

Commonwealth Update

OREN GRUENBAUM

ABSTRACT *In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe was widely regarded to have lost presidential elections, but the results had still not been released three weeks later. The opposition accused him of going to war against the people to preserve his rule. Raila Odinga, the opposition leader in Kenya, became prime minister alongside President Mwai Kibaki. A power-sharing deal was cemented by the appointment of a bloated government that could cost an eighth of public revenue. Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf swore in a cabinet full of long-time opponents, with Yusuf Raza Gillani as prime minister. A surge in world prices of staple foods sparked unrest across continents—rice has risen 140% this year. The world's smallest republic, Nauru, called a snap election.*

AFRICA

Botswana

Ian Khama, son of the independence leader and founding president Seretse Khama and his British wife, was chosen by parliament as the new president (2 April). A general and vice-president, Khama took over from Festus Mogae, who stepped down after 10 years in office. There was some criticism of the fact that Khama was inheriting his father's position without an election. Khama is also a paramount chief of the largest ethnic group in Botswana.

A new diamond-processing plant opened, creating about 3,000 jobs. Diamonds had previously been sent abroad to be polished, marketed and sold. The \$83m plant, jointly owned by the government and De Beers, will process diamonds from De Beers mines worldwide.

Cameroon

MPs voted on 10 April to scrap presidential term limits to enable Paul Biya to stay in power beyond 2018, when he will be 85. He has ruled for 26 years. The main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (FSD), boycotted the debate. FSD leader Joseph Banadzem said: "The whole issue is a complete fraud. We do not want to legitimise it by taking part." A member of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement said party members were paid to back the bill. In February,

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some 100 demonstrators were killed by the military and police in rioting over fuel costs, exacerbated by opposition to the constitutional changes. Since February, 24 people have died in food riots.

Ghana

Hundreds of Liberian women living in Ghana suspended a five-week sit-in protest against their repatriation after Liberia's envoy visited (24 March). They had been accused by a Ghanaian minister of demonstrating naked, a traditional protest among powerless women in parts of Africa. The women object to a UN plan offering each refugee \$100 to return to Liberia; they demanded \$1,000 or to be resettled in the West. Tens of thousands of Liberians remain in Ghana five years after the civil war ended but Ghana denied forcibly repatriating refugees.

Kenya

The opposition leader Raila Odinga was sworn in as prime minister, sharing power with President Mwai Kibaki. The agreement raised hopes for an end to the long-running political crisis that has claimed 1,500 lives but also raised fears of corruption and mismanagement because of the size of the government (12 April).

The power-sharing deal was brokered by the former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan in February and a cabinet was due to be announced on 6 April. But talks broke down as Odinga held out for a 50–50 split in cabinet posts he said he was promised under the National Accord and Reconciliation Act. Odinga accused Kibaki's Party of National Unity of "going to extraordinary lengths to monopolise power". However, Odinga appears to have conceded much; except for local government and land, the key posts remain with Kibaki's followers. After elections in 2002, Odinga and Kibaki were involved in a similar coalition that soon collapsed.

The cabinet has 40 ministers, including the new prime minister's post and two deputy prime ministers, plus 52 assistant ministers. Almost half of MPs now have a ministerial position. The cabinet may now cost \$1bn a year, about an eighth of expected government revenue. The Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, who was tear-gassed in protests over the size of the cabinet, said: "Even 15 ministers are enough but they want to increase the number since they do not intend to serve but to acquire wealth."

The ethnic violence and displacement of up to 600,000 people that followed the disputed presidential elections last December was meticulously planned, the New York-based Human Rights Watch said in a report, *Ballots to Bullets*. Attacks on members of Kibaki's Kikuyu ethnic group were organised by local leaders, as were reprisals, it said. Meanwhile, a South African judge, Johann Kriegler, began an official inquiry into allegations of electoral fraud.

