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AFRICA

SENEGAL

Presidential election

President Abdoulaye Wade, 85, the candidate of the ruling Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS), won more votes than any other candidate in presidential elections held on Feb. 26. However, Wade failed to win more than 50 per cent of the vote, meaning that a second round run-off vote was scheduled for March 25. The second round of voting, constitutionally required when no single candidate secured more than 50 per cent of the first round vote, pitted Wade against his closest first round rival, former Prime Minister Macky Sall (2004-07), the candidate of the Alliance for the Republic (APR).

Wade won some 34.8 per cent of the first round vote, whilst Sall secured 26.6 per cent. Former Prime Minister Moustapha Niasse (1983 and 2000-01), the candidate of the United to Boost Senegal (BSS) coalition, trailed in third place with 13.2 per cent. Voter turnout was 51.6 per cent, whilst EU electoral observers reported that voting was held amid largely peaceful circumstances. However, the BBC online news service had reported on Feb. 20 that six people had died during anti-government protests since the beginning of 2012, including one death on Feb. 19 during a protest against a "police blunder" that resulted in officers throwing tear gas into a mosque in Dakar (the capital).

Wade had first been elected for a seven year term in March 2000 [see pp. 43449; 43396]. A constitutional referendum held in January 2001 reduced the presidential term from seven to five years and limited a president to two consecutive terms in office [see pp. 43933-94]. Wade was re-elected for a second (five-year) term in February 2007 [see p. 47732]. In July

2008 the National Assembly (the lower chamber of the bicameral legislature) voted to amend the constitution to extend the presidential term from five to seven years [see pp. 48680-81]. Wade's intention to seek another term as president prompted serious unrest in Dakar in mid-2011 [see p. 50552]. When an electoral court approved Wade's presidential candidacy on Jan. 27, more violent protests erupted in Dakar, resulting in the death of one police officer [see p. 50857]. Wade, a lawyer by profession, had defended his decision to contest the forthcoming presidential contest by insisting that the constitutional changes enacted in January 2001 were not retroactive, and so therefore his "first" term should be considered as the one that started after the amendments were approved (in 2007). The statement published by the court on Jan. 27 agreed with the president, confirming that Wade's first term under the 2001 constitution took place between 2007 and 2012, and that, therefore, Wade was entitled to run for a "second term" under the 2001 constitution. The court also rejected the candidacy of music icon Youssou N'Dour, whose candidacy was invalidated because he did not turn in enough valid signatures on his petition.

Many of Wade's opponents urged citizens to rally behind Sall's candidacy in the second round, with Niasse saying that it was "imperative" to prevent a Wade victory. Sall predicted that a "desire for change" amongst the electorate would help him win the run-off vote.

■ Last articles pp. 50857; 50552; 50496.

MALI

Tuareg offensive

Gen. Sadio Gassama, minister of internal security and civil protection, on Feb. 11 ex-

pressed the army's determination to defeat Tuareg rebels who had launched a major offensive in northern Mali in January [see p. 50856]. Gassama's remarks came after the government of President Gen. (ret'd) Amadou Toumani Touré faced rising domestic and international pressure over the offensive, which had resulted in the deaths of dozens of people. Earlier, on Feb. 2, protesters against the offensive in Bamako (the capital) had also directed their ire against the Touré regime for its apparent failure to quell the violence in the north.

By Feb. 2 the rebels had seized several northern towns, including Menaka. However, on Feb. 3-4 the rebels—many of whom had recently returned to northern Mali from Libya, where they had been fighting alongside forces loyal to deposed dictator Col Moamer al-Kadhafi [see pp. 50695; 50752]—were forced to retreat from Kidal, after being attacked by helicopter gunships and other heavy weapons.

Insecurity caused by the fighting was cited as the reason why Doctors of the World, a global network of volunteer medical staff, suspended its activities in Mali on Feb. 8. The office of UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on Feb. 24 estimated that some 130,000 people had "been uprooted within and outside Mali" since the Tuareg offensive began in January. During a visit to Mali on Feb. 25, French Foreign and European Affairs Minister Alain Juppé urged the government to negotiate with the rebels, who were demanding an autonomous homeland in northern Mali.

