

Commonwealth Update

OREN GRUENBAUM

ABSTRACT *Morgan Tsvangirai quit the presidential race in Zimbabwe and fled to the Dutch embassy, saying the campaign of murder, torture and rape of opposition supporters by Zanu-PF militias made a free election impossible. Strains began to show in Kenya's fledgling coalition government. A wave of anti-foreigner violence in South Africa sent tens of thousands fleeing the country and left scores dead. There were fears of renewed fighting in Uganda as rebels reportedly rearmed. One of the two main parties in Pakistan pulled out of the coalition government. Pro-democracy candidates swept elections in Tonga's near-feudal system.*

AFRICA

Botswana

The government refused to allow several hundred San, or Bushmen, access to a waterhole, despite a landmark legal victory allowing them to return to the Central Kalahari game reserve after they were forcibly removed. The San must bring in water by lorry or collect rainwater. The government says the San settlement could damage the environment, although several boreholes have been sunk for a diamond mine in the reserve and more will follow when tourist lodges are built (22 April).

Cameroon

The opposition Social Democratic Front staged a “day of mourning” to protest against changes to the constitution. An amendment allows President Paul Biya, 75, to seek re-election in three years’ time. Biya, president for 26 years, wants 10 more years in power (21 April).

Seven journalists and media figures were interrogated by police over articles on a defective aircraft bought for Biya. Other journalists have been harassed or dismissed after criticising an arms sale and the closure of TV and radio stations, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) said.

The Gambia

The IFJ called on the Gambia to obey a court ruling to release Ebrima Manneh, a journalist with the *Daily Observer* newspaper who has been missing since July 2006.

Correspondence Address: Email: Oren.Gruenbaum@guardian.co.uk

Meanwhile, President Yahya Jammeh promised “stricter laws than Iran” and said he would “cut off the head” of any gay person in the Gambia (23 May). The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Council called the comments “doubly disgraceful” because the Gambia hosts the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights. Last year, Jammeh claimed to have cured people of HIV and Aids.

Kenya

The delicate balance of power between Kenya’s coalition partners survived five by-elections (12 June). Prime Minister Raila Odinga’s Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) won three seats, while President Mwai Kibaki’s Party of National Unity (PNU) won two. Two ODM ministers died in a plane crash during campaigning. Friction within the coalition surfaced when the president’s security guards clashed with those of the prime minister at independence celebrations. Kibaki and Odinga signed a power-sharing deal in February after violence that followed December’s elections left 1,500 people dead. Odinga wants supporters who were arrested during the violence freed to help reconciliation but Kibaki allies said it would lead to a “culture of impunity”.

The 42-member cabinet held its first formal session and made food security and resettling the 600,000 people made homeless by the post-election violence its top priority (9 May). However, the finance minister, Amos Kimunya, said he might shift funding from resettling the displaced to pay for new ministries. Kenya needs to find another \$300m to pay for more than 90 ministers and deputy ministers—40% of MPs. The coalition also faces a challenge from ODM and PNU backbenchers who want to form a parliamentary opposition.

The medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said civilians caught up in the conflict around Mount Elgon faced torture and sexual violence (17 April). The defence minister and army chiefs should face prosecution over abuses, the state-funded Kenya National Commission for Human Rights said, citing medical evidence of torture in the crackdown on the Sabaot Land Defence Force (SLDF) after the militia took up arms over land allocation. MSF accused both sides of “indiscriminate violence”. One woman said the SLDF extorted fines from people, chopping their ears off if they had no money and killing them if they resisted.

Charles Ndungu, chairman of the Kenya National Youth Alliance—the political wing of the outlawed Mungiki sect—was shot dead in his car. It comes less than a fortnight after the wife of the sect’s jailed leader was found beheaded, sparking riots in which 14 people died. The Mungiki, mainly drawn from Kibaki’s Kikuyu ethnic group, run transport rackets in the capital.

Political parties spent millions of dollars bribing voters, a survey claimed. The Coalition for Accountable Party Finance said that out of \$90m raised by the parties, 40% was used as bribes.

Kenyans have been celebrating Barack Obama securing the Democratic Party nomination for the US presidential election. His father, Barack Sr, was an economist who came from a village near Kisumu in western Kenya.