Scores of people died in Mungiki riots in Nairobi and elsewhere. The Mungiki are a criminal Kikuyu movement linked to senior government politicians. It mixes Mau Mau revanchism and old Kikuyu rites with western "gangsta" culture. The Mungiki accused police of beheading the wife of their imprisoned leader. Human rights groups say the government executed hundreds of suspected Mungiki in extra-judicial killings last year. Meanwhile, nearly 200 people were arrested during a week-long

crackdown on an armed militia in western Kenya. The land dispute around Mount Elgon led by the Sabaot Land Defence Forces has left 800 people dead in the past year and is separate from the election violence.

Malawi

The government is to introduce compulsory birth certificates to combat a growing child-trafficking problem. Officials said the move would also reduce confusion in cases such as the singer Madonna's adoption of a Malawian boy from an orphanage. It was later discovered that his father was still alive.

Namibia

President Hifikepunye Pohamba declared a state of emergency after 42 people were killed and thousands displaced by floods. Widespread crop failures are expected after rivers reached record levels.

Nigeria

The daughter of the former president Olusegun Obasanjo told the BBC she feared for her life after being charged by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). Senator Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello was named by the anti-corruption agency in a 300m naira (\$2.5m) fraud case that has led to the resignation of two health ministers (16 April). Meanwhile, in a divorce court, Obasanjo's son Gbenga accused his wife, Mojisola, of having sex with his father to win government contracts. The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) chose a compromise candidate, Vincent Ogbulafor, as its new leader. His election was a setback for Obasanjo, who retains a powerful position within the PDP.

MPs investigating how \$16bn of investment in the power industry was spent allege that the former Obasanjo government paid \$50m to non-existent companies. Some \$2.2bn-worth of energy contracts were awarded without a bidding process by the former president and his energy minister. Six power stations already paid for by the government have yet to be completed years later.

Last year's defeated opposition leader, Muhammadu Buhari, appealed to the supreme court over the election of President Umaru Yar'Adua after the election tribunal said the All-Nigeria People's Party candidate had failed to prove the result had been affected by rigging. It was Nigeria's first peaceful transfer of power between elected leaders. A court quashed the election of Timipre Sylva as governor of oil-rich Bayelsa state. Judge Saka Ibiyeye said there was no evidence that the 14 April election had actually taken place. Nine other gubernatorial results have also been overturned. The EFCC appealed against a decision to grant immunity from prosecution to Peter Odili, a former governor of Rivers state, Nigeria's wealthiest region (7 March). The commission has charged eight out of 36 governors from the previous administration with corruption since they lost office, and immunity, last year. Theodore Orji, governor of Abia state, denied being involved in a film of a secret ritual at a cult shrine that was released on the internet. The cult has been linked to ritual murders for the use of body parts.

Prospective homebuyers in the capital, Abuja, were beaten and tear-gassed by police at chaotic scenes as they queued to buy houses being sold by the civil service at a fraction of their real value. Officials denied they had already been sold off to cronies.

A court imprisoned a man for 18 months for dressing as a woman. Another 18 men face charges of indecent behaviour in the sharia-run northern state of Bauchi. Homosexuality is illegal.

The winner of a famous fishing festival in Kebbi state was stripped of his title and thrown in jail after officials ruled that his 66kg winning fish was already dead when it came out of the water. The monster fish netted him prizes worth \$33,000, including a car and a ticket for the Hajj pilgrimage.

Sierra Leone

The Ex-Liberian president Charles Taylor ordered militias to eat the flesh of their enemies, a former death squad leader told his war crimes trial in The Hague. Joseph “Zigzag” Marzah said Taylor told his fighters in Liberia to even eat UN peacekeepers to “set an example” and slit open the stomachs of pregnant women. Taylor is on trial for backing rebels of the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone’s 11-year war by selling diamonds on their behalf and buying weapons for them. Prosecutors are trying to trace at least \$650m that went through his bank accounts.

South Africa

The deputy security minister told police in Pretoria they should kill criminals if they threaten police or the community. Susan Shabangu said police “must kill the bastards [criminals] if they threaten you”, the *Star* newspaper reported (10 April). “No warning shots. You have been given guns, now use them.” There are about 20,000 murders a year in South Africa.

