Montenegro to vote on independence

The constituent republic of Montenegro will vote on independence from Serbia on May 21. Montenegro’s Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic wants to cut the ties that bind Serbia and Montenegro, currently united in a federal government. Djukanovic’s pro-independence coalition in Montenegro’s Parliament and the opposition agreed on the referendum after negotiations with the European Union. The EU set a threshold of 55 percent of more than half the electorate for a vote in favour of independence to succeed.

ETA declares “permanent” ceasefire in Spain

The armed Basque separatist group Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque fatherland and liberty or ETA), which has been blamed for up to 800 deaths since the late 1960s, declared a “permanent” ceasefire on March 22, 2006. The cease-fire statement was read on Basque television by a masked woman flanked by two masked men. The group, founded in Spain during the Franco dictatorship, declared a previous ceasefire in 1998, which was followed by a number of fatal bombings when talks with then Prime Minister Jose Luis Aznar broke down. The current prime minister, José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, reacted cautiously to the declaration, as did French President Jacques Chirac. Spanish newspapers with pro-government editorial stands lauded the declaration as a breakthrough. The more circumspect Spanish online news service, Periodista Digital, commented to the New York Times that it was naïve to take the ETA at face value. The ETA declaration also called on France as well as Spain to begin respecting the right of Basques to self determination. There are almost two million Basques in Spain and about 250,000 across the border in France.

Somalia’s parliament meets as fighting threatens

The first meeting of Somalia’s parliament inside the war-torn country on the Horn of Africa has been overshadowed by the most serious fighting there in years.

The fighting in Mogadishu was taking place between three warlords and Islamist forces. The Islamists, known as the Islamic Courts militia, want to impose Sharia law to end the violence in the capital. The warlords, Mohammed Deere, Mohammed Qanyare and Bashir Rageh, have united as the “Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism.” They claim the Islamists are harbouring a Sudanese man, known as Zuweydan, who is sought by the U. S. as a suspect in terrorist attacks. Deer, Qanyara, Rageh and their business allies control large parts of Mogadishu and airstrips around the capital.

The parliament in Baidoa marked the return to Somalia of the newly constituted federal government from its exile in Kenya (see “Somalia’s transitional government starts building a federal democracy,” Federations Vol. 4 No. 4, March 2005).

New editor of Federations:

Rod Macdonell is the new Senior Editor of Federations. Before joining the Forum of Federations in December 2005 as Senior Director of Public Information and Education, he was the Executive Director of Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, based in Toronto. He also worked for the World Bank Institute in Washington, D.C., designing training for journalists in developing countries and delivering that training both by video conferencing and in person in numerous countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe. He previously worked for the Canadian Press, and as an investigative journalist for the Montreal Gazette and taught courses on the press and the law at Concordia University’s Journalism Department in Montreal. He was the winner of three Judith-Jasmin Awards, Quebec’s highest award for journalism. He has a law degree from Université de Sherbrooke in Quebec.