A plan to grow sugar cane for biofuel in the internationally important Tana wetlands was described as “an ecological and social disaster” by Nature Kenya, a Nairobi-based conservation group. The delta is home to rare sharks and 345 bird species, and sustains thousands of farmers and fishermen (25 June).

An 88-year-old man who is the world’s oldest pupil has been forced to abandon his studies and move into a home for the aged after his house in Eldoret was burned down in January’s post-election violence, his school said.

Malawi

The former president Bakili Muluzi vowed to continue campaigning for next year’s elections despite being put under house arrest for an alleged coup plot (26 May). Security chiefs were also arrested. President Bingu wa Mutharika said his former allies opposed his anti-corruption drive, while the opposition United Democratic Front said the arrests were politically motivated. The UDF has boycotted parliament and blocked government bills.

A court approved the adoption by the pop star Madonna of a young Malawian boy, David Banda. Critics accused the government of skirting laws banning adoption by non-residents (25 May).

Mozambique

The Red Cross said 36,000 people had returned to Mozambique from South Africa after a wave of anti-foreigner violence, which began near Johannesburg, left 62 dead.

Namibia

A 16th-century shipwreck laden with treasure was discovered off the coast. The country’s diamond company, Namdeb, found bronze cannons, thousands of Spanish and Portuguese gold coins and tonnes of elephant tusks. It is thought to be the oldest shipwreck ever found in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nigeria

Nigeria will not be self-sufficient in electricity until at least 2015, President Umaru Yar’Adua said. Three new gas-fuelled power stations are unable to generate electricity because Nigeria has sold all its gas for export. Privatisation of the power industry had failed, he said. The federal government will spend half a \$10bn windfall from the high oil price on improving the power supply with the rest shared by the 36 states, despite critics saying that state governments are too corrupt not to waste the money (20 June).

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta claimed responsibility for the first attack on an offshore platform in the region. The attack on the Royal Dutch Shell facility stopped about 10% of Nigeria’s oil production. Two sailors died in two rebel attacks on naval vessels protecting oil companies in June; while in May gunmen in the Delta hijacked a ship belonging to the US Chevron oil company and kidnapped its crew, demanding a ransom of 30m naira (\$259,000).

Shell was blamed for an oil spill in the Ogoni region. Oil is gushing from pipes abandoned by the company when it withdrew from Ogoniland in 1993 following local protests. Yar'Adua banned Shell from the Delta (4 June).

The deputy governor of the Bakassi region and six Cameroonian soldiers were kidnapped and killed by suspected Nigerian militants from the Delta. Nigeria handed over most of oil-rich Bakassi to Cameroon in 2006. The rest of the disputed peninsula is due to be handed over in August (14 June).

Farida Waziri, who once led the police anti-fraud unit, was appointed to head the powerful anti-corruption agency. Nuhu Ribadu, the former chairman, was sent on "study leave" amid claims that he only investigated rivals of the former president Olusegun Obasanjo. But critics say the agency has become a tool for settling political scores and the most corrupt remain untouched.

Authorities in Abuja evicted more than 800,000 people from their homes between 2003 and 2007 to implement a "master plan" for the capital, a report by the Swiss-based lobby group Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions said. More people were affected than in slum clearances ordered by Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

Hamisu Lamido, a film producer known as Iyan Tama, faces jail in northern Nigeria for releasing his film *Tsinstiya* without it being censored according to strict new Islamic laws.

Sierra Leone

The UN-backed war crimes court more than doubled prison terms for two former pro-government militia leaders. Judges said the terms did not reflect the gravity of their crimes during the civil war. Moinina Fofana and Allieu Kondewa led the Civil Defence Force that fought rebels in the 10-year war, in which some 50,000 were killed. Many regard the CDF as fighting for a noble cause in defending the population against the Revolutionary United Front.

Liberia's ex-president Charles Taylor rejected complaints from Sierra Leonean rebels about atrocities committed by his fighters, his former vice-president, Moses Blah, told the court. The rebel leader Foday Sankoh complained about the rape, mutilation, killings and cannibalism committed by Liberians helping the RUF, which itself had a reputation for atrocities. Taylor denies 11 counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes. He is accused of sending guns and fighters to Sierra Leone in exchange for diamonds—investigators said \$5bn had gone through his US accounts (15 May).