The state power company Eskom said electricity prices had to double by 2010 if it was to deal with the crippling energy crisis. Eskom plans to spend 343bn rand (\$45bn) increasing generating capacity in the next five years and Mozambique is to increase power supplies to South Africa to help it cope. Officials have suggested splitting the country into two time zones to stagger peak demand.

Thabo Mbeki was strongly criticised for his diplomatic role in the Zimbabwean elections. Dismissing the president’s claim that the polling had been a relative success, the *Sunday Times* newspaper said Mbeki had become a “laughing stock”: “South Africa’s strategy of quiet diplomacy has done little more than to cosset Mugabe while he raped his country.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu called for a judicial inquiry into a controversial 1999 arms deal. Jacob Zuma, leader of the ruling ANC and almost certain to succeed Mbeki as president, is accused of taking bribes from the French firm Thales International (Thint) to halt inquiries into corruption charges related to the \$4.8bn purchase when he was deputy president. Zuma’s ambitions could be thwarted by a second trial on corruption charges, which is scheduled for August. A first trial collapsed in 2006. The ANC said it wanted its new deputy president, Kgalema Motlanthe, in government as an alternative ANC candidate for the elections in case

Zuma cannot stand. "Power lies in the ANC. It's the ANC that wins elections," Zuma told London's *Financial Times*.

The Human Rights Commission said one in five sexual assaults on South African children happened in schools. School is the most common place for pupils to be assaulted and robbed.

Tanzania

President Jakaya Kikwete ordered a crackdown on witchdoctors who use body parts from albinos in magic potions, after 19 albinos were murdered in the last year (3 April).

Tanzania's ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, will share power with the opposition Civic United Front on the semi-autonomous islands of Zanzibar, opposition officials said. The CUF leader Seif Sharrif Hamad said the deal would end the rift that emerged after the 2005 Zanzibar polls, when the CUF believes it was cheated of victory in Zanzibar, its power base. Hamad would serve as chief minister under the CCM's President Amani Karume.

About 65 miners were feared dead after rain triggered the collapse of Tanzanite mines in Mererani.

Uganda

Hopes of an end to the 20-year rebellion by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) were dented when the leader, Joseph Kony, refused to come out of hiding to sign a final peace deal. His chief negotiator later resigned, calling the ceasefire into question. Kony wants war crime indictments issued against him and two top commanders by the International Criminal Court lifted. President Yoweri Museveni said: "They should face traditional justice, which is more compensatory." The violence has displaced more than 1.6 million people and tens of thousands have been killed or kidnapped. The UN estimates that the group has abducted 20,000 children.

The government banned a workshop in Entebbe organised to educate sex workers from across east Africa about their human rights, claiming "prostitutes [were] coming together to devise ways of spreading their vice." Prostitution is illegal in Uganda but the state-run *New Vision* newspaper acknowledged: "Prostitutes are everywhere; in pubs and hotels, on streets, in brothels."

Zambia

Southern African leaders met in the capital, Lusaka, to discuss the political deadlock in Zimbabwe (12 April). Opening the 14-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) summit in Lusaka, Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa said it could not "stand by and do nothing". However, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe did not attend and the final communiqué said there was no crisis.

Some 500 miners were sacked after rioting and attacking a Chinese manager (6 March). Union officials were also arrested. The Chinese manager at the Chambishi copper smelter was admitted to hospital after the assault. China has become a major investor in Zambia's copper sector but workers complain of low wages and poor conditions. A blast at the mine killed 50 people in 2005.

Zimbabwe

Robert Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF party lost control of parliament for the first time since independence 28 years ago. With results from the presidential ballot still not released three weeks after the 29 March elections, Mugabe was widely accused of refusing to recognise defeat by Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, feeding fears of a last-ditch vote-rigging operation. The MDC said its tally of results published outside polling stations showed Tsvangirai had won just over the 50% necessary for an outright win but other reports gave him about 48% to Mugabe's 43%.

