

Commonwealth Update

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ABSTRACT *The Pakistani opposition leader and former premier Benazir Bhutto, who had only recently returned from exile, was assassinated as she campaigned for forthcoming elections. A month earlier, Pakistan had thrown a shadow over the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Uganda when President Pervez Musharraf declared a state of emergency. The Commonwealth suspended Pakistan. Another former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, also returned from exile to stand in elections. Islamist insurgents battled the Pakistan army in several regions. In Kenya violence erupted along ethnic lines after Mwai Kibaki was widely seen to have rigged the presidential election. In Australia, John Howard's Liberal Party was swept from power. His successor, Kevin Rudd, signed the Kyoto Protocol and set a date to withdraw troops from Iraq. A European Union–Africa summit underlined familiar divisions: the British prime minister, Gordon Brown, boycotted the event because a travel ban was waived for Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, who attacked Europe for criticizing human rights in Africa.*

ASIA

Pakistan

The opposition leader and former prime minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated on 27 December in a gun and suicide bomb attack as she left a rally in Rawalpindi.

Elections scheduled for 8 January were delayed until 18 February because polling offices and material were destroyed in rioting after her death. Her son, Bilawal, 19, was chosen to succeed her as leader of the Bhutto-dominated Pakistan People's Party (PPP). His father, Asif Ali Zardari, will act as regent while Bilawal finishes university.

The government said the attack had been ordered by a tribal leader in South Waziristan aligned with al-Qaida, Baitullah Mehsud. He denied any involvement. Many Bhutto supporters blame the government of President Pervez Musharraf, especially the ISI military intelligence.

On 15 December, Musharraf lifted the state of emergency that had been imposed a month before on 3 November. His first act upon restoring the constitution was to swear in new members of the supreme court. Iftikhar Chaudhry, the sacked former chief justice, remains under house arrest.

The two main opposition parties, the PPP and Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), had said they would contest general elections. The

decision to stand came after 33 opposition groups met in Lahore on 9 December but failed to agree on a boycott, despite protests that the poll would not be fair, given the state of emergency.

Sharif, who was ousted by Musharraf in a 1999 coup, had flown back to a rapturous welcome in Lahore after seven years in exile (25 November). He had been deported to Saudi Arabia hours after returning on 10 September. Sharif was barred from standing for office because of a court conviction. Bhutto said she would contest the elections “under protest”. A PML-N spokesman said it had little choice after the PPP said it was taking part.

In November, Musharraf sacked supreme court judges who he feared would rule his re-election illegal. Most did not take the new oath of allegiance. About 60 of 97 high court judges also refused. The court had also been due to rule on whether an amnesty lifting corruption charges against Bhutto was legal. This had been a pre-condition of Bhutto for a possible power-sharing deal with Musharraf. Chaudhry, the sacked chief justice, urged people to “rise up”.

More than 3,000 people were detained under emergency rule, including lawyers, judges and politicians. He also amended the constitution to prevent future legal challenges to his declaration and the 1952 Army Act was amended so civilians could be tried for treason in military courts. Musharraf stood down as head of the army and was sworn in for a new term as a civilian head of state. The supreme court ordered the election commission to declare that Musharraf had won October’s election. The previous judges had questioned the poll’s validity. The stock market fell nearly 5%.

At least 136 people were killed in bomb attacks in Karachi at the homecoming parade of Bhutto, who was returning from eight years in exile (19 October). Several Islamist groups had threatened to attack Bhutto on her return after she promised to confront militants. Zardari, her husband, blamed the government and intelligence agencies.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) suspended Pakistan from the Commonwealth on 22 November “pending restoration of democracy”. The foreign ministry said the Commonwealth had not appreciated Pakistan’s “serious internal crisis”.

Scores of militants were killed in heavy fighting in South Waziristan in January. Earlier, Islamists seized two army forts in tribal areas. Dozens were killed in a wave of suicide bombings of targets that included an outgoing minister, mosques and police.

The army recaptured two towns in the Swat valley from forces of the pro-Taleban cleric Maulana Fazlullah (6 December). At least 300 people died in fighting. The fighting in Swat was the first serious insurgent threat from pro-Taleban forces, including foreign fighters, outside the largely autonomous Waziristan tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. Fazlullah tried to implement sharia law in Swat, a tourist area.

Mir Balaach Marri, alleged head of the banned Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), was killed in Afghanistan, intelligence sources said (21 November). The BLA has been fighting for more autonomy in mineral-rich Balochistan since 2000.