South Africa

A third of the 62 people killed in xenophobic attacks in May were South Africans mistaken for foreigners, the government said (12 June). An estimated 85,000 people were uprooted in pogroms that spread to seven of nine provinces and 20,000 displaced people are still living in makeshift camps. The mob violence, blamed on competition for scarce jobs and subsidised housing, was the worst since apartheid ended in 1994, and saw the army deployed in townships.

The high court in Cape Town banned unauthorised trials of vitamin cures for Aids in a landmark defeat for the government's controversial promotion of alternative

therapies for Aids. The government claims vitamin pills, garlic and beetroot might reverse Aids but doctors said such trials caused unnecessary deaths when HIV-positive people stopped using anti-retroviral drugs. One in five adult South Africans is HIV positive.

The Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu and the Human Rights Commission demanded a retraction from an ANC leader who said he was prepared to kill for the party president, Jacob Zuma (21 June). The remarks by the head of the ANC youth league, Julius Malema, on the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto uprising, caused considerable criticism.

South Africa dismissed as “laughable” a claim that it had supported a failed coup in oil-rich Equatorial Guinea. A British mercenary, Simon Mann, who is on trial for his alleged role in the 2004 plot, said South Africa and Spain, the former colonial power, both “gave the green light”.

The high court ruled that Chinese South Africans should be reclassified as black so that the 200,000 ethnic Chinese could benefit from government policies aimed at ending white domination in the private sector. The Chinese Association of South Africa argued that its members had been discriminated against under Black Economic Empowerment codes. Chinese were classified as mixed race under apartheid.

The US supreme court allowed a lawsuit to go ahead against firms accused of aiding apartheid under a law that allows foreigners to sue in US courts over breaches of international law. The victims are seeking a reported \$400bn damages from corporations including BP, Exxon Mobil, Citigroup, Deutsche Bank, General Motors and Ford.

Aluminium lightning conductors worth \$2,600 were stolen from the roof of President Thabo Mbeki’s official residence.

Tanzania

Agathon Rwaswa, leader of Burundi’s last active rebel group, the FNL, returned home from exile in Tanzania days after the FNL and government signed a ceasefire and following an ultimatum from regional leaders.

President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete surprised many by nominating Al-Shymaa Kway-Geer to parliament—the country’s first albino MP. Kikwete is campaigning against widespread superstition about the condition. Twenty albinos have been murdered in the past year in Tanzania, where some believe that magic potions using albinos’ body parts bring good luck.

Sub-Saharan Africa’s first commercial wind farm is being built in the Singida region of the Rift valley—one of Tanzania’s poorest areas. By 2010, 24 wind turbines will meet 10% of the country’s power needs. Wind East Africa, the company behind the \$113m project, said Tanzania’s reliance on hydroelectric power meant shortages during drought (21 April).

Uganda

The rebel leader Joseph Kony was reported to be preparing a new offensive after refusing to sign a peace deal. Diplomats said his Lord’s Resistance Army had

forcibly recruited 1,000 fresh fighters and acquired new arms from rebels in Chad. A Ugandan army spokesman said there was “still room for peace talks ... there is room also for taking military action.” The LRA was reported to be abducting civilians to act as fighters, porters or concubines. Kony remained in the Democratic Republic of Congo and refused to sign a peace deal agreed by his representatives after two years of talks in April unless the International Criminal Court dropped indictments for human rights violations (6 June).

The constitutional court annulled a law that public meetings of more than 25 people needed written consent from the police. Three journalists, including the well-known editor Andrew Mwenda, were arrested in armed raids on the *Independent* magazine following articles about a former army chief jailed for corruption and allegations of army atrocities against the LRA. Amnesty International condemned the arrest of three gay rights activists at an Aids conference as they demanded more help for HIV-positive homosexuals.

Zambia

The government said it had recovered \$60m in money and assets stolen by officials under former president Frederick Chiluba, who is on trial for corruption. Last year, Britain’s high court ruled that Chiluba and four aides conspired to rob Zambia of about \$40m.

