war crimes tribunal convicts Moinina Fofana and Allieu Kondewa of murder, cruel treatment, pillage and collective punishments. They will be sentenced at a later date. The trial of the Civil Defence Force leaders has been controversial, as many Sierra Leoneans consider the militia to have defended them against the brutality of rebel groups such as the Revolutionary United Front. Special prosecutor Stephen Rapp acknowledges that the men were trying to restore democracy, but says their methods were not justified. In July the court hands out its first sentences, after convicting three rebel leaders for war crimes including murder, rape and mutilation. Alex Tamba Brima and Santigie Borbor Kanu are jailed for 50 years each and Brima Kamara for 45 years. The three were senior members of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council that overthrew the government in 1997. The Special Court has indicted a total of 13 people, including the former Liberian President Charles Taylor, who is accused of backing the rebels. Taylor’s trial has been postponed to January 2008.

Ghana

Construction begins on a controversial dam on the Black Volta river (24 August). President John Kufuor says the dam will produce up to 400 megawatts of electricity and solve the country's energy shortages. But activist groups are concerned about the impact on the surrounding communities and environment.

African Union leaders meet in Accra for a three-day summit (1 July). Proceedings are dominated by a proposal to create a pan-African government, championed by Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi. Kufuor, chairman of the AU, says the summit agreed to set up a committee to establish a road map and a time frame for a union government. Critics say priority should have been given to resolving the crises in Zimbabwe, Somalia and Sudan.

The Gambia

The High Court sentences three coup plotters to 20 years' hard labour for treason (10 August). The three men, an ex-chief of police, an ex-immigration director and a religious scholar, are among more than 20 charged with trying to overthrow President Yahya Jammeh's government in March 2006. Ten ex-army officers have been sentenced to 10 years for the plot; one suspect was acquitted and the suspected mastermind of the coup, former army chief of staff Col Ndure Cham, has fled the country. The government says five other suspects have escaped from custody.

Cameroon

The ruling Democratic Rally of the Cameroonian People wins parliamentary elections on 22 July, taking 140 of the 180 seats. Opposition parties say the vote was marred by fraud and intimidation. The Supreme Court annuls the results in five districts, leaving 17 seats vacant, and a joint statement of the American, British, and Dutch embassies criticizes the voting and calls for the creation of an independent electoral commission.

Uganda

The government introduces a £5 monthly allowance to support the "chronically poor" (8 August). A further £3 a month will be given to families who care for orphans or children with disabilities. The money will come from international donors. The UN estimates that 39% of Ugandans live in poverty.

Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo agree to resurvey their border through Lake Albert, after tensions over the ownership of Rukwanzi Island. Surveying is to begin in September. Experts believe the region is rich in oil deposits.

Kenya

A leaked report claims that former president Daniel arap Moi stole more than £1 bn of government money during his 24-year rule (31 August). The Kroll consultancy report was commissioned by the Kenyan government and submitted in 2004, but never acted upon. It claims that Moi and his supporters bought assets in 28 countries

and amassed huge personal fortunes. None of the money has been recovered. The government dismisses the report as “not credible”. The leak comes days after Moi, who still holds considerable political power, announces his support for the re-election of his successor, President Mwai Kibaki.

The opposition coalition the Orange Democratic Movement, viewed as the only serious threat to Kibaki’s re-election, falls apart ahead of December voting (15 August). Rivals Raila Odinga and Kalonzo Musyoka, who are both seeking the presidency, are now leaders of two factions of the ODM.

Kibaki refuses to sign a bill that could force reporters to reveal their sources after protests from journalists (22 August). The president sends the bill back to parliament, saying it poses a threat to democratic reforms.

About 10,000 women attend a rally in Nairobi calling for an affirmative action law to increase the representation of women in parliament (8 August). Health Minister Charity Ngilu says women face prejudice and additional constraints when running for office. Only 18 of the 224 MPs are female.

MPs’ plans to award themselves £10 m bonuses before this parliament is dissolved spark street protests in the capital (31 July). Police fire tear gas at demonstrators and arrest four organizers. The next day Health Minister Ngilu forces her way into a police station and helps the four, who include a women’s rights activist, escape custody. She is arrested for interfering with the course of justice—the first time a serving minister has been arrested since Kibaki came to power. On 3 August a judge declares her arrest illegal.

The Kenyan police force is named the most corrupt government department for the sixth year in a report by Transparency International. It says more than half of residents’ interactions with the government and private institutions still involve bribery. Kenya ranks 142nd on TI’s 163 global corruption list.