Mugabe said: "We don't rig elections ... we have that sense of honesty." However, Tsvangirai accused Mugabe of preparing to go to war against the people by deploying troops and armed militias to intimidate voters ahead of a possible run-off poll (6 April). Doctors reported treating opposition supporters for beatings at the hands of pro-government militia. At least two opposition activists were killed and one new MP said he had fled his home. A general strike called by the MDC failed amid fear of repression and an economic catastrophe that has sent inflation to 165,000%, caused food shortages and left 80% jobless. Three million people are estimated to have left the country.

Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's president, who led regional attempts at diplomacy, said there was no crisis in Zimbabwe but the British prime minister, Gordon Brown, told the UN security council: "No one thinks, having seen the results at polling stations, that President Mugabe has won." Brown is pressing for an arms embargo on Zimbabwe to prevent a Chinese shipment of weapons reaching the country.

The electoral commission acknowledged that Zanu-PF had lost its parliamentary majority. Six Zanu-PF ministers were among those to have lost their seats. But the ruling party demanded recounts in enough seats to reverse its loss if it were awarded them. The MDC said recounts would rig results and its lawyers said armed police prevented them filing a petition to force officials to release the results (5 April).

The MDC said at first that it would not contest a run-off vote against Mugabe but later said it would if international observers were allowed in, fearing that a boycott would hand Mugabe victory unopposed. The government accused Tsvangirai of treason, saying he was working with Britain to bring about "regime change". Police arrested at least five officials for allegedly under-counting votes cast for Mugabe. Opposition supporters, however, claimed they had been turned away from polling stations because their names were not on the electoral roll while others said dead relatives had been listed. Under a last-minute edict, policemen were deployed inside polling stations, prompting claims of intimidation. The MDC complained that three million extra ballot papers had been printed.

ASIA

Pakistan

President Pervez Musharraf swore in 24 members of a new cabinet following the sweeping victory of parties opposed to his rule in February's elections. Twenty of those who took the oath on 31 March were from the rival Pakistan People's Party

(PPP) or the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which won the highest and second-highest number of seats respectively and surprised many by agreeing to form a coalition. Others were from the ethnic Pashtun Awami National Party, the hardline Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. The PPP prime minister, Yusuf Raza Gillani, is a former parliamentary speaker from a feudal landowning family who was jailed in 2001 for five years by an anti-corruption court over illegal government appointments. He is expected to step aside if Asif Zardari, the widower of the assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, becomes an MP and eligible to become prime minister.

Gillani's first act was to free dozens of judges detained under the emergency rule imposed by Musharraf in November as they were about to rule on the legality of his re-election last year. Hundreds of lawyers greeted the deposed chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, on his release from house arrest in Islamabad. Zardari and Sharif promised to reinstate the judges, which could trigger moves to force out the former military leader Musharraf. On 6 March, however, the army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, said he hoped the army would not be dragged into any "unnecessary controversy". MPs elected the PPP's Fahmida Mirza as Pakistan's first female speaker.

Some 40 people were reported killed in sectarian violence in North-West Frontier Province between the Sunni Muslim Orakzai tribe and the minority Shia Katchai tribe. Heavy weapons were used in the clashes in Kohat. In Lahore, at least 28 people were killed and 120 injured in suicide car bombings of a federal police building and a naval college. Another bomb in a suburb killed three, including two children, police said. A suicide attack killed at least 40 people, tribal elders and local officials near Peshawar. At least 38 people were killed by a suicide bomber at a funeral of police killed days earlier in the north-west.

Kashmir Singh was released from a Pakistani prison after spending 35 years on death row for spying for India.

Bangladesh

A Greenpeace report on climate change estimated that 75 million people in the mostly low-lying country would lose their homes if greenhouse gas emissions grew at their present rate (25 March). As the next monsoon season neared, aid agencies said millions were still in dire need of help five months after Cyclone Sidr, which destroyed 1.5 million homes and killed 5,000 people in November (17 April). Meanwhile, the country was gripped by a food crisis after the cost of rice, the staple food, soared to twice last year's price. State outlets run by soldiers have been selling subsidised rice.