Zambia granted political asylum to 12 Zimbabwean opposition activists who have fled escalating violence by the security forces.

Zimbabwe

Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, pulled out of the presidential run-off vote on 27 June, handing victory to President Robert Mugabe. Tsvangirai said the election was “a violent, illegitimate sham” and took refuge in the Dutch embassy in Harare after supporters hoping to attend a rally days before the election were attacked (23 June). There had been mounting international condemnation of the murder, torture and rape of opposition supporters by Zanu-PF militias. Tsvangirai was held by police several times and the MDC secretary general, Tendai Biti, faces the death penalty on trumped-up treason charges.

The BBC said documents identified the military and police as running Mugabe’s re-election campaign, including using food aid as a weapon. At least 70 supporters were killed and 25,000 beaten or forced out of their homes by militias, the MDC said. The wife of Emmanuel Chiroto, recently elected MDC mayor of Harare, was beaten to death after being abducted with her four-year-old child. “Women and girls are being abused and raped in the areas the ruling party has sealed off,” said an aid worker.

Zimbabwe’s own independent watchdog, the Election Support Network, said it had been permitted only 500 observers to monitor 9,000 polling stations. The Tanzanian foreign minister, Bernard Membe, speaking for the Southern African Development Community team monitoring the polls, said: “If the elections were to take place today, these elections would never be free and fair.”

The Kenyan prime minister, Raila Odinga, said: “The time has come for the international community to act on Zimbabwe in the way that it did in Bosnia . . . what you need in Zimbabwe is an international peacekeeping force so that eventually proper elections can be held.” Even allies of Mugabe, such as Angola’s President José Eduardo dos Santos, urged him to stop the violence. However, Mugabe declared: “Only God who appointed me will remove me—not the MDC, not the British.”

The central bank issued a 500m Zimbabwe dollar banknote, worth \$2, only 10 days after issuing a Z\$250m note. Zimbabwe’s annual inflation rate hit 165,000% in February and an economist said prices now doubled every week.

The government announced results for the first presidential poll on 29 March, claiming Tsvangirai won 47.9% of the vote to Mugabe’s 43.2% (2 May). The former Zanu-PF finance minister Simba Makoni came third with 8.3%. The MDC had previously queried 120,000 votes given to Mugabe, which they said were enough to stop Tsvangirai winning outright with 50% of the vote.

ASIA

Bangladesh

The opposition leader Hasina Wazed was released from prison to get medical treatment in the US (11 June). Her Awami League party officials boycotted talks with the government over December’s general elections until she was released. Meanwhile, the former prime minister’s lawyers claimed that crucial evidence in the corruption case against her had been eaten by termites. Her rival and fellow former prime minister, Khaleda Zia, who heads the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), was also released on medical grounds but ruled out going abroad for treatment.

Local elections in 13 areas were announced for August—the first voting under the army-backed interim government (20 June). The Awami League said free elections could not be held under a state of emergency and the BNP called for protests. Observers said a local vote threatened to weaken their power base. The police chief, Nur Mohammad, said more than 10,000 people he described as terrorists and extortionists had been arrested to improve security before elections. Opposition parties said many of their district officials had been held. The leader of Bangladesh’s largest religious party was detained in the government’s anti-corruption drive. Jamaat-e-Islami’s chief, Matiur Rahman Nizami, denies benefiting from illegally awarding contracts when his party was a coalition partner of Zia. Five other former ministers were also held.

A 16-month-old boy in Dhaka who became the first human case of the H5N1 strain of bird flu had recovered after treatment, the health ministry said. Doctors successfully removed a 42kg abdominal tumour from a cycle rickshaw puller. It had grown 81cm long and 61cm wide.

Brunei

A British judge issued an arrest warrant for Prince Jefri Bolkiah, brother of the Sultan of Brunei, for violating a court order to hand over £3bn (\$5.9bn) to the Brunei government. Billions went missing while he was finance minister.

India

Eight bombs in Jaipur killed 63 and left about 200 wounded. A little-known group called the Indian Mujahideen claimed responsibility for the bombs, which went off near tourist sites in the Rajasthan city, but the Bangladesh-based Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (Huji) and Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba are also suspected. India had more than 2,300 terrorism-related deaths in 2007—about 10% of the worldwide total (13 May).