Two American bishops are consecrated in Kenya after leaving the US Anglican church over the appointment of homosexual clergy (30 August). Bill Murdoch, of Massachusetts, and Bill Atwood, of Texas, will be answerable to the Kenyan church, although they will serve in the US. The move will exacerbate divisions in the church over consecrating gay bishops and blessing same-sex couples.

The World Health Organization says the mass free distribution of mosquito nets has halved the number of child deaths from malaria in high-risk areas, including Kenya (16 August). The Kenyan Health Ministry has distributed 13.5 m insecticide-treated nets since 2003, and the number of children sleeping under a net has increased from 5% to 52%. About 34,000 Kenyans die from malaria a year.

Two hominid fossils found in Kenya challenge established views of evolution (Nature, August). It had been thought that hominid *Homo habilis* evolved into the more advanced *Homo erectus*, which evolved into humankind. But the discovery of a *Homo habilis* broken upper jawbone and a *Homo erectus* skull reveals an overlap of about 500,000 years during which the species must have co-existed in the Turkana basin area.

Tanzania

President Jakaya Kikwere launches a campaign to encourage Tanzanians to be tested for HIV by taking the test himself, with his wife (14 July). Kikwete says people

with HIV/Aids should not be stigmatised, and urges Tanzanians to follow his example and find out their status.

Conservationists condemn a plan to build a soda ash plant alongside Lake Natron, where 75% of the world's flamingo population gathers in summer. Lake Natron is rich in salt, vitamins and bacteria the birds eat, and is one of the most important breeding sites of the lesser flamingo. Dr Chris Magin of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds says the industrial plans could mark the beginning of the end for the lesser flamingo. Norconsult, the company behind the planned plant, says a proper environmental impact assessment will be conducted.

Malawi

The parliamentary crisis continues, with opposition parties refusing to debate the budget (tabled in April) unless MPs who have changed parties are expelled. President Bingu wa Mutharika accuses them of endangering donor funds and state services. Opposition parties say the ruling minority government is unconstitutional because most members were elected on the ticket of the former ruling party the United Democratic Front. Mutharika also won elections for the UDF, but left to set up the Democratic Progressive Party after accusing UDF officials of blocking his anti-corruption drive. Analysts say the row could topple the government.

Two British city councils announce plans to plant one fruit tree in Malawi for every tonne of aluminum cans and foil recycled in August. Bristol and South Gloucestershire councils sign up to a two-year scheme run by the charity Ripple Africa, which supports the growth of guava and paw-paw fruits from seed.

Zambia

President Levy Mwanawasa suspends the head of the anti-drug agency for alleged abuse of office (9 August). Drug Enforcement Commission chief Ryan Chitoba, the latest senior official to face corruption charges, is accused of taking funds recovered from criminals.

Zimbabwe

President Robert Mugabe receives a warm round of applause at the opening of the Southern African Development Community summit in Lusaka (17 August). Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa praises veteran leaders who oversaw their countries' liberation—widely seen as a reference to Mugabe—but calls on Zimbabweans to resolve their differences peacefully. The summit welcomes efforts by South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki to mediate between Mugabe and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, although opposition officials lobbying in Lusaka say Mbeki is moving too slowly.

Catholic Archbishop Pius Ncube, a fierce critic of the government, is accused of adultery by the husband of a church secretary. Onesimus Sibanda says his wife, Rosemary, has admitted to the affair. He is to sue the archbishop for 20 billion ZD in damages. State television shows videos of a man said to be Ncube in bed with a

woman. The archbishop says the allegations are politically motivated to silence his opposition of the government. He resigns to the Pope in July after what he describes as “a state-driven, vicious attack not just on myself, but by proxy on the Catholic church in Zimbabwe”, adding: “It is my feeling that I should face this case in court as Pius Ncube, an individual, not that the holy Catholic church of God should seem to be on trial because I am its head.”

A 15-year-old boy and a security guard are crushed to death during a stampede to buy sugar in Bulawayo (16 August). Witnesses say the guard was unlocking the gates to the shopping centre when the crowd pushed forward, knocking over a wall, which fell on the guard and a teenager.

Zimbabwe’s inflation rate reaches 7,638% in July, and the Reserve Bank issues a new 200,000 ZD note—worth about £6 at the official exchange rate or 50 p on the black market. The note can buy 2.2 lb of sugar.