Pakistan refused to let the UN question the nuclear expert AQ Khan, who is a hero for developing Pakistan’s atom bomb but in 2004 confessed to leaking nuclear secrets to Iran, North Korea and Libya.

Bangladesh

Four professors were jailed for two years for inciting students to protest against emergency rule (4 December). They denied leading rallies in Rajshahi in August

against the army-backed government, which took power in January. Meanwhile, the supreme court rather than politicians will now appoint judges.

The government appealed for \$1bn to rebuild southern areas destroyed by Cyclone Sidr on 15 November. At least 3,268 people were killed and more than two million people need emergency aid.

In a crackdown on corruption, about 160 former politicians have been convicted in the past four months, including Khaleda Zia, who faces corruption charges. Her rival and fellow former prime minister, Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League, is also being held on charges of extortion, corruption and abuse of power.

Bangladesh and India said they were close to solving frontier issues after five days of talks in Dhaka. India said Bangladesh had given assurances that it would close more than 140 camps of Harkat-ul-Jihad Islamist militants.

Hong Kong

A record turnout helped the pro-democracy candidate and former colonial official Anson Chan win a key by-election in Hong Kong. Chan came out of retirement to campaign for the chief executive to be directly elected by 2012, instead of chosen by a pro-Beijing committee.

Hong Kong came third in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) international schools survey of reading and maths, and second for science.

Money flowing from the Chinese mainland lifted Hong Kong's benchmark Hang Seng index 3.9% to an all-time high of 28,199.75.

India

India vowed to protect the controversial Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen after violent protests by Islamists in West Bengal's capital, Calcutta. Nasreen, who is confined to a Delhi safehouse, said she would remove lines from her 2003 autobiography seen as derogatory to Islam. A court in Gujarat sentenced eight Hindu men to life for rape and burning seven Muslims to death in riots in 2002, in which at least 1000 died.

At least one person was killed as tribespeople in Assam demonstrated for more rights. Footage of a tribal woman being stripped and assaulted caused outrage. At least six people were killed in attacks police blamed on a rebel separatist group, the United Liberation Front of Assam. Maoist rebels in eastern India killed at least 17 people after some 25 rebels fired on a festival in Jharkhand. Separately, three bombs at courthouses killed 13 people in Uttar Pradesh. It was unclear who was responsible.

About 25 000 protesters marched 325 km to Delhi to demand land redistribution. The protesters, mostly low-caste tenant farmers and landless indigenous people, said they had been left behind by India's economic boom.

India will create a "tiger protection force" to prevent poachers pushing the animal into extinction. New figures put numbers at fewer than 1500.

In India's biggest commercial land deal, three firms paid 27.9bn rupees (\$701 m) for 2.5 hectares of land in Mumbai, which rivals London for pricey offices. Foreign investors in the world's second fastest-growing economy lifted the Sensex share index above 20 000 for the first time.

India agreed with Burma to develop Sittwe port, despite calls for sanctions against the junta. Delhi has been reluctant to criticise Rangoon because of its strategic interests in Burma, such as a 20% stake in the huge Shwe gas field. Indo-Pakistani trade ties were boosted when a lorry carried goods across the Wagah border crossing for the first time since partition 60 years ago (1 October). Cargo was previously unloaded at the border and reloaded on to different lorries in the other country.

The government said it would hold talks with the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, in Vienna on the controversial India—US civil nuclear deal (21 November). Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's communist allies opposed the deal, saying it would give the US too much influence over foreign policy, but agreed to the IAEA talks. Singh described the deal as a "landmark" that would allow India access to US nuclear technology.

The London-based steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal was ranked as India's wealthiest person for a fourth year by Forbes Asia magazine. His wealth was put at \$51bn, twice the 2006 level.

India's Viswanathan Anand regained the World Chess Championship after nearly seven years.

A man married a dog in southern India, seeking to atone for stoning two other dogs to death.

Malaysia

Malaysia charged 26 ethnic Indians with attempted murder in connection with a rally in Kuala Lumpur in November. At least 8000 people protested against what they see as unfair treatment of Hindu Indians in Muslim-majority Malaysia. Meanwhile, the government banned the hiring of any more Bangladeshi migrant workers after thousands were abandoned at Kuala Lumpur airport by their employers.

Malaysia's state carmaker, Proton, announced plans for an "Islamic car", with features such as a compass pointing to Mecca.