The state of Rajasthan and leaders of the Gujjar community reached a deal in their demands to be designated as a lower social class. More than 40 Gujjars were killed in protests as they called for tribal status, which gives them better access to jobs and education under government-set quotas.

Scores of people died and two million were made homeless by monsoon floods in West Bengal, Orissa, Assam and two other eastern states. Large numbers of soaked jackals, monitor lizards and raptors went to a runway at Delhi airport to dry off, forcing flights to be cancelled.

At least 14 rebels of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) were killed when rival separatist factions clashed in the north-eastern state, police said. Both factions have observed a ceasefire with security forces since 1997 but 400 rebels have died in factional fighting since the NSCN split in 1988. Clashes during village council elections in the state of West Bengal killed 37 supporters of the rival Marxist and Congress parties.

A Delhi court convicted the son of an influential politician in a high-profile murder case. Vikas Yadav was found guilty of abducting and killing Nitish Katara six years ago because he opposed Katara's relationship with his sister. Vikas is the son of DP Yadav, an Uttar Pradesh politician with alleged links to organised crime, and is already imprisoned for the murder of a Delhi model, Jessica Lal.

The Indian space agency set a world record by successfully launching 10 satellites at once (28 April).

Four members of a Santhal tribal family in Assam were stoned and buried alive after their neighbours accused them of witchcraft. Police said the motive may have been to acquire their land or because they challenged tribal elders.

Malaysia

A small party from Borneo in the 14-strong ruling coalition sought a motion of no confidence in the prime minister. The Sabah Progressive Party said it had lost faith in Abdullah Badawi, who is under mounting pressure to resign after the government cut its fuel subsidy and prices jumped 40%. Opposition groups called for a million people to demonstrate in Kuala Lumpur in July over the cost of fuel. Malaysia had some of Asia's cheapest petrol—and has the world's fastest-rising carbon emissions. The opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim is convinced he will have enough support to overthrow the government this year. In March's general election, the coalition led by the United Malay National Organisation lost its majority in parliament for the first time since independence in 1957.

A landmark ruling by an Islamic court allowed a Muslim convert to return to Buddhism after her marriage collapsed. Malaysians who renounce Islam face harsh

laws and non-Muslims must convert to marry a Muslim. Meanwhile, women's groups reacted angrily to government plans to ban women travelling abroad on their own without written consent from their families or employers.

More than 60 immigrants from Burma set fire to a detention camp in Negeri Sembilan after their request for asylum was refused. Asylum-seekers are treated as illegal immigrants, who can be caned and deported.

Pakistan

Rising food prices, acute electricity shortages and the failure to reinstate senior judges sacked by President Pervez Musharraf eroded optimism in the new government, which won power in February. The former prime minister Nawaz Sharif denounced Musharraf at a rally in Islamabad that marked the end of the so-called "long march" across the country by thousands of lawyers and activists protesting at Musharraf's sacking of the chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, and about 60 other judges last November. Sharif pulled his ministers out of the new coalition cabinet in protest at the failure to restore them to office. Asif Ali Zardari, leader of the ruling Pakistan People's Party, however, has less interest in their return as they had overturned a decree by Musharraf clearing him of charges of corruption and murder (13 May).

Zardari increased pressure on Musharraf to quit by declaring that the PPP would soon announce a new candidate for the presidency who would continue the legacy of his assassinated wife, the former prime minister Benazir Bhutto (21 June). He proposed removing Musharraf's right to dismiss the government and transferring powers to appoint army chiefs and provincial governors to the prime minister. Musharraf's term ends in 2012 but he has faced mounting calls to quit since his party was trounced in February's elections. The former military ruler made it clear that he would not resign or go into exile and become a "useless vegetable" (7 June). There was speculation that the army chief, Gen Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, had met Musharraf to persuade him to step down.

Pakistan's Frontier Corps has been so heavily infiltrated by Taliban militants that it is joining in attacks on coalition forces, according to classified US reports compiled after clashes on the Afghan border (22 June). Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, and Nato criticised a deal between the Pakistani army and the Pakistani Taliban, led by Baitullah Mehsud, which saw exchanges of prisoners and cuts in troop numbers after the army had razed a town in the tribal area of South Waziristan and displaced 200,000 people in their crackdown on the militants. Karzai threatened to send troops across the border to chase Taliban fighters fleeing into the tribal regions.

