



Briefs & Updates

African Union summit meets in Abuja, Nigeria

The fourth summit of the 53-member African Union met from January 30 to 31 in Abjua, Nigeria. Hosting the conference was Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, who is the current chair of the African Union. Heads of state including South African President Thabo Mbeki and Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak joined UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan for discussions. Topping the list of items discussed were African conflicts in the Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan's Darfur region, as well as the impact of diseases such as AIDS, malaria and polio. Plans to expand African representation on the UN Security Council and changes to that body were also discussed.

European Union parliament approves constitution

With flags hanging from their desks in Strasbourg, members of the European parliament approved their constitution on January 12 by a vote of 500 to 137, with 40 members abstaining. The document must now be ratified by all 25 members, something that is not expected before the end of 2006. Austrian Social Democratic Party leader Martin Schulz praised the values of the new constitution as enshrining "universal, indivisible values, valid for all Europeans". Correspondent Inigo Mendez de Vigo saw it heralding "a new era on this continent". Parliamentarians admonished each other to convince their constituents to support the constitution.

But for all the support shown in Parliament, there is also a "No" campaign being organized to defeat the constitution.

Spain's Basques demand right to secede

The parliament of Spain's Basque autonomous region has voted to change their status to one of "free association" with Spain. In a 39 to 35 vote on December 30, 2004, the parliament approved the measure after three members of the *Socialista Abertzaleak* party (considered close to the rebel separatist group ETA) changed their minds and voted in favour of the measure. The party had previously said that the proposal did not go far enough. The plan has been dubbed the "Ibarretxe Plan" after Basque leader Juan Jose Ibarretxe. But even though the Basque parliament has approved the plan, it has not been approved by Spain's parliament, which seems unlikely. The Socialist Party of

Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero opposes the measure, as does the opposition Popular Party.

On February 1, the Plan was debated by Spain's parliament, where it was rejected by 313 votes to 29. The next day Ibarretxe announced that general elections in the Basque region would take place on April 17, a month earlier than planned, to show anticipated Basque support for the Plan. If the Basque Nationalist Party wins an absolute majority in the elections, Ibarretxe said he would launch a referendum on the Plan.

Besides changing their ties with Madrid, the measure would also establish a Basque system of courts and Basque representation in international bodies, including the European Union. As an autonomous community of Spain, the Basque region already controls its own finances, police, health care, schools, and other public services.

Denzil Douglas wins re-election in St. Kitts

On October 25, 2004, the St. Kitts and Nevis Labour Party again formed the government in St. Kitts and Nevis with just over 50 per cent of the popular vote and 12 of the 17 seats in the legislature. Dr. Denzil Douglas, leader of the St. Kitts and Nevis Labour Party, was named Prime Minister. One opposition party, the Concerned Citizens

Movement, won 3 seats with 8 per cent of the vote, and the People's Action Movement won one seat with 32 per cent of ballots cast. The Nevis Reformation Party won the remaining seat with 7 per cent of the vote. The voter turnout was 59 per cent. There is still a possibility of a referendum on secession on the island of Nevis.



*St. Kitts Prime Minister
Dr. Denzil Douglas.*

Sri Lankan government investigates aid gone missing

The Sri Lankan government has started an investigation into reports that aid for the tsunami-stricken east coast of the country has gone astray. While government records showed that sufficient food had been shipped to the town

of Batticaloa on the east coast, there was a demonstration in the nearby town of Tricomalee on January 31 by hundreds who said the government had given no food aid and no help with rebuilding. People elsewhere complained that in January four trucks with rice, lentils and sugar bound for ethnic Tamil settlements in the north of Sri Lanka were forced to turn away by Sinhalese citizens and to give the food to Sinhalese areas instead. The reports came amid assertions by others earlier in January that aid and relief given in the areas of Sri Lanka held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was going to help that organization's soldiers. After initial cooperation between people from the LTTE and staff of the government of Sri Lanka in disaster relief in the east and the north just after the tsunami, later attempts at joint relief and rehabilitation work have been bogged down. A total of 3,000 people were killed by the tsunami along the coast of Batticaloa alone. The disaster also made 62,000 people homeless in that region.