The passenger train service between Calcutta in India and the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka, resumed for the first time since the 1965 war between India and Pakistan (14 April).

Veterans of Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence called for their countrymen who collaborated with Pakistan to face war crimes trials. The accused include the leaders of Bangladesh's largest Islamic party, Jamaat-e-Islami. Some three million people, mostly civilians, lost their lives in the war. Dr Mustafisa Rahman, a medic in the Bangladeshi forces, said of the collaborators: "They raped our

mothers, they killed our brothers and sisters, they burned our houses, they have done everything.”

Hundreds of people campaigning for Islamic rule clashed with police in protests over a draft law giving equal inheritance rights to men and women. Police used teargas and batons to break up the protests after members of the Islamic Constitution Movement and the Ahkame Sharia Hefazat Committee, backed by Jamaat-e-Islami, threw rocks in Dhaka. Nearly 50 people were hurt days before when the Khelafat Majlis group clashed with police in the capital over the same issue (11 April). The government said it was working to curb the activities of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (Huji), an Islamic organisation designated by the US as a terrorist group (7 March).

A cartoonist who was jailed under emergency laws after the government said his drawings were insulting to Muslims has been released, prison officials say (20 March). Police arrested Arifur Rahman following complaints by the head cleric of Dhaka's main mosque. He was also sacked by his newspaper, *Prothom Alo*. Meanwhile, the writer Taslima Nasreen arrived in Europe in ill health after protests by Muslim groups forced her into hiding in Calcutta and then Delhi (19 March). She fled Bangladesh in 1994 when her book attracted death threats.

Hong Kong

All kindergartens and junior schools were closed after an outbreak of an unidentified flu-like illness killed four children and affected 200 others.

India

India's football captain, Baichung Bhutia, refused to carry the Olympic torch in protest against China's crackdown on Tibetan demonstrators, officials said. Bhutia is a Buddhist from the north-eastern state of Sikkim, which has long been claimed by China. The Indian leg of the torch's troubled journey around the world saw some 16,000 police seal off the city centre, leaving few public spectators. At least 100 pro-Tibet activists were detained (17 April).

The victory of the Maoists in Nepal's elections (10 April) has raised concerns for the country's once-close relations with India. The Maoist leader Prachanda has talked of a more “balanced” approach in Nepal's dealings with its neighbours, China and India, and scrapping the 1950 treaty with India. Delhi also sees its own Maoist insurgencies—largely in Jharkhand, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal—as its greatest threat. Meanwhile, Maoist rebels in Bihar state killed five policemen and a porter in an attack on a railway station (14 April) and in West Bengal police said three members of the ruling Marxist party were shot dead by Maoists in a remote area. The prime minister, Manmohan Singh, said Sikh separatists based outside India were trying to revive militancy in Punjab (6 March). India battled a bloody uprising by Sikh secessionists in the state in the 1980s.

In an effort to catch up with China's leap in trade with resource-rich African states, the first Indian–African summit was held in Delhi amid talk of a \$10bn development fund for the continent and lower tariffs. Twelve African heads of state attended (9 April).

The government banned the export of non-basmati rice to control soaring domestic food costs. Inflation rose to 7.4%, its highest level for almost four years, driven by rising metal, food and oil prices (11 April). The ban could further raise rice prices globally as India is the world's third-largest exporter. Since January, world rice prices have soared 140%, while one wheat variety leapt 25% in a day. Bob Zoellick, president of the World Bank, said global food price inflation could push at least 100 million people into poverty.

The supreme court approved a government plan to allow controversial positive discrimination quotas in universities (10 April). Under the plan, the lower castes' share of places in educational institutions would more than double to nearly 50%. The controversial plan led to widespread protests across India when it was announced last year.