The UN says humanitarian assistance is needed to help refugees, amid reports that more than three million Zimbabweans have fled the country to South Africa and other neighbouring countries.

Portugal says it will invite Mugabe to an EU-Africa summit in December, despite a European travel ban on the president and his allies. Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates, who holds the EU presidency, believes a summit with Africa is crucial to improve trade and other relations. Other African leaders will not attend if all leaders are not all invited. Privately, Portuguese diplomats say they will not be disappointed if Mugabe fails to arrive.

South Africa

The controversy over the government’s handling of the HIV/Aids epidemic is revived when President Thabo Mbeki fires Deputy Health Minister Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge for attending an Aids conference in Spain without his permission. Campaigners, who credit Madlala-Routledge with revamping the Aids treatment programme, condemn the move. Her former boss, Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, is unpopular for promoting nutrition above anti-retroviral drugs to treat the disease. A Sunday newspaper publishes a series of allegations against Tshabalala-Msimang, accusing her of concealing an alcohol problem and jumping the queue for a liver transplant, and revealing that in the 1970s she was expelled from Botswana for stealing from patients. The minister threatens to sue the Sunday Times, and Mbeki defends her against the “wild animals” in the press.

The health ministry recalls 20 million faulty condoms in August after claims that the manufacturer, Zalatex, bribed a government official to give them a safety certificate. The company denies the claims.

In July, Mbeki suggests he may remain as African National Congress leader after the party conference in December. Although he is constitutionally barred from standing for a third term as president, by leading the party he could effectively handpick his successor. Mbeki says it would be “disrespectful” to ignore the party leadership if they ask him to stay on. The ANC is deeply divided on the subject of who should succeed Mbeki, with the unions and youth wing backing his rival, former deputy president Jacob Zuma.

Apartheid police minister Adriaan Vlok and four other former officials are found guilty of trying to murder activist Frank Chikane in 1989 by lacing his underwear with a nerve toxin (17 August). They are given suspended sentences under a plea bargain. Rev Chikane, a director in the president's office, told the Pretoria court he did not want the men to go to prison. Vlok sought forgiveness from Rev Chikane last year by washing his feet.

An apartheid-era security police commander in jail for murder says former president FW de Klerk was aware of and condoned gross human rights violations during his term of office (27 July). Eugene De Kock, nicknamed "Prime Evil" for his role in the killing and maiming of dozens of anti-apartheid activists, claims the Nobel Peace Prize winner has blood on his hands and says he is willing to testify against his former boss. De Klerk denies the claims, saying he played no role in the deaths of government opponents.

A wine farm near Stellenbosch becomes the first in South Africa—and the third in the world—to be declared carbon neutral. To win the status Backsberg wineries planted more than 900 saplings in a nearby area to offset carbon emissions.

Lesotho

The government declares a state of emergency and appeals for aid to feed more than 400,000 people after the worst drought in 30 years (19 July). Maize production has collapsed by more than 40% and the World Food Programme says more than one fifth of the population urgently needs food aid.

Namibia

Ten men found guilty of treason for leading a secessionist rebellion in the Caprivi region in 1999 are each sentenced to more than 30 years in jail. The men were expelled from the courtroom before their sentences for shouting "Viva Caprivi". They tell the court they do not recognize Namibia as a country.

Canada

Prime Minister Stephen Harper announces plans to build two military facilities in the Arctic to assert Canadian sovereignty over the region (10 August). On a trip to the far north, he says: "Canada's new government understands that the first principle of Arctic sovereignty is: use it or lose it. Today's announcements tell the world that Canada has a real, growing, long-term presence in the Arctic." A training centre for 100 troops will be built in Resolute Bay, and a deep-water port on Baffin Island. The move comes a week after a Russian sub planted a flag on the Arctic seabed. Moscow claims rights to half the Arctic, with the US, Norway and Denmark also having claims.

The Cree people of Quebec are awarded £65 m from the government to settle a series of long-standing grievances and land claims. The money will be distributed over 20 years, and will be used to develop health services, infrastructure and economic growth. The Grand Chief of the Grand Council of the Crees, Matthew Mukash, says the award is long overdue. "If you go to the communities you'll see a

lot of services that are lacking—facilities that you see in any town in Canada that we don't have," he says. The deal gives the Crees control over the justice system, policing, sanitation and economic development projects.