Akhtar Mengal, a nationalist leader from Baluchistan, was released after two years in prison. The latest of many separatist insurgencies in the poor but mineral-rich province began in 2004. Meanwhile, human rights groups condemned the trading of 15 girls, aged between three and 10, to end a Baluchi clan feud that left 19 people dead and began when a dog was shot.

A second successful test of a cruise missile capable of carrying nuclear weapons was carried out days after India tested its own ballistic missile.

Militants from the troubled Swat region of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) suspended talks with the government because of delays in meeting their demands for troops to be withdrawn, detained militants to be released and sharia

law imposed. The militants, led by the pro-Taliban cleric Maulana Fazlullah, negotiated a peace deal with the provincial authorities after their Islamist insurgency was put down by the army. This included the release of Maulana Sufi Mohammad, who is Fazlullah's father-in-law and founder of the banned Islamist Tehrik Nifaz-e-Shariat Mohammadi movement. Since the deal, a polio vaccination campaign was allowed—previous attempts failed because Fazlullah declared that the vaccine made children impotent. However, two girls' schools have been burned down.

The army protested over a US missile attack in the tribal district of Bajaur that killed an al-Qaida leader, Suleiman al-Jazairi, and at least 15 others (16 May). At least eight Shias died in separate sectarian attacks in Dera Ismail Khan in May and June. Four people were wounded after militants bombed video and music shops in NWFP and the tribal area of North Waziristan. In the first violence since the formation of a new provincial government, a police chief and his driver were killed by a roadside bomb in the north-western city of Peshawar (24 May). Other bombs, including suicide attacks, claimed 13 lives in the NWFP. Pakistan's ambassador to Afghanistan, Tariq Azizuddin, was freed by militants after being seized near the border in February (17 May). A leading al-Qaida suspect held in Pakistan over an attempt to kill Benazir Bhutto was released without charge (16 June). Qari Saifullah Akhtar was linked to a bomb attack on the former prime minister in Karachi last October in which some 135 people died. Al-Qaida claimed responsibility for a car bomb that killed at least six people near the Danish embassy in Islamabad. It said it was in response to Danish newspapers publishing a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad in February.

The teacher of a religious seminary in Punjab province confessed to torturing a pupil aged seven to death for not memorising Koran lessons. The child was suspended upside down from a ceiling fan by Maulvi Ziauddin and beaten with a baton.

Singapore

The International Court of Justice ruled in favour of Singapore in its 29-year sovereignty dispute with Malaysia over a tiny uninhabited island. The island, known as Pulau Batu Puteh in Malaysia and as Pedra Branca in Singapore, has a strategic position in the Malacca Strait, which carries 40% of world trade.

Sri Lanka

In one of the most serious clashes in recent years, the army said 43 soldiers and 100 rebels had been killed in fighting in the Jaffna peninsula. The Tigers claimed they had killed 100 soldiers and lost 16 fighters. Rebels bombed military targets in Welioya using light aircraft. It was the fifth aerial strike since the Tigers created an air force a year ago. At least 12 policemen were killed in a suicide bombing in Vavuniya. Tamil Tiger boats destroyed a small navy outpost on Mannar island, killing at least three sailors. Four rebels were also killed. At least seven soldiers and 17 rebels died in fighting in the northern Welioya area. Bomb attacks on buses in Colombo and Kandy on 6 June killed 22 civilians and injured 100. Two days earlier, 24 were injured in a blast targeting a commuter train. In other attacks in Colombo in May, a bomb at Dehiwela station killed eight; nine died in a suicide bombing in the city centre, and in April, 24 were killed in a bus blast in Piliyandala.