A Russian *Soyuz* rocket heading to the International Space Station propelled Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor, Malaysia's first astronaut, into space (10 October).

Maldives

Police said 10 suspects in a bomb attack that wounded 12 tourists had fled to Pakistan. Eleven suspects are in custody for the 29 September nail-bomb attack in the capital, Male. Tourism provides two-thirds of the Maldives' income.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, leader since 1978, intends to ban the full veil and foreign preachers. A Maldivian Democratic Party spokesman in London said this would "exacerbate extremism".

Singapore

Leaders of ASEAN, the south-east Asian bloc, signed a charter on human rights and democracy (20 November). The summit took place amid condemnation of Burma's

human-rights record. Burmese officials gained the support of other members to block a briefing by the UN's special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari.

Singapore's parliament voted not to decriminalise homosexuality (23 November). In a reform of sex laws, many dating from the British colonial era, MPs legalised oral and anal sex but only between heterosexuals. Lee Hsien Loong, prime minister, said gay and lesbian people did not have minority rights.

Sri Lanka

The government said it had released most of the 2000 Tamils held since two bombs went off in Colombo on 4 December. Tamil politicians and human-rights groups accused it of indiscriminately arresting Tamils, who suffered "cruel and degrading treatment". At least 17 people were killed and 40 injured in the blasts, which the authorities blamed on Tamil Tiger rebels.

SP Thamilselvan, the Tigers' deputy leader, was killed in an air force raid on a camp as leaders were meeting (2 November). The navy said 17 rebels were killed in a sea battle. In October, it said it had sunk the Tigers' last boats.

A Human Rights Watch report said abuse of Sri Lanka's 660 000 domestic workers was rampant in Gulf states. It said employers routinely confiscated passports and confined them to the workplace, while some maids faced food deprivation, physical and verbal abuse, forced labour and rape.

The British government was urged to prosecute a former Tamil Tiger commander detained in England (7 November). Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, known as Colonel Karuna Amman, was once the Tigers' deputy leader. Karuna led a regional splinter faction from 2004 and is said to have later collaborated with government forces. Human-rights groups accuse him of crimes including torture and the use of child soldiers.

Four ministerial advisers on human rights resigned, accusing the government of doing little to stop killings, kidnappings and disappearances (15 October). The decision was announced days after the UN's high commissioner for human rights said Sri Lanka's "prevalence of impunity" was alarming.

The manager of the Fortress hotel in Galle defended its \$14 500 dessert, a chocolate pudding with a gemstone (27 September).

CHOGM

The biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) was held in Uganda from 23–25 November 2007, opening in the Serena Hotel, Kampala, and then moving for the Retreat to Munyonyo Resort on Lake Victoria. Of the 48 countries that attended, 36 were heads of state or government. Five countries were missing—two, Fiji and Pakistan, were under suspension and three others, Vanuatu, Nauru and St Lucia—could not attend. A notable absentee was Prime Minister John Howard of Australia, who lost power in a general election during CHOGM to Labor leader Kevin Rudd.

The main CHOGM discussions centred on:

1. The need for further debt relief for middle-income countries. The Heads called as a priority for wide-ranging reform of international bodies, including the Bretton

Woods institutions, so as to strengthen the voice and participation of developing countries. To this end a small Commonwealth group would be set up to push the advocacy and lobbying already underway. It is to report back to the 2009 CHOGM. In a new move to help small states, it was agreed to look at setting up a Commonwealth Small States Office in Geneva, along the lines of the office already operating in New York, to help these countries handle the complex negotiations for which they have inadequate capacity.

2. Trade and concern over the deadlock on the Doha Round. Developed countries were called on to implement promises on lasting duty-free and quota-free market access on products from the least developed countries. Feeling was strong over the European Union's denunciation of the Sugar Protocol and the Heads called for new trading arrangements to give long-term economic benefits to sugar exporters of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Group.
3. Sitting on the eve of the UN meeting in Bali, the Heads launched a 13-point Lake Victoria Climate Change Action Plan. The Commonwealth, some of whose low-lying member countries face inundation from rising sea levels, was early to draw attention to the dangers. It did so at the 1989 CHOGM in Kuala Lumpur with the Langkawi Declaration in the Environment.

