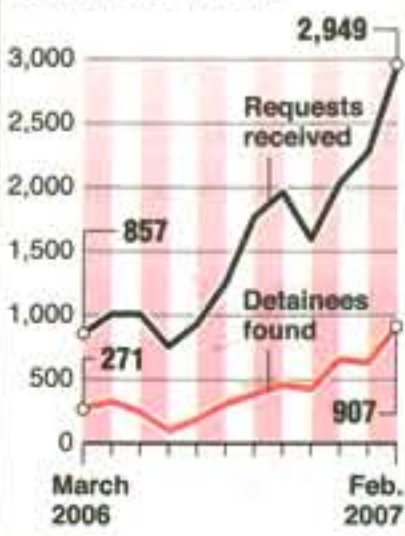


Around the World

1. IRAQ

Missing Iraqis

The number of requests filed by Iraqis looking for relatives who may be detained by the U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq:



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Source: National Iraqi Assistance Center, U.S. Defense Department
Graphic: Angela Smith, Judy Treibler

Vanished without a trace

When her heart is heaviest, Sahira Kereem tries to think of the little things her husband did that annoyed her. She remembers times when she suggested they visit her parents, and he just rolled his eyes.

The mental trick rarely brings her comfort. The fact remains that Riyadh Juma Saleh, her husband of nearly 15 years, went missing one day nearly three years ago and Kereem has no idea what became of him.

Over the past four years, as sectarian kidnappings and killings have gripped Iraq and U.S. forces have arrested untold numbers in an effort to pacify the country, tens of thousands of Iraqis have vanished, often in circumstances as baffling as that of Kereem's husband, a Shiite Muslim father of three.

There's no accurate count of the missing since the war began. Iraqi human rights groups put the figure at 15,000 or more, while government officials say 40 to 60 people disappeared each day throughout the country for much of last year, a rate equal to at least 14,600 in one year.



Women react at the scene of the car bomb attack in Kufa, southern Iraq, on Tuesday.

Suicide bomber strikes Kufa

A suicide car bomber sent a fireball through a crowded market Tuesday in the Shiite holy city of Kufa, killing at least 16 people and threatening to further stoke sectarian tensions in relatively peaceful areas south of Baghdad.

Kufa, 100 miles south of Baghdad, is a stronghold of the Mahdi Army militia, which is loyal to radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. U.S. officials have expressed fears that Sunni insurgents led by al-Qaida are carefully picking their targets to provoke retaliatory violence to derail efforts to stabilize the country.

The blast sent flames through a nearby two-story kebab restaurant, charring the interior. Angry residents demanded better protection and accused authorities of fortifying their own homes and offices at the expense of the public.

The predominantly Shiite southern areas have seen a spike in violence and unrest, blamed in part on militants who have fled a security crackdown in Baghdad.

Cheney visits Baghdad

Vice President Dick Cheney and Iraqi Prime Minister Mouri al-Maliki acknowledged problems in the pace of reducing violence in Iraq today, but both pledged their governments would continue working together toward a solution.

"The meeting with the vice president paved a foundation for practical steps to support our efforts working on both the security front as well as the domestic political issues," said al-Maliki in a joint news conference with Cheney.

Al-Maliki is coming under increasing pressure from Washington to demonstrate progress in easing sectarian violence, and Cheney's unannounced visit to Iraq was depicted by U.S. officials as an attempt to press al-Maliki and other Iraqi leaders to do more to achieve reconciliation among factions.



Report compiled from news services

2. MEXICO

Oaxaca braces for protests

The words of Benito Juarez, a reformist hero and Oaxaca's most famous native son, are found on their share of colonial-era buildings here: "Respecting the rights of others is peace."

So it is no wonder that Oaxaca remains on edge, five months after a conflict that left at least a dozen protesters dead after teachers, union members, students and indigenous activists occupied the main plaza and triggered a police crackdown.

The clashes have ended, but protesters and government officials say the other side continues to use intimidation and is not respecting the rights of city residents. Some protesters continue to deface and block public buildings, while activists accuse state police of intimidation and arbitrary arrests.