Amnesty International called for an urgent investigation into some 1,000 unmarked graves found in the Kashmir valley. The Indian army and militants have been accused of numerous human rights abuses in Kashmir since Islamic groups began fighting the Indian administration in 1989.

People flocked to see a baby born on March 11 with two faces who some believe is the reincarnation of a goddess. Lali Singh has two sets of eyes, noses and lips. Doctors said that despite having two faces Lali is healthy. At least 50 people in southern India damaged their sight by staring at the sun in the hope of seeing a vision of the Virgin Mary, doctors said (12 March). A woman accused of being a witch was tied to a tree and badly beaten by villagers in Bihar in an incident broadcast on television (29 March). In the same week, a woman in Chhattisgarh died after being accused of witchcraft and dragged from her home, beaten and burned with an iron before being pushed on to a burning pyre, police said.

The government said it would pay poor families nearly \$3,000 to bring up their girls to discourage aborting female foetuses, which has led to a gender imbalance in areas (6 March). Despite being outlawed in 1994, about 10 million female foetuses have been aborted in India in the past 20 years.

Tata, India's biggest vehicle-maker, paid Ford \$2.3bn for the luxury British car brands Jaguar and Land Rover (26 March). Four Indians were among the world's 10 richest people in *Forbes* magazine's annual list (6 March). Lakshmi Mittal was fourth with \$45bn; brothers Mukesh and Anil Ambani have about \$43bn each, and KP Singh was eighth with \$30bn.

Malaysia

The opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said he had the backing of enough MPs to topple the government: "We are just waiting for the right time." The former deputy prime minister was speaking after police broke up a rally of thousands of his supporters marking the end of a ban preventing him from running for office. Anwar was jailed in 1998 on corruption charges he said were politically motivated (15 April). Malaysia's opposition—Islamist and ethnic Chinese parties and Anwar's People's Justice Party—performed well in the general election on 8 March, winning control of the legislatures in five of the 13 states, and an unprecedented 82 of 222 seats in the House of Representatives. The ruling National Front suffered its worst showing in decades, prompting calls for Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to

resign. Chinese Malaysians (26% of the population) and Indians (8%) turned against the Front's ethnic-minority parties. Abdullah's United Malays National Organisation, which leads the ruling coalition, has won every election since independence from Britain in 1957 but it scraped barely half of the vote nationally and lost the two-thirds parliamentary majority it has held since 1974, which had allowed it to change the constitution at will. Abdullah's first change was to cut cabinet posts from 90 to 68. The only ethnic Indian minister, Samy Vellu, had already lost his seat amid Indian anger at discrimination in favour of the Malay majority known as the New Economic Policy. Abdullah said he would discuss a transition of power to his deputy, Najib Razak (12 April).

Sri Lanka

Former rebels won a landslide victory in the first elections in eastern Sri Lanka for more than 10 years (11 March). The Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal party (TMVP), set up by the renegade Tamil Tiger leader Col Karuna, won every local council around Batticaloa city. The government said it now wanted to hold provincial elections and introduce limited devolution to address Tamil demands. Human rights groups accused the TMVP of waging a campaign of violence ahead of the voting. The party helped government forces drive the rebels out of the region last year. Its founder, Karuna, was jailed for nine months by a UK court in January for identity fraud.

The air force bombed a suspected Tiger training base, the day after a government minister was killed in an explosion (7 April). The highways minister, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, and at least 13 other people were killed in a suicide bombing near the capital, Colombo. In March, a Tamil MP was killed in an explosion in the north. K Sivanesan and his driver died when a roadside bomb blew their car up, which Tamil rebels blamed on government forces. He was the third MP from the rebel-backed Tamil National Alliance to be killed in two years.

The government capped rice prices but wholesalers in Colombo closed as traders said the price limits made their business uneconomic. A consumer court was set up to punish retailers who overcharged (17 April).