CMAG

At its eve-of-CHOGM meeting, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) re-suspended Pakistan from the councils of the Commonwealth because President Musharraf had not yet kept his promise to remove his uniform and separate the offices of heads of state and chief of army staff. Also, the state of emergency had not been lifted, the constitution and independence of the judiciary had not been restored, and fundamental rights and the rule of law remained curtailed. It was a long and difficult meeting, mainly because the Sri Lankan foreign minister Rohitha Bogollagama did not favour the suspension and Joseph Salang Gandum, deputy foreign minister of Malaysia, was also hesitant. Both finally went along with the consensus. At the press conference, the UK foreign and commonwealth secretary David Miliband, attending his first CMAG meeting, strongly supported the suspension. Pakistan was taken out of the Commonwealth in 1972 by the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. It rejoined in 1989 when his daughter Benazir became prime minister. It was suspended after the Musharraf coup in 1999 but restored to full membership in 2004.

EUROPE

Britain

The prime minister, Gordon Brown, boycotted a European Union–Africa summit in Lisbon because it was attended by Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe (7 December). Mugabe is banned from travelling to the EU but was allowed to attend the summit after African leaders threatened to stay away.

A reward of £20 000 was offered for the return of two CDs lost by HM Revenue and Customs. The CDs contain personal details of 25 million people, raising the threat of fraud on a massive scale.

Gillian Gibbons, a teacher from Liverpool, was pardoned by Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir and freed from prison after a Sudanese court convicted her for blasphemy. Her pupils had chosen to name a teddy bear Muhammad (3 December). Two UK Muslim peers went to Khartoum to lobby for her release. Sudanese protesters had called for her execution.

Brown said he wanted to reform political party funding after a property developer admitted illegally donating £660 000 to the Labour Party since 2003 under other people's names (1 December).

UK taxpayers could have gained "more money" from the privatisation of the defence research firm Qinetiq, the National Audit Office said. It also condemned an incentive scheme that netted fortunes for Qinetiq's bosses.

British banks revealed huge losses from the global credit crunch, which was sparked by the US sub-prime mortgage crisis. The issue continued to trouble world stock markets, with losses for the entire financial sector estimated at £200bn (\$400bn). The Bank of England and the International Monetary Fund said the credit crunch would hit UK and world growth. Retailers warned of a severe slowdown in business. London's FTSE 100 index had its worst fall in more than four years.

Northern Rock, the UK's fifth-largest mortgage lender, was put up for sale but attracted few bids. Thousands of depositors had queued outside branches to withdraw their money in the first run on a British bank since 1866. Shares in the bank had plummeted on news of its rescue by the Bank of England after inter-bank lending dried up on fears of defaults from the sub-prime crisis.

The number of women becoming priests in the Church of England in 2006 outnumbered men for the first time.

The largest Protestant paramilitary group in Northern Ireland renounced violence, officially ending decades of terror it inflicted on the Catholic minority. The outlawed Ulster Defence Association said it was disbanding its armed units but was not yet willing to hand over its arsenal (11 November).

Britain's 28-day limit for detaining suspected terrorists without charge was far longer than 15 other western countries surveyed by the human rights group Liberty. The government wants to extend it to 42 days but has won little support for the move. Details of all landline and mobile phone calls in the UK will be stored for a year under new laws. Samina Malik, who called herself the "Lyrical Terrorist", was spared prison after becoming the first woman in the UK convicted under the Terrorism Act. She wrote poems about beheading non-believers and pursuing martyrdom.

Tens of thousands of turkeys were culled after the virulent H5N1 strain of bird flu, which can kill humans, was found on farms. There was also an outbreak of the insect-borne livestock disease bluetongue, which has spread to Europe from the tropics. Barkfly, an African species, was found in the UK for the first time—the result of global warming, conservationists said.

The home secretary, Jacqui Smith, apologised for underestimating by 300 000 the number of immigrants working in the UK. It is now thought that 1.1 million foreign workers entered since 1997 (30 October). Polish politicians campaigned in Britain before elections in the eastern European country and 23 polling stations were set up for the 850 000 Poles in the UK.

European Union leaders signed a landmark treaty to reform the 27-member bloc (13 December). The Treaty of Lisbon replaces the European Constitution rejected by French and Dutch voters in 2005 and comes into force in 2009. It creates a new longer-term president of the European Council and an EU foreign policy chief. Gordon Brown again ruled out a referendum on the treaty. In his first major foreign policy speech, Brown signalled that there would be no realignment by saying Britain's "most important" alliance was with the US.

The government said Britain was researching a claim for sovereignty over a large area of the seabed off Antarctica as countries scramble for resources.