The Oaxaca crisis has become a symbol for tensions that simmer throughout Mexico: bitterness over corruption and social inequality.

U.S. to allow trucks

A pilot program to allow Mexican trucks into all areas of the United States should be in place by July, a top U.S. trade official said Tuesday.

Access to the U.S. by Mexican trucks has been delayed for years by safety and environmental concerns and resistance from U.S. truckers.

"To my mind Mexico has lived up to its responsibility" in addressing safety concerns raised by the U.S. Congress, said Franklin L. Lavin, undersecretary for international trade for the U.S. "We fully intend to go ahead with liberalization in July. So we're on track."

Lavin spoke to U.S. business leaders at a luncheon sponsored by the American Chamber of Commerce in Mexico City.

3. RUSSIA



A World War II veteran looks for the name of a fallen World War II in Kiev, Ukraine, on Wednesday

Victory Day celebrated

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday told the annual massive Victory Day commemoration in Red Square that desecrating war monuments harms relations between countries.

Putin did not mention any country by name, but the statement in his speech before thousands of veterans, dignitaries and soldiers was an apparent reference to the recent removal of the statue of a Red Army soldier from downtown Tallinn, the capital of the former Soviet republic of Estonia.

The statue's relocation and the planned reburial of soldiers who had been interred near it set off days of clashes between police and mainly ethnic Russian demonstrators, in which one person was killed and hundreds arrested.

Victory Day, one of the most important holidays on Russia's calendar, commemorates the 1945 defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II.

4. ROME



Corn stands ready to be harvested in a Missouri field in 2006.

U.N. ponders biofuels

Biofuels like ethanol can help reduce global warming and create jobs for the rural poor, but the benefits may be offset by serious environmental problems and increased food prices for the hungry, the U.N. said Tuesday in Rome in its first major report on bioenergy.

In an agency-wide assessment, the U.N. raised alarms about the potential negative impact of biofuels, just days after a climate conference in Bangkok said the world had both the money and technology to prevent global warming blamed in part on greenhouse gas emissions.

Biofuels, which are made from corn, palm oil, sugar cane and other agricultural products, have been seen by many as a cleaner and cheaper way to meet the world's soaring energy needs than with greenhouse-gas emitting fossil fuels.

But environmentalists have warned that the biofuel craze can do as much or more damage to the environment as dirty fossil fuels — a concern reflected throughout the report, which was released Tuesday in New York by U.N.-Energy, a consortium of 20 U.N. agencies and programs.



Pope Benedict XVI boards an Alltalia Boeing 777-200 plane in Rome on Wednesday.

Pope heading to Brazil

Pope Benedict XVI departed today on his first pilgrimage to Latin America — a test of the 80-year-old pontiff's stamina and how he intends to deal with pressing challenges to his church in the region.

The Vatican is promising he will deliver a tough message to politicians on poverty and crime during the five-day visit to Brazil — the world's most populous Roman Catholic country.

The German-born pope plans to lay out his strategy when he opens a once-a-decade meeting of bishops from throughout Latin America in the shrine city of Aparecida, near Sao Paulo, Brazil, South America's largest city.

5. NETHERLANDS

Officer's conviction reversed

U.N. appeals judges on Wednesday overturned a conviction for complicity in genocide against a Bosnian Serb army colonel whose troops were involved in the 1995 slaughter of more than 8,000 Muslim men in Srebrenica.

Col. Vidoje Blagojevic, 56, was the wartime commander of the Bratunac brigade that took part in the worst post-World War II massacre in Europe by helping separate Muslim men from women and herding them into buses before the men were driven away and later murdered.

Blagojevic was convicted in January 2005 of war crimes and complicity in genocide and remains in jail, though his sentence was reduced from 18 to 15 years.

A five-judge appeals panel at the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal said Blagojevic should have been acquitted on the genocide charge because the original trial judges ruled that he did not know of the mass murders and only provided logistical support. That meant he did not share in the intent to commit genocide, said presiding appeals judge Fausto Pocar.