■ Last article p. 50856.

GUINEA

Filing of charges over 2009 stadium massacre

Col Moussa Tiegboro Camara on Feb. 8 appeared before a panel of judges overseeing a government investigation into the massacre of over 150 civilians by troops in the national stadium in Conakry (the capital) in September 2009 [see p. 49389; see also pp. 49447; 49504-05; 49562]. The judges had filed charges against Camara on Feb. 1. Camara, a minister in the presidency in charge of fighting drug trafficking and organised crime [see p. 49246], was the highest-level official to be questioned and charged in relation to the massacre.

IMF credit facility

The executive board of the IMF on Feb. 24 approved a new SDR128.52 million (US\$1.00=0.6429 special drawing rights—SDRs—as at Feb. 24, 2012) arrangement for Guinea under the Fund's Extended Credit Facility (ECF). The board also approved an amount equivalent to SDR 1.2852 million in interim assistance for Guinea under the en-

Results of first round of presidential elections in Senegal

Candidate	Party	Votes	% of votes
Abdoulaye Wade	Senegalese Democratic Party	942,327	34.81
Macky Sall	Alliance for the Republic	719,367	26.58
Moustapha Niasse	United to Boost Senegal	357,330	13.20
Ousmane Tanor Dieng	Senegal Socialist Party	305,924	11.30
Idrissa Seck	Rewmi	212,853	7.86
Cheikh Bamba Dièye	Front for Socialism and Democracy/Benno Jubël	52,196	1.93
Ibrahima Fall	Independent	48,972	1.81
Cheikh Tidiane Gadio	Citizen Political Movement	26,655	0.98
Mor Dieng	Party of Hope	11,402	0.42
Djibril Ngom	Independent	10,207	0.38
Oumar Khassimou Dia	Humanist Party Ñaxx Jariñu	6,469	0.24
Amsatou Sow Sidibé	Convergence Movement of Actors for the Defence of Republican Values-Lennen	5,167	0.19
Doudou Ndoeye	Union for the Republic	4,566	0.17
Diouma Dieng Diakhate	Jogal Democratic Initiative Party	3,354	0.12
Total		2,706,789	99.99

Turnout: 51.6 per cent.

(Source: African Elections Database.)

hanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative.

Guinea was one of seven countries that had yet to reach its completion point under the HIPC initiative, the other six being Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan.

■ Last articles pp. 50695; 50637.

LIBERIA

Trial of former President Taylor

Judges at the Special Court for Sierra Leone, sitting in The Hague, the Netherlands, on Feb. 9 rejected a request by lawyers to re-open their case in defence of former Liberian President Charles Taylor (1997-2003). The court unanimously ruled that Taylor's lawyers had "failed to establish any justification for the re-opening of its case".

The request was made on Jan. 31, after defence lawyers claimed that a report published in December 2011 by the UN Panel of Experts on Liberia presented evidence that many rival factions that were acting for personal gain and not under Taylor's control or command operated in Liberia during the civil war. Taylor's trial ended in March 2011 and the court was expected to deliver its verdict in April. [For recent developments see pp. 50856; 50329; 50277; 49974; 48339].

US ruling on deportation of rebel leader

A US immigration judge on Feb. 6 ruled that George Boley, a prominent rebel leader during Liberia's civil war of the 1990s, could be deported from the USA because there was evidence that he was involved in killings and the recruitment of children to fight in the war. The US authorities, which had held Boley in custody since 2010, brought the case against the former rebel after claiming that there was evidence suggesting that his fighters had burned to death dozens of captives accused of witchcraft in 1994.

Oil discovery

Energy company African Petroleum Corporation announced on Feb. 21 that the company's Narina-1 well struck "105 feet of net oil pay" at its offshore LB-09 block, off the coast of Liberia, the Reuters news agency reported that day. The company also revealed that it was undertaking an "extensive exploration and appraisal programme" to establish whether or not the "reservoir was commercially viable".

■ Last article p. 50856.