British troop numbers in Iraq would be halved to 2500 from next spring, Brown told MPs (8 October). Meanwhile, the number of Iraqis seeking asylum in the UK doubled in three months, according to official figures.

After much speculation, Brown opted not to call an autumn election, saying he wanted to show his "vision for change". He rejected suggestions that he changed his mind on a snap election because of poor opinion polls after the success of the Conservative Party's annual conference. Sir Menzies Campbell stepped down as leader of the third-largest UK party, the Liberal Democrats.

AFRICA

Kenya

President Mwai Kibaki was sworn in for a second term after contested elections, which sparked violence across the country. At least 800 people died, ending decades of ethnic coexistence (30 December). The main opposition party, the Orange Democratic Movement led by Raila Odinga, and foreign observers condemned irregularities that included turnouts of more than 100% in some constituencies.

The state-sponsored National Commission on Human Rights said at least 360,000 votes could not be verified—the winning margin was 230,000. The attorney-general, Amos Wako, called for an independent investigation. Odinga demanded a re-run. In October, the electoral commission had investigated the widespread buying of election voting cards.

After the former UN secretary general Kofi Annan brokered talks between Kibaki and Odinga, they agreed to work together to end the dispute (24 January). A previous peace initiative by Ghana's President John Kufuor, as chairman of the African Union, broke down.

Thirty Kenyans including many children were burned to death in a church, after seeking refuge from the violence. A mob set fire to the church in Eldoret where many people from Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe were sheltering.

Kenya granted asylum to 23 Somalis, who had gone on hunger strike, fearing they would be deported to Mogadishu (26 November). Eighteen other Somalis were deported a week before after being refused asylum by Uganda. Kenya hosts more than 200,000 refugees, mostly from Somalia and Sudan.

There were protests after politicians and businessmen reportedly paid \$15,000 each to lunch with Kibaki in Nairobi (22 November).

A UK court ordered the extradition to Kenya of an evangelical preacher, Gilbert Deya, on charges of child abduction. The self-proclaimed bishop of a congregation

with 36,000 UK members claimed he could give infertile couples “miracle babies”. Kenyan police say Gilbert Deya Ministries is a child-trafficking ring.

Police were accused of executing nearly 500 people in Nairobi last year by the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, which investigated the disappearance of hundreds of men from the Mungiki secret sect. The police commissioner called the allegations “reckless”. Police targeted the outlawed gang in June after several grisly murders. The Mungiki terrorised Nairobi, demanding protection money from minibus operators, slum dwellers and businessmen.

The electoral commission investigated the widespread buying of voting cards ahead of general elections in December (17 October).

President Mwai Kibaki rejected a law which in effect would have overlooked financial crimes committed by officials before 2003. These include two notorious cases, the Goldenberg and Anglo Leasing scams, which lost huge sums. The bill, passed by MPs in September, also stopped elected officials from having to declare their assets. Kibaki won in 2002 on an anti-corruption platform.

South Africa

Jacob Zuma became the favourite to become next leader of the ruling African National Congress, and in pole position to become South Africa’s next president, after receiving the most nominations. Trade unions, the ANC powerbroker Tokyo Sexwale, plus five branches of the ANC backed him compared with four branches for President Thabo Mbeki. The tycoon and former anti-apartheid leader Cyril Ramaphosa was put forward as a compromise contender. The vote is on 20 December.

Zuma was acquitted of rape last May but he still faces corruption charges. The supreme court upheld appeals by the state against earlier rulings preventing prosecutors from using documents seized from Zuma relating to alleged bribery in a 1999 \$4bn arms deal (8 November).

The economic outlook for Africa is improving after a decade of 5.4% growth that matches global rates and indicates that a fundamental change is occurring, the World Bank said. Africa traded more effectively with the rest of the world, relied more on the private sector and avoided collapses in growth, it said, but added that corruption limited investments in education and health. South Africa and Nigeria account for more than half of the region’s gross domestic product.

The number of South Africans living on less than \$1 a day more than doubled in the decade since apartheid ended. The South African Institute of Race Relations survey said 4.2 million people were living on \$1 a day in 2005. A Zimbabwean job-seeker collapsed and died from starvation in Cape Town (2 November). Fellow Zimbabweans said he had not eaten for two weeks. Up to 3 million Zimbabweans have fled to South Africa.

