



# Briefs & Updates

## **Swiss voters reject three laws**

In a referendum on May 16, voters in Switzerland rejected two laws which would have increased the funding for the state old-age pension plan by raising the Value Added Tax. They also rejected a law that would have reduced taxes for married couples, families and home owners. The Swiss Trade Union Federation organized the drive for a referendum against one of the pension reform laws. A number of cantons and Swiss citizens asked for the referendum on the law on tax reduction. Under Swiss law, any federal legislation can be put up for a referendum if 50,000 voters sign a petition to do so.

## **Putin re-elected President of Russia**

Vladimir Putin was re-elected President for a second four-year term with 71 per cent of the vote in Russian elections on March 14. His runner-up, Nikolaj Charitonov of the Communist Party, received only 13.7 per cent of the vote. A total of 64.3 per cent of Russians went to the polls in the presidential elections. President Putin increased his vote significantly from his first election in 2000, in which he won 52.5 per cent of the vote against the Communist runner-up Gennady Zyuganov, who received 29.4 per cent.

## **Canadian government funds Quebec's parental leave plan**

The Quebec Liberal government has struck a deal with Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin for federal funding of Quebec's own parental leave program. The federal government will provide 80 per cent funding for Quebec's more generous parental leave plan. The deal was made days before Mr. Martin called a federal election, to be held on June 28. The plan is the same one that was introduced by the separatist Parti Quebecois years ago. Quebec Liberal Premier Jean Charest endorsed the plan and won a decision in court in its favour. Under the plan agreed upon by the Quebec and federal governments on May 19, Quebecers can receive 75 per cent of their income for 40 weeks after a child is born. The federal government's current parental leave

plan funded through the federal Employment Insurance gives parents 55 per cent of their income up to \$39,400 for 50 weeks. The Quebec program raises the insurable income to \$52,500.

## **Horst Köhler elected President of Germany**

Horst Köhler, the candidate of the centre-right, was elected the ninth President of the German Federal Republic on May 23 in a special assembly in Berlin's old Reichstag building. Mr. Köhler won with 604 votes over Gesine Schwan, a university president who was the candidate of the Social Democrats and the Greens. Mr. Köhler, a former managing director of the International Monetary Fund, was the candidate of the Christian Democrats, the Christian Social Union, and the Free Democrats (liberals). The special assembly, the *Bundesversammlung*, is made up of an equal number of members of the German Bundestag and the legislative assemblies of Germany's 16 *Länder*. Mr. Köhler succeeds Johannes Rau, a Social Democrat.

## **Referendum for reunification plan fails in Cyprus**

A referendum on a constitutional arrangement to end the partition of the island of Cyprus was rejected in a referendum in April. While Turkish Cypriots approved the plan, it was rejected by Greek Cypriots. The plan's failure means that only southern Cyprus, the Greek Cypriot part of the island, was admitted into the European Union on May 1. Despite the failure, the Turkish Cypriot authorities eased tensions on May 26 by allowing all EU travellers, including Greek Cypriots, to enter the northern part of the island by showing identity cards instead of passports.

## **U.S. court rulings force air pollution cleanups**

A decision by the U.S. Supreme Court upholding air quality standards in February 2004 means that smog cleanups must be carried out in 470 counties in 31 states. Environmental and public health groups such as the American Lung Association and Environmental Defense sued to force

government into action to reduce ozone pollution, according to the Associated Press on April 16. The decision will mean increasing vehicle inspections and maintenance, producing cleaner-burning gasoline, and other changes. In a second environmental lawsuit, a settlement ordered by a recent court decision pressured the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to adopt rules protecting vital ecosystems across the U.S. from harmful air pollution levels of nitrogen oxides. Under the court-ordered agreement, the EPA must issue a proposed rule by September 30, 2004 and a final rule by September 30, 2005, according to both the EPA and Environmental Defense websites. A decision in a third air-pollution lawsuit, brought by several states in the U.S. on the New Source Review program of the EPA (*see Federations Vol 3. No. 4 and Vol. 4 No. 1*), is not expected to be decided by the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia before August 1.

### **Federal government in Malaysia to manage water supply**

A federal water supply system is still not in operation despite the fact that all the states of Malaysia except Sabah and Sarawak agreed a year ago to give the federal government the right to manage the country's water supply. It will still take longer to iron out the agreement, according to federal Energy, Water and Communications Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Lim Keng Yaik. The takeover could require changes in laws and an amendment to the constitution, according to a report in the Malaysian National News Agency. The ministry also has to draft a benchmark document for the new federal water supply and management.

### **African National Congress majority increases in elections**

In the South Africa elections on April 14, 2004, the African National Congress increased its majority to 62.7 per cent of the vote, giving it 279 of the 400 seats in the National Assembly. The second-largest party in the Assembly is the Democratic Alliance, with 50 seats after taking 13.2 per cent of the vote. Next came the Inkatha Freedom party with 28 seats and 7 per cent of the vote. The New National Party, successors to the National Party which ran the apartheid government in which whites only could vote, gained only 7 seats with just 1.7 per cent of the vote. A total of 76.7 per cent of South Africans went to the polls.

### **Government defeated in Sri Lanka elections**

In the elections on April 2, the previous United National Party government was defeated by the United People's Freedom Alliance led by President Chandrika Bandaranaike



*Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.*

Kumaratunga. The new prime minister appointed by the President was Mahinda Rajapakse of the United People's Freedom Alliance, which won 45 per cent of the votes and 105 seats in the 225-seat legislature. The United National Party of outgoing Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe won 82 seats with 37.8 per cent of the vote. The party backed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Tamil National Alliance, won 22 seats in parliament with 6.8 per cent of the vote.

### **Pakistan hopeful on peace talks after Indian elections**

Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar told his country's Senate standing committee on foreign affairs that the government was heartened by a consensus on dialogue with Pakistan among the major Indian political parties, according to the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn*. Mr. Khokhar referred to President Pervez Musharraf's recent telephone conversations with the new Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi as both "positive and upbeat". The foreign secretary said the talks planned between foreign secretaries of the two countries in June would be a continuation of the process agreed to by Pakistan and the previous Indian government. The new Congress Party coalition government has promised to keep to the peace process. "So we will see from where they will like to pick up the threads — whether from Shimla, Lahore, Agra or Islamabad," he said. Mr. Khokhar added that Pakistan would keep a "positive attitude" in pursuing the dialogue, which includes talks to settle the Kashmir and Jammu dispute. ⑥