



Briefs & Updates

G3 formed after G8 failed to respond

Three newly industrialized (and federal) countries have formed a trade bloc that leaders hope will also increase their political influence. South Africa, Brazil and India have formed the a group dubbed the "G3" after a G8 meeting failed to grant subsidy cuts to help Africa and did not endorse a Brazilian plan to end hunger, the South African Broadcasting Corporation reported on June 7. "When countries like India, South Africa and Brazil speak with one voice, that voice will be heard," said Yashwant Sinha, Indian Foreign Minister, flanked by his Brazilian and South African counterparts after their first trilateral meeting. Their first political goal is to create permanent seats on the UN Security Council for developing nations.

US states face deficit again next year – program cuts or fee increases predicted

The governments of the U.S. states are expecting a deficit of US \$32 billion next year. While this amount is about half of the deficit from last year, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington, D.C. non-profit organization, expects this figure to grow, and noted that it will be the "fourth consecutive year of program cuts, tax and fee increases, and other budget-balancing maneuvers." A prime example of this is California, where Governor-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, will have to deal with an \$8 billion deficit next year, about 11 percent of the state's budget.

Haider's party loses in Austrian votes

The Freedom Party of far-right politician Jörg Haider was the big loser in two provincial elections in Austria on September 28. In the province of Upper Austria, the Freedom Party vote fell from 20 per cent in the 1997 elections to just over eight per cent. The big winners were the socialists, who increased their share of the vote by 11 per cent to 38 per cent, coming second to the Austrian People's Party (the conservatives) who garnered 43 per cent. In the province of Tyrol, the Freedom Party also dropped from 20 per cent of the vote to 8 per cent, with the socialists picking up four points and the conservatives two.

Somalia moves slowly toward peace

Despite an agreement in July at the Nairobi talks of the Somali National Reconciliation and Peace Conference, several key Somali leaders have refused to co-operate. Notable in opposing the Nairobi agreements are the President of the Transitional National Government (TNG) Abdiqassim Salad Hassan, and a Mogadishu-based faction leader Muse Sudi Yalahow. Hassan, who as leader of the TNG controls only parts of Mogadishu and two small areas in the south, accused delegates of approving the "dismemberment" of Somalia. The delegates in Nairobi endorsed a transitional federal charter and agreed that a transitional federal government would govern for the first four years, but have not agreed how to resolve such issues as the status of existing regional administrations, the role of religion and the country's official languages.

Electoral reform begins in Canada's provinces

A Citizens' Assembly in the Province of British Columbia will recommend a new method of selecting members of the provincial parliament in late 2004, in time for the next provincial election, which has been set for May 17, 2005. Two members of the assembly are being chosen at random from each representative district in the province. In Prince Edward Island, Canada's smallest province, an electoral reform commission held hearings and issued an interim report in September, putting forth for consideration four different systems, each incorporating some proportional representation. In the province of Québec, the three main parties – Liberals, Parti Québécois and Action Démocratique du Québec – have all agreed in principle to adopt some form of proportional representation. New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord has ordered the creation of a commission on legislative democracy to study the concept of proportional representation and fixed election dates for his province. In Ontario, the Liberal Party as recently as May called for a binding referendum on a new voting system, but there has not been mention of this pledge after October 2, when the Liberals won a landslide vote with 72 seats in the 103-seat Ontario Legislature.

Pakistani lawyers march to bring back constitution

On October 13, Pakistani lawyers opposed to the constitutional amendments pushed through by President Musharraf's Legal Framework Order started what the press in Pakistan is calling "a long march". They are marching the 275 kilometres from Lahore to Rawalpindi to make their point. According to the Lahore newspaper *Dawn* on October 13, Hamid Khan, President of the Supreme Court Bar Association, said the lawyers of the country had rejected all the "so-called amendments to the Constitution" made through the Legal Framework Order.

Comoros constitutional crisis continues

Despite an agreement signed by the conflicting parties in Pretoria, South Africa, on August 16, the mediation by the African Union over competences of the constituent units and the federal government in Comoros had made no progress by mid-September. Adding to the crisis, popular discontent erupted over an increase in prices in September, most notably in the price of rice, due to a tax earmarked for the creation of a university.

Canada to get a "Council of the Federation"?

On October 24, the premiers of Canadian provinces were scheduled to gather to finalize the mandate and structure for a new "Council of the Federation" The proposed council, which has been endorsed by all provinces except Québec and Alberta, would be a new permanent institution of the provinces "to improve intergovernmental relations in Canada." ☺