Media rights activists criticised the appointment of retired army general Sunil Silva as deputy head of the state-run Rupavahini, the most widely watched TV station in the country (20 March). The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders expressed concern about five Sri Lankan journalists detained by the police for allegedly receiving money from the Tamil Tigers (12 March). The US-based Human Rights Watch accused security forces and pro-government militias of abducting and "disappearing" hundreds of people, mostly Tamils, since 2006. Meanwhile, foreign judicial and forensic experts of the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons left the country because the government had failed to investigate a series of abuses, including the killing of aid workers.

The Campaign Against Arms Trade criticised the sale of 10,000 military missiles by Slovakia as "exactly what Sri Lanka doesn't need at the moment". The Tigers complained that the Sri Lankan military had shelled a Catholic church in Madhu that is revered by Sri Lankans of all religions and is a rare symbol of Sinhalese-Tamil unity. A venerated statue was removed from the shrine for the first time in centuries because of the fighting.

Sir Arthur C. Clarke, the British science-fiction writer, died aged 90 in his adopted home of Colombo. He predicted communication satellites in 1945 and wrote the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

PACIFIC

Australia

A government summit on the future of the country prompted renewed calls for a republic and the end of the British monarch as head of state (20 April). The foreign minister, Stephen Smith, said a split was “inevitable”. The prime minister, Kevin Rudd, had invited a thousand people, including actors Cate Blanchett and Hugh Jackman, to the two-day summit to brainstorm ideas. Aboriginal issues were also on the Australia 2020 agenda. Meanwhile, an Aborigine rights campaigner said Aboriginal children were once used for medical tests. Kathleen Mills claimed children had been injected with a leprosy drug (15 April).

Rudd urged Beijing to tackle “significant” human rights problems in Tibet, in a speech in China. Rudd, who is fluent in Chinese, made the comments to Peking University students at the start of his first official visit to the country. He said Australia recognised Chinese sovereignty over Tibet but called for dialogue between the two sides (9 April).

A man and his adult daughter asked for understanding after revealing on national TV that they had a daughter from their incestuous relationship. A judge banned them from having sex with each other and revealed that they had a previous child in 2001 who died from congenital heart disease after birth. John Deaves and his daughter Jenny insisted on TV that they were “normal intellectual adults” (7 April).

Australia’s first underground carbon storage facility opened in Victoria state. The geo-sequestration plant, the only one in the southern hemisphere, will capture 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide from a power station and store it 2km below the surface.

Nauru

President Marcus Stephen called a snap election in the world’s smallest republic after declaring a state of emergency to end months of political deadlock. The government and opposition each have nine MPs, who have failed to agree on the future of the heavily indebted country since Australia closed its camp for processing asylum-seekers earlier this year (18 April). In March, gangs attacked the main police station in a violent protest thought to be linked to a dispute over mining contracts.

Solomon Islands

The prime minister, Derek Sikua, admitted that Japan had been paying for the Solomon Islands to go to meetings of the International Whaling Commission in its efforts to end a ban on commercial whaling. Several small countries with no history of hunting whales have recently joined the IWC as Japan has tried to win votes. Sikua said his country had not attended because it no longer wanted Japanese

assistance. It will now back Australian efforts to ban so-called scientific whaling (8 March).

EUROPE

Cyprus

Mehmet Ali Talat became the first Turkish Cypriot leader for decades to walk down Nicosia's Ledra Street into Greek Cypriot territory (11 April). Ledra Street, which had come to symbolise the partition of the island, was opened a week ago for the first time since violence flared there between the two communities in 1964. Relations have thawed since Greek Cypriots elected Demetris Christofias president in February. He stood on a platform of resuming negotiations with the North and reuniting the island. The opening of Ledra Street has been seen as a major confidence-building measure before peace talks resume in June. Cyprus has been divided since 1974 when Turkish troops invaded the North after a coup backed by Greece.

Malta

The ruling Nationalist Party won the general election on 8 March by the slimmest margin in Malta's 43 years of independence. The Nationalists beat the opposition Labour Party by 0.5% of the 300,000 votes cast. Turnout was 93%. Lawrence Gonzi, who has been prime minister since 2004, is expected to continue his pro-EU policies.