Close allies of Mbeki bid for Johncom, an influential South African media group. His personal adviser and a foreign ministry official are in a consortium offering R7bn (\$1bn) for Johncom, which owns the Sunday Times. The best-selling weekly newspaper exposed a theft conviction and alcohol problems of the health minister. The consortium, Koni, is reported to be seeking funding from the state-owned Public Investment Corporation.

Mbeki, clutching the rugby world cup trophy, was carried aloft by the nearly all-white rugby team after South Africa beat England to win the tournament trophy a second time (20 October).

The reggae star Lucky Dube, one of Africa's biggest-selling artists, was shot dead in front of his children in an attempted car hijacking in Johannesburg (19 October). In 2006, 19 000 South Africans were murdered.

Scientists found the earliest evidence of humans thriving by the sea with the discovery of 164 000-year-old waste from shellfish dinners in a cave on the Cape.

More than 3200 gold miners were rescued from 2.2 km underground after a power cable accident trapped them for nearly two days.

Memorials to the anti-apartheid leader Oliver Tambo were unveiled in the London area he lived in for 30 years after being forced into exile in 1960.

Nigeria

The attorney-general, Michael Aondoakaa, was accused by British legal authorities of stalling efforts to recover millions of dollars looted by former Nigerian officials. He complained of procedural problems in a UK request for help in the case of a former state governor accused of diverting public funds. James Ibori, whose \$35m assets have been frozen by a British court, is one of several former Nigerian officials under investigation by British police at Nigeria's request (29 November). As governor, Ibori's salary was \$25 000 a year.

The senate declared last year's handover of the oil-rich Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon illegal (23 November). It said no part of Nigeria could be ceded without changing the constitution and called for a halt to the transfer of border areas. In 2002, the International Court of Justice ruled in favour of Cameroon in the border dispute. The vote came two weeks after a clash in which 21 Cameroon troops were killed in Bakassi, which has potentially huge oil and gas reserves.

Nigeria cancelled a contract with Siemens, pending an investigation into whether former ministers took bribes from the German telecoms firm. Siemens was found guilty of bribery and fined €201m (\$248m) by a Munich court on 4 October. Separately, parliament elected a new speaker to replace Patricia Etteh, who resigned in October over a corruption scandal. An MP collapsed and died in a confrontation in parliament over the case.

President Umaru Yar'Adua's government agreed to review all privatisation deals approved by the former president, Olusegun Obasanjo, who stood down in May. Yar'Adua has already rescinded the controversial sale of two oil refineries in the last days of Obasanjo's government (28 November). Nigeria's top energy adviser, Rilwanu Lukman, urged a review of all oil extraction deals with foreign companies.

The supreme court annulled April's election of Celestine Omehia as governor of the oil-rich Rivers State (25 October) and said the post should go to Rotimi Amaechi, who won the ruling People's Democratic Party primaries but was dropped because of corruption allegations. It was the third time in October a court nullified the election of a state governor. The anti-corruption agency was investigating how Amaechi, as speaker of the state assembly, had allegedly amassed \$150m. As governor, he will be immune from prosecution.

Five alleged Islamic militants arrested with arms and explosives in northern Nigeria in November were charged with plotting to attack government buildings. Three men spent two years in an Algerian training camp run by a group with al-Qaida links, prosecutors said.

Yar'Adua said the government would not allow Nigeria to be used as a base for the US–African military command, Africom. Liberia is the only country willing to host the Americans.

Six people died and hundreds were arrested in clashes over local elections in Kano. Separately, Human Rights Watch called for an inquiry into police killings. The New York-based group said official statistics recorded that police had killed 8000 Nigerians since 2000, mostly in what are described as shootouts with robbers (18 November).

Glasgow beat Abuja for the right to host the 2014 Commonwealth Games. The Nigerian capital's bid was largely built on the fact that the games have never been hosted by an African nation.

Two children, aged five and six, of employees of the French energy group Total were kidnapped by gunmen in Port Harcourt. The child of a Shell worker had been kidnapped a week before. Militants in the Niger Delta freed seven oil workers (22 October).

The Ministry of Education is evaluating schemes from Microsoft, Intel and Nicholas Negroponte's One Laptop per Child group to give the country's 30m children access to computers. Intel's project will be tested in 200 schools.

Cameroon

Police shot dead at least two motorcycle taxi-drivers at a protest against police abuses and the severe beating of a colleague in Bamenda (16 October).

The Gambia

Two Amnesty International workers and a Gambian arrested for spying were freed on bail (9 October). President Yahya Jammeh's government has been criticised for detaining opposition activists and journalists. The three had gone to meet Ousman Jatta, a key opposition figure detained for 13 months.