The defence ministry attacked what it called “journalistic treachery” (6 June). The Paris-based watchdog Reporters Without Borders described the statement as “very threatening” and part of a policy of intimidation and restrictions on the press. Days earlier, Keith Noyahr, deputy editor of the English weekly *The Nation*, was abducted and beaten up. P Devakumar, a broadcast journalist, was hacked to death with a friend. He was the ninth media worker to be killed in Jaffna since 2006 (28 May). Taraki Sivaram, a popular Tamil journalist, was abducted in front of a Colombo police station, beaten and shot dead. Sri Lanka failed to be re-elected to the UN’s Human Rights Council after heavy criticism of its own record. Human Rights Watch said Sri Lanka should be investigated by the council.

The ruling coalition won a provincial election in the east, seen as key to its strategy against the Tigers of limited devolution. But opposition leaders and rights groups said the poll was marred by fraud and voter intimidation. The vote was held in a region under rebel control until last year. At least 11 people were killed in a bombing before the elections.

EUROPE

UK

Gordon Brown, the prime minister, pushed through a controversial extension from 28 days to 42 of the period a terrorist suspect can be held without charge. The government won by only nine votes, with many of the ruling Labour Party MPs rebelling, and Brown had to make many concessions (11 June). A senior opposition leader, David Davis, astonished his Conservative Party by resigning his seat to force a by-election and highlight the “relentless erosion of civil liberties”.

The UK faced its “most difficult economic challenge for two decades”, the Bank of England governor said. In his Mansion House speech, Mervyn King said rising food and energy prices would raise inflation, growth and house prices would fall, and incomes would stagnate. The chancellor of the exchequer, Alistair Darling, again called for pay restraint to curb inflation. Tanker drivers delivering fuel for Shell won a 14% pay rise after their four-day strike disrupted UK fuel supplies, teachers staged their first national strike in 21 years, and 600,000 local government workers voted to take industrial action in July over their pay offer.

Figures from the Department for Work and Pensions showed pensioner and child poverty had increased and inequality had worsened since Labour won power in 1997. The UK’s 1,000 richest people were now collectively worth £400bn, the *Sunday Times* Rich List said. In a huge U-turn, Brown cut income tax for 20 million people to fend off a party revolt over scrapping a lower rate for the worst paid.

A Cabinet Office civil servant left top-secret documents about al-Qaida on a train. Binyam Mohamed, the last British resident held in the US base Guantanamo Bay, was charged with war crimes and faces the death penalty, despite a British government request to release him.

The upper time limit for abortions will remain at 24 weeks after MPs voted against proposals to reduce it in the first major challenge to Britain’s abortion laws since 1990 (21 May). MPs also defeated an attempt to ban research on hybrid human-animal embryos.

The Conservative MP Boris Johnson was sensationally elected to one of the most powerful positions in Britain when he ousted Ken Livingstone as mayor of London (3 May). The ruling Labour Party also suffered a severe drubbing in local elections across the rest of the country and the anti-immigration British National Party won a seat on the London Assembly for the first time.

AMERICAS

Antigua and Barbuda

The opposition Labour Party leader and former prime minister Lester Bird said he would campaign in next year's elections for the dismissal of four former Canadian Mounties brought in to reform Antigua's police force, which faced a rising crime rate with no fax machines, email or radios. Bird said it went "against the grain of our sovereignty" (24 May).

Canada

Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologised for 150,000 aboriginal children being forced to attend state-funded Christian boarding schools aimed at assimilating them, where many were sexually and physically abused. Harper made the apology in parliament in Ottawa to leaders of Canada's one million First Nation, Inuit and Métis people, in front of hundreds of ex-schoolchildren. The schools operated between 1870 and 1996. An Ojibwe woman, who now only speaks English, described being taken from her parents at four and not seeing her mother for four years. Australia apologised for a similar policy in February, although no compensation was paid. Harper's apology followed a C\$2bn (\$2bn) settlement in 2005 of a lawsuit by former students.

Canada joined Russia, the United States and Norway at a meeting organised by Denmark in Greenland to agree on rules for the five states bordering the energy-rich Arctic Ocean and prevent a new "gold rush" in the north (29 May). They agreed to settle disputes according to the UN Law of the Sea Convention. Critics fear the Arctic states are planning to carve up the region as global warming makes the region more accessible.