NIGERIA

Attacks by Boko Haram - Other security developments

Gunmen on Feb. 27 killed three police officers during attacks against a police station and a bank in the town of Jama'are, Bauchi state, a known stronghold of the Boko Haram sect, the so-called "Nigerian Taliban". At least two people were killed and more than 38 others were injured on Feb. 26, when a suicide bomber drove a car rammed with explosives into a church in the city of Jos. The suicide bomber was amongst the dead. Five people were wounded in another attack against a church on Feb. 26, in the town of Suleja, near Abuja (the capital).

Twelve people were also killed on Feb. 24, when Boko Haram militants attacked a police station and a prison in the city of Gombe. Also on Feb. 24, gunmen riding on motorcycles killed five people at a mosque in the northern city of Kano. The BBC online news service on Feb. 20 reported an announcement by the security forces that at least eight Boko Haram militants were killed during a gun battle in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri, shortly after the rebels detonated explosive devices at a market in the city.

The BBC online news service on Feb. 16 reported that 119 inmates, including seven convicted Boko Haram militants, had escaped from a prison in central Kogi state, after armed men from the sect attacked the jail with explosive devices and guns. A bomb disposal officer was killed in the northern city of Kaduna on Feb. 14, when a device he was attempting to defuse in the Ungwar Sarki residential area of the city exploded.

Meanwhile, Kabiru Umar (also known as Kabiru Sokoto), who was accused of being the mastermind of the Boko Haram bomb attack against a Christian church in Madalla on Dec. 25, 2011 [see p. 50804], was recaptured by the security forces in the eastern state of Taraba on Feb. 10 [for Umar's escape from police custody in January see p. 50855].

Boko Haram on Feb. 8 claimed responsibility for an attempted suicide bomb attack against an army barracks in the northern city of Kaduna on Feb. 7. The suicide bomber, inside a car packed with explosives, was shot and killed by the security forces as he attempted to drive the vehicle into the barracks. The suicide bomber was the only casualty. Officials announced that the security forces killed eight Boko Haram militants during an early-morning raid in Kaduna on Feb. 7, recovering automatic rifles, live ammunition, and bomb-making materials.

The BBC online news service reported on Feb. 6 that Boko Haram militants were suspected of launching near-simultaneous attacks against a police station in the northern city of Kano and against a market in the northern city of Maiduguri. At least one police officer was wounded during the attack against the police station, in the Sharada area of Kano.

In another security development, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta

(MEND), the main rebel faction in the Niger delta region, on Feb. 5 claimed responsibility for an attack which destroyed an oil pipeline near the Brass river, Bayelsa state, on Feb. 4. In a statement, the MEND described the attack as "relatively insignificant", saying that it was a "reminder of our presence" and warning that it was also "a sign of things to come". The pipeline was operated by Italian-headquartered multinational energy company Eni. [For most recent developments concerning the activities of MEND see pp. 50119-20.]

Gubernatorial elections

Gubernatorial elections were held in four states in February after the Supreme Court had on Jan. 27 ordered five state governors (all from the ruling People's Democratic Party—PDP) to step down from their posts immediately [see p. 50855].

PDP incumbent Adml Murtala Nyako was returned to office in Adamawa state on Feb. 4. PDP candidate Henry Seriake Dickson won a landslide victory in Bayelsa state on Feb. 11 and replaced outgoing PDP governor Timipre Sylva. PDP incumbents Aliyu Magatakarda Wamakko and Liyel Imoke secured re-election in Sokoto state and Cross River state, respectively, on Feb. 18 and Feb. 25.

In a blow to the PDP, on Feb. 24 the Supreme Court nullified the election victory in April 2011 of the governor of Kebbi state, Usman Saidu Nasamu Dakingari, and ordered the holding of fresh elections within 90 days. The ruling, which overturned an appeals court decision ratifying Nasamu Dakingari's election, also ordered the governor to immediately stand down from his post.

Guilty plea in UK court by former Delta state governor

James Ibori on Feb. 27 pleaded guilty at Southwark crown court in London to 10 counts of money laundering, fraud, and related offences in connection with his tenure from 1997 until 2007 as the governor of Nigeria's Delta state [for arrest in Dubai in May 2010 see p. 49820; for arrival in London in April 2011 see p. 50380].

Ibori had been a prominent figure in Nigeria, widely regarded as a wealthy "powerbroker" in the country's "power struggles". However, prosecutors revealed