Dispute over French water firm in Buenos Aires

Should residents of the province of Buenos Aires pay a 60-per-cent hike to pay for water supply improvements? Because the firm providing the water is a French-controlled company, the question took Argentine President Nestor Kirchner to Paris to meet French President Jacques Chirac in January. The Argentine government rejected the 60-per-cent hike and instead asked the water firm Auguas Argentinas, controlled by the French firm Suez, to invest US \$136 million in the improvements. Argentine Planning Minister Julio De Vido, who was also in Paris for the talks, said there could be Argentine government help with the improvements, but not for "free".

World Social Forum 2005 closes in Porto Alegre, Brazil

On January 31, the fifth World Social Forum ended in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, in the south of the country. The event drew 155,000 participants from 135 countries. There were 6,880 lecturers and 2,500 activities. The Forum started as an expression of world diversity. In a break with past practices, a group of 16 "personalities" put together the agenda and asked the 120,000 or more participants to approve it, rather than working as a large, open space without a structure determined in advance. It was also the first time that the World Social Forum brought together civil society groups to meet the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. "It is important to be here to listen, understand the criticism and bring it back," said Simonetta Nardin of the External Relations Department of the IMF.

New Austrian constitution delayed?

Austria's constitutional convention has produced its first draft. In December 2004, the draft of a revised constitution was put forward by convention member Franz Fiedler. It contained a reference to the "right to housing" and contained the wording "Marriage and family enjoy the legal, economic, and social protection of the state." The draft did not include a reference to God. The Austrian socialists called the draft constitution "unacceptable". The socialist party wanted a reduction of the voting age to

16, among other changes. The possibility of a referendum on a new draft constitution in autumn 2005 now seems unlikely. (6)

Gays, lesbians and the law in federal countries

Belgium: Legalized gay marriage in February 2003, the second country in the world to do so.

Brazil: No laws against homosexuality, and a number of states and cities have laws forbidding discrimination against gays and lesbians. In December 2005, Brazil amended its immigration policy to recognize relationships between binational same-sex couples.

Canada: Laws against homosexual practice were repealed in 1969. Then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau said, "There is no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation." Gay marriage is legal in 7 of 10 provinces, and a vote on a bill extending marriage to same-sex couples was given first reading in the federal Parliament in February 2005.

India: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code still outlaws homosexual practice.

Germany: Laws against homosexuality were repealed in 1968 in East Germany and in 1969 in West Germany. In 2001, the Bundestag passed a "Life Partnership Law" to allow civil unions of same-sex couples. The law was strengthened in October 2004 to allow adoptions of children of the other partner and to pay support for each other.

Nigeria: Chapter 42, section 214 of the Nigerian Criminal Code makes homosexuality punishable by 14 years in prison. Under Sharia law, legal in some northern states, the penalty can be death by stoning.

Pakistan: Section 377 of the Pakistan Criminal Code makes homosexual activity illegal. It is punishable from two years to life in prison, and corporal punishment of 100 lashes. Under Islamic law (made legally binding in Pakistan in 1990), the punishment can be death by stoning.

South Africa: The 1996 constitution protects gays and lesbians from discrimination in the South African Bill of Rights. In 1998 the Supreme Court struck down South Africa's sodomy law.

Spain: The socialist government introduced a law in December 2004 to legalize gay marriage. Parliament planned to debate the bill in February.

Switzerland: No laws against homosexuality, and the Constitution implicitly bans discrimination based on sexual orientation. The canton of Zurich voted in a referendum in 2002 to allow civil unions for homosexual couples. In December 2003, the federal legislature gave first reading to a bill on civil unions for homosexuals, and a referendum process on the proposed law has been launched by its opponents.

United States of America: In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that sodomy laws, which 14 of the 50 states still had on their books, were unconstitutional. Massachusetts legalized gay marriage in 2004, and a law offering civil unions for same-sex partners was approved in Vermont in 2000.