Lesotho

The UK's Serious Fraud Office is deciding whether to launch a corruption inquiry into Mott MacDonald, a British company accused of bribing two Lesotho officials over a multibillion-dollar water project. The Lesotho Highland Water Project, which is also being investigated by the European Union, was one of the largest engineering projects undertaken in southern Africa. Masupha Sole, chief executive, was jailed for 15 years for receiving bribes.

Mozambique

The former Mozambique president Joaquim Chissano won the first \$5m Mo Ibrahim prize rewarding a retired African head of state for excellent leadership (22

October). Former UN head Kofi Annan, who chaired the panel that awarded the prize, said: "His decision not to seek a third presidential term reinforced Mozambique's democratic maturity and demonstrated that institutions and the democratic process were more important than personalities."

The head of the Catholic Church in Mozambique, which opposes birth control, said European condoms were deliberately infected with HIV. Maputo Archbishop Francisco Chimoio claimed anti-retroviral drugs were also infected "to finish quickly the African people". Aids activists called his claims "nonsense" (26 September).

Namibia

Namibia and Angola agreed to build a hydro-electric dam on the Kunene river. An initial proposal for a dam and power station at Epupa Falls sparked protest as development would have required the removal of the long-settled Himba tribe and drowning a large area of natural beauty, forest and grassland (25 October).

Sam Nujoma, the first leader of independent Namibia, stepped down as president of the ruling Swapo party after 47 years at the helm (29 November). He is expected to continue to wield influence as Swapo chairman.

Sierra Leone

Ernest Bai Koroma, the new president, called for a change in mentality at his inauguration as he pledged to fight corruption and reduce poverty (15 November). A report commissioned by Koroma found that funds from a \$500 000 project at one ministry, financed by an international donor, had not reached the intended recipients. However, the inauguration was one of the most orderly Sierra Leone has seen.

Amnesty International called for more help for victims of sexual abuse in the decade-long civil war. A third of female Sierra Leoneans are estimated to have been raped, but Amnesty said victims had received no help (26 October).

The UN-backed war crimes court jailed Moinina Fofana and Allieu Kondewa, two ex-leaders of a pro-government militia during the war, for murder, cruel treatment and the use of child soldiers. The case is controversial as some saw the Civil Defence Force as defending civilians against rebels in the war.

Swaziland

The supreme court overturned a royal edict that banned banning two widows from burying their husband, after a five-year dispute (12 November). King Mswati III had ruled that protocol prevented the man being buried on his homestead when he lost the chieftaincy. Opposition leader Mario Masuku said: "It is a victory for the oppressed."

Uganda

There was an outbreak of Ebola (6 December) which has killed about 20 people. There is no known cure for the virus. There were also outbreaks of cholera, meningitis and bubonic plague.

Lord's Resistance Army rebels asked war victims in the north to forgive them (6 November). The LRA delegation wants their top commanders, four of whom were indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes two years ago, to face traditional forms of justice instead. The LRA were infamous for mutilating victims and kidnapping thousands of children to serve as fighters, porters and sex slaves. The LRA also said it would hold the first talks in Kampala with President Yoweri Museveni.

Six people were killed in shooting between troops from Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo on Lake Albert (25 September). Tension has grown since oil was found under the lake, which is shared by both countries.

Zambia

President Levy Mwanawasa threatened opponents of plans for a new constitution with treason charges. Some opposition leaders intend to boycott a new body to review a draft, saying it is controlled by Mwanawasa (10 October).

Zimbabwe

The chief statistician said it was impossible to work out the inflation rate because of the lack of goods in shops (27 November). Many staples are unobtainable since the government ordered prices to be halved or frozen in a bid to stem the world's highest inflation rate, put at almost 8000% in September. The International Monetary Fund said it could reach 100 000%.

At the EU–Africa summit in Lisbon, President Robert Mugabe accused Europe of arrogance in criticising his human-rights record (9 December). The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, condemned oppression in Zimbabwe. However, South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki said he was "very confident" of a solution to the political crisis after talks with Mugabe and opposition officials in Harare in November.

The government published a new law that would force mining firms to transfer a majority shareholding to local owners, including giving the government a free 25% stake (19 November). Mugabe amended the constitution to allow him to choose a successor if he retires mid-term. He will seek another term in next year's elections.