UK

The Bank of England announced plans to swap about £50bn (\$100bn) worth of government bonds for banks' mortgage books to supply liquidity to the financial system in an effort to ease funding problems since the credit crunch began in the US (20 April). Banks are increasingly unwilling to lend to one another because of uncertainty over bad debts linked to the US sub-prime mortgage market, which is affecting the wider economy. Britain's second largest bank, Royal Bank of Scotland, is asking shareholders for £10bn of extra cash to shore up its financial position.

MPs will have the key vote before troops are sent to war and will ratify treaties, the justice secretary, Jack Straw, said as he set out plans for constitutional reform. At present, the prime minister can sanction military action without MPs' approval. Other proposals include ending the prime minister's power to make judicial appointments.

More than 108,000 people are being held in detention in Britain, *Criminal Justice Matters* magazine said. The study includes prisoners and others such as mental health patients and detainees in immigration centres. Jail totals were 81,700 in England and Wales.

Ian Paisley, 82, said he would stand down as Northern Ireland's first minister and leader of the Democratic Unionists, the party he founded (4 March).

Paisley came to prominence as a bigoted fundamentalist preacher against Roman Catholicism in the 1950s, who was blamed for inflaming the decades-long conflict between Northern Ireland's Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists but came to be an architect of last year's peace deal when he agreed to share power with Sinn Fein.

A high court ruled that the investigation into alleged bribery and corruption by the UK firm BAE over the \$85bn al-Yamamah arms deal with Saudi Arabia was dropped illegally. The senior judges criticised the role of the former prime minister Tony Blair in forcing the police to halt the inquiry in order to protect lucrative contracts and the sharing of secret intelligence (10 April).

An inquest jury ruled that Diana, princess of Wales, had been unlawfully killed in 1997 by a combination of the driving of her chauffeur and that of the photographers pursuing her (9 April).

AMERICAS

Canada

Police searched the Ottawa headquarters of Canada's ruling Conservative party during an inquiry into its campaign spending before parliamentary elections two years ago (16 April).

Canada will continue its frontline role in southern Afghanistan after the February 2009 deadline it set. Canada had threatened to withdraw its contingent in Kandahar province unless other NATO countries sent reinforcements. France confirmed it would send a battalion of troops to Afghanistan (3 April).

Jamaica

The country's poor had been abandoned by the government and left to the mercy of violent criminal gangs, Amnesty International said in a report. The human rights group said inner-city Jamaicans were being "held hostage" in the battle between gangs and the state. Jamaica has one of the world's highest murder rates, with 300 people killed so far this year.

Around the Commonwealth

The new Commonwealth secretary-general, Kamallesh Sharma, took office in 1 April. The Indian diplomat succeeds Don McKinnon, who stepped down after eight years.

Sharma held talks with leaders from the Southern African Development Community to discuss issues of importance to the region and review Commonwealth assistance (20–21 April). In a speech to a SADC summit in Mauritius, Sharma said: "Poverty is the persistent scandal of our times—nearly 750 million Commonwealth citizens live below the poverty line."

The Education Good Practice Awards were launched on 30 April in London to disseminate the best policy initiatives for primary school children, their teachers or the education system of a Commonwealth country.

New Commonwealth Secretariat Publications
(www.publications.thecommonwealth.org)

Mohammad A. Razzaque and, Edwin Laurent (Eds), *Global Rice and Agricultural Trade Liberalisation: Poverty and Welfare Implications for South Asia*, 224 pages, ISBN 978-0-85092-861-7.

Small States: Economic Review and Basic Statistics, Vol. 12, 174 pages, ISBN 978-0-85092-863-1.

David Upton with Peter de Groot, *Planting and Establishment of Tropical Trees*, 142 pages, ISBN 978-0-85092-708-5.

Dinesh Dodhia, *The Emerging Debt Problems of Small States*, 104 pages, ISBN 978-0-85092-868-6.