Harper says he will not give preferential treatment to Conrad Black, the newspaper tycoon convicted of fraud in the US (18 July). Lord Black was born in Canada but gave up his citizenship to become a member of the British House of Lords. He is now seeking to regain his status so as to serve some of his time in Canada, where parole rules are laxer. But legal observers say this will be extremely difficult without high-level help, given that he has a criminal record.

Trinidad and Tobago

A judge orders the extradition of three men to the US to face charges that they plotted to attack John F Kennedy airport in New York (6 August). The judge says there is enough evidence to justify extraditing Kareem Ibrahim, Abdul Nur and Abdul Kadir in connection with an alleged plot to blow up the airport's fuel tanks and pipelines. The three were arrested in Trinidad in June.

Dominica

Hurricane Dean destroys 99% of the island's banana crop in August, leaving about 15,000 workers unemployed and putting further pressure on the struggling industry.

St Lucia

Heavy rains and flooding brought by Hurricane Dean batter the region in August, although the devastation is not as widespread as had been feared.

Jamaica

A general election scheduled for 27 August is postponed for a week because of the damage caused by Hurricane Dean. A state of emergency is declared after the hurricane destroys homes and brings down power lines.

Montserrat

Scottish scientists are awarded £400,000 to develop a volcano warning system on Montserrat. The team is working on an unstaffed device capable of monitoring a volcano through the smoke, gases and clouds that usually surround its crater, and aims to provide the Montserrat Volcano Observatory with round-the-clock coverage of activity.

Cyprus and Malta

EU finance ministers give the countries the final go-ahead to adopt the euro in 2008 (10 July). The 27 ministers decide that one euro will be worth 0.585274 Cyprus pounds and 0.4293 Maltese lira.

UK

Prime Minister Gordon Brown's bumpy landing continues with summer floods across Gloucestershire and a foot and mouth outbreak among livestock in Surrey in August, which threatens a fresh farming crisis.

The UK expels four Russian diplomats in response to Moscow's refusal to extradite a suspect in the murder of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko. Foreign Minister David Miliband says the move was necessary to send a "clear and proportionate" signal to Russia about the seriousness with which Britain views the matter.

The Crown Prosecution Service decides there is insufficient evidence to press charges in connection with the cash for honours inquiry, bringing to an end a 16-month inquiry that rocked the Labour party. During the investigation Labour fundraiser Lord Levy and two others close to the party were arrested, and Prime Minister Tony Blair was interviewed twice.

The BBC journalist Alan Johnston is released after 114 days in captivity in Gaza (3 July).

A statue of former South African president Nelson Mandela is unveiled in London (29 August). Mandela, his wife Graca Machel, and Brown are among those at the unveiling in Parliament Square.

Around the Commonwealth

Secretary-General Don McKinnon attends the signing ceremony of a £500,000 Commonwealth Connects initiative to fund the Computers for Communities project in Trinidad and Tobago. The country's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Glenda Morean-Phillip, signs the agreement in London on 26 July.

Finance ministers from the South Pacific attend a workshop to learn about the Commonwealth's computer software for designing national debt strategies and carrying out debt sustainability analysis in Papua New Guinea in July.

The 14th Annual Workshop of the Framework on Regional Co-operation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Asia-Pacific region is held in Bali, Indonesia, from 10 to 12 July.

The seventh annual Commonwealth Vision Awards is launched, with the theme 'Changing communities, greening the globe'.

Public servants from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka attend a disaster management training programme from 23 June to 5 July 2007 to learn how to better prepare communities for natural disasters.

Ambassadors from the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries and the Commonwealth meet to discuss migration and development on 5 July 2007 in Brussels.

Nurses and midwives from India and Southeast Asia attend a training workshop aimed at reducing neonatal and infant mortality rates from 22 to 29 August 2007 in New Delhi.

The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation helps Cameroon develop a marketing and promotions strategy to enhance its tourism potential.

A regional information and communication technology (ICT) workshop focusing on 'Connecting Rural Communities' takes place on 20 August in Nairobi.

New Commonwealth Secretariat publications

Economic Vulnerability and Resilience of Small States

ISBN: 978-99909-49-22-3; 480 pages; price: £20.00

Credit Management for Poverty Alleviation

ISBN: 978-19011-27-31-7; xvii + 170 pages; price: £20.00

Commonwealth Ministers Reference Book 2007, Henley Media Group Ltd.

ISBN: 978-0-955408-0-9; 270 pages; price: £35.00

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