6. EAST TIMOR



East Timorese President Xanana Gusmao holds his son Daniel as he casts his ballot in the presidential elections today in Dili.

Election critical to peace

Hundreds of people lined up before dawn today to vote in presidential elections in East Timor, a critical step toward maintaining peace in Asia's newest nation following violence last year that took it to the brink of civil war.

Around 500,000 people are eligible to vote in the polls, which pit Nobel Peace Prize winner and acting prime minister Jose Ramos Horta against Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres, an ex-guerilla who spent years in the jungles fighting Indonesian rule.

Wednesday's vote follows balloting last month that did not produce an outright winner.

Most analysts see 57-year-old Ramos Horta — who fled East Timor during Indonesia's occupation to become the international face of its freedom movement — as the favorite, especially since five losing candidates in the first round of voting are urging their supporters to back him.

But Guterres, 52, is backed by Fretilin, the political party of the nation's former armed resistance to Jakarta's rule, which has strong support across the country.

"I will become the Timorese president to serve the people, resolve the crisis and establish peace and democracy," Guterres said after voting today. "I want to win with dignity, but if I lose I will also accept that with dignity."

7. HAM

Migrants: Boat was rammed

Haitian migrants claim a Turks and Caicos naval vessel rammed their crowded sailboat twice before it capsized last week, killing more than 60 people, a senior Haitian official said Tuesday.

Jeanne Bernard Pierre, the director-general of Haiti's National Migration Office, said the migrants' account has not been confirmed but Haiti would consider it "criminal" if found true.

"The survivors say the accident wasn't an accident, it was provoked. They say they were hit twice by a coast guard boat from the Turks and Caicos," Pierre told The Associated Press by telephone from the Turks and Caicos Islands, where she was meeting with survivors at a detention center.

Turks and Caicos Police Inspector Hilton Duncan declined to comment on claims the migrants' boat was rammed, saying the sinking is under investigation.

8. ISRAEL



SOURCES: ESRI; B'selelem; PeaceNow AP

Herod's tomb found?

After a long quest in search of King Herod's tomb, an archaeologist announced Tuesday that he had found what appear to be the ornate remnants of the Roman-era king's burial site on the edge of the Judean Desert.

Ehud Netzer, a Hebrew University archaeologist, said he knew he had solved the puzzle of Herod's grave when his team uncovered pieces of a large sarcophagus made of pink Jerusalem limestone and decorated with expertly carved floral motifs.

He noted, however, that no inscriptions had been found that would more definitively verify that this was the tomb of Herod, who ruled Judea on behalf of Rome from 37 to 4 B.C. and, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew, was said to have ordered the killing of all boys in or around Bethlehem under the age of 2 in an effort to kill the infant Jesus.

While this "Slaughter of the Innocents" is not recounted by anyone other than Matthew, Herod is known to have had two of his sons strangled, executed one of his 10 wives for treason, killed numerous in-laws and on his deathbed ordered his eldest son beheaded.

9. AUSTRIA

Raising cash, and eyebrows

This isn't the typical whispering you might expect to hear in a library.

Vienna's City Hall has launched a "sex hotline" to raise money for the capital's main public library, officials said Tuesday.

It's unusual, but it's not particularly raunchy: Callers pay 53 cents a minute to listen to an actress read breathless passages from erotica dating to the Victorian era.

City Hall set up the hotline earlier this month to help the library raise cash for planned remodeling and expansion, Austrian media reported.

Anne Bennet, a famous Austrian stage and film star, reads passages from the Vienna library's collection of 1,200 works of erotic fiction from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, the library said.

10. SOUTH KOREA

Little progress in talks

North and South Korea made little progress Tuesday in working out security arrangements for test runs of trains across their heavily armed border in their first day of military talks, a South Korean official said.

The two Koreas agreed during economic talks last month to conduct the test runs on May 17 on rebuilt rail tracks across their border, but the tests cannot occur unless North Korea's military agrees to security arrangements.

If the rail tests go forward, it would be the first time that trains would cross the border in more than a half-century.