There was a muted reaction to the death of Ian Smith, the former prime minister of Rhodesia, whose white-minority regime illegally declared independence from Britain in 1965 and fought black nationalists until the guerrilla war led to the creation of Zimbabwe in 1979 (21 November). Bright Matonga, deputy information minister, said: "We offered him the hand of reconciliation, which he never accepted. Good riddance."

OCEANIA

Australia

Labor Party leader Kevin Rudd was sworn in as prime minister, following a landslide victory in parliamentary elections (3 December). His first act was to ratify

the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, reversing previous policy. He also said Australian troops would be withdrawn from Iraq by mid-2008. His cabinet includes Australia's first woman deputy leader, Julia Gillard.

The key issues in the election were the economy, Iraq, immigration and the environment—Australia is the world's heaviest polluter per capita. In a sign of the widespread desire for change, John Howard lost his own seat after 33 years, the first serving prime minister to do so since 1929. Labor defeated the Liberal Party with a big swing of more than 6% but the win was by a national margin of 0.1%—or 12 000 people in nine seats.

A judge's decision not to jail nine men found guilty of raping a girl of 10 in an Aboriginal community sparked outrage. The offenders were either given probation or suspended sentences for the 2005 rape in Aurukun, Queensland. Judge Sarah Bradley called the sentences "appropriate". A review of sexual abuse sentences in Aboriginal Queensland was ordered.

Fiji

Ten people face charges of plotting to assassinate the military leader, Commodore Frank Bainimarama. Prosecutors agreed to drop a charge of treason as the regime faces a legal challenge over its legitimacy. In October, the military government lifted the state of emergency imposed when the deposed premier Laisenia Qarase re-entered politics.

New Zealand

The solicitor-general said 12 environmental activists arrested in October could not be charged under anti-terrorism laws. The men, mainly Maori, allegedly planned a violent campaign against the white majority.

The tiny South Pacific territory of Tokelau rejected self-government in the second referendum in two years (25 October), falling just short of the two-thirds majority of the 692 voters. Wellington has governed Tokelau since 1926 and gives it substantial aid.

Papua New Guinea

A state of emergency was declared after at least 150 people died in floods when Tropical Cyclone Guba hit eastern PNG (21 September).

Solomon Islands

The prime minister, Manasseh Sogavare, boycotted the annual Pacific Islands Forum in Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa, because he said the 16-nation summit did not address his complaints that an Australian-led peacekeeping force was undermining his country's sovereignty (16 October).

AMERICAS

Canada

Officials signed an agreement granting semi-autonomy for a mainly Inuit region of Quebec (6 December). The deal would create a regional assembly and government with responsibility for education, health and transport.

Iran expelled Canada's ambassador after Ottawa failed to approve Iran's proposed diplomatic representation to Canada (4 December). Relations have been strained since a Canadian-Iranian journalist died in police custody in Iran in 2003.

Two US army deserters who fled to Canada in protest against the Iraq war lost a fresh asylum appeal bid. The supreme court refused to hear an appeal against a decision by officials to deny them refugee status (15 November).

The prime minister, Stephen Harper, announced a public inquiry into corruption allegations involving Canada's Conservative prime minister from 1984 to 1993, Brian Mulroney.

In another sign of global warming, the Northwest Passage was ice-free for the first time since records began. Canada warned that it would step up patrols of the Arctic route from Europe to Asia. Record summer melting of sea-ice has made the passage fully navigable and escalated a dispute over who controls the route. Canada says it lies in its territorial waters and is planning a new military base in the Arctic.

The Anglo-Australian mining group Rio Tinto bought the Canadian aluminium firm Alcan for \$38.1bn.

Harper's minority Conservative government survived a confidence vote over the "throne speech" on its policy agenda. A loss would have triggered a third election in three years. The government promised MPs a vote on extending the military mission in Afghanistan beyond February 2009. It also said Canada's greenhouse gas emissions were 33% above its Kyoto Protocol targets.

Dominica

Eugenia Charles, prime minister from 1980–1995, died aged 86. Known as the Iron Lady of the Caribbean, she founded the Dominica Freedom Party and supported Dominica's independence from Britain, which it achieved in 1978.

Guyana

Venezuela denied destroying two gold-mining dredges on Guyanese territory following a strong protest from Guyana's government. Guyana said 36 Venezuelan soldiers used helicopters and plastic explosive to blow up the two dredgers (15 November). Venezuela said it was removing illegal miners inside its own territory.