Canada's foreign minister, Maxime Bernier, resigned after leaving classified documents at the flat of his former girlfriend, Julie Couillard (27 May). As well as having ties to criminal biker gangs, Couillard worked for a property developer seeking a C\$30m (\$30m) government contract in Quebec City. A Kevlar boss had introduced her to Bernier and officials admitted that she lobbied the former minister. She also lobbied Bernard Côté, a senior adviser to the public-works minister, while in a relationship with him. He also resigned.

Police near Vancouver have been left baffled by the discovery of five human feet in shoes that have washed up there in the past year.

Jamaica

The government gave the go-ahead for a group of international investors to open the island's first casino, despite opposition from religious groups. The prime minister,

Bruce Golding, said at least \$1.5bn had to be invested, with the proceeds going towards health and education (23 April).

PACIFIC

Australia

More than 10,000 farming families have had to leave their land as a result of the worst drought in a century (18 June).

Nine Aboriginal men convicted of gang-raping a 10-year-old girl in 2005 had their sentences increased, after an outcry when the female judge spared them prison, saying the girl had “probably agreed to have sex” (13 June).

Australian combat troops returned home from Iraq, in line with an election promise by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. He said the previous government of John Howard had abused intelligence information to justify joining the Iraq war. About 300 Australians will remain in Iraq on logistical and air surveillance duties.

Australia’s first woman bishop, Kay Goldsworthy, was consecrated in Perth. The government announced plans to remove about 100 laws it said discriminated against homosexual couples but it refused to allow gay and lesbian marriages.

Australia increased its share of the seabed by 2.5m sq km, after the UN agreed to extend its continental shelf. Australia had worked for 15 years on the claim, which gives it rights to explore new areas for oil and gas. The government said there would be no exploration of Antarctic waters.

Fiji

Australia asked Fiji to increase security for its top diplomat in the country after James Batley received his second death threat in two weeks (15 May). Australia imposed sanctions on the government of Frank Bainimarama after he seized power in a 2006 coup. Critics accuse his government of clamping down on dissent, with two Australian newspaper publishers deported this year.

Nauru

The government said it won early elections aimed at ending months of political deadlock. All nine MPs in President Marcus Stephen’s government were re-elected, while three opposition MPs in the 18-strong parliament lost their seats. Although the world’s smallest republic has no parties, parliament had been split. The deadlock stalled vital decisions on Nauru’s budget—the island of 13,000 people has \$1bn debt—and civil servants’ wages went unpaid.

New Zealand

The energy minister, David Parker, said that unless there was significant rainfall soon households would be asked to cut electricity consumption by up to 15% during the peak times. Lack of rainfall has reduced hydroelectric power by a third. (10 June).

Papua New Guinea

Taiwan's vice-premier and foreign minister quit over \$30m of public money lost in a failed attempt to secure diplomatic ties with Papua New Guinea (6 May). Two men were given the money to broker a deal with PNG but vanished in 2006. China regards Taiwan as part of its territory and the island often courts small nations in a bid for recognition.

Tonga

Voters backed reformists in the first election since serious unrest in 2006 (25 April). Nine pro-democracy candidates won all of the seats in the almost feudal political system, under which nine MPs are elected, 15 chosen by the king and the other nine selected by aristocratic families. The king has agreed to make most MPs elected by 2010.

Commonwealth

The Commonwealth readmitted Pakistan, which was suspended six months ago after Musharraf imposed emergency rule. A Commonwealth statement in London said: "The government of Pakistan has taken positive steps to fulfill its obligations in accordance with Commonwealth fundamental values" (22 May).

A statement on Zimbabwe by the Commonwealth secretary-general, Kamallesh Sharma, said: "The Commonwealth is extremely concerned that the scheduled run-off elections cannot now take place as envisaged, with the participation of both presidential candidates in conditions that assure Zimbabweans of the opportunity to express their will freely and without fear, through credible democratic processes.

"The Commonwealth remains committed to supporting regional efforts to address the situation in Zimbabwe" (24 June).

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

Commonwealth Ministers Reference Book 2008, 264 pages, ISBN 978-0-9554408-4-7.

Commonwealth Health Ministers Book 2008, 212 pages, ISBN 978-0-9554408-6-1.

Janet Strachan and Constance Vigilance (Eds), *Sustainable Development in Small Island Developing States: Issues and Challenges*, 80 pages, ISBN 978-0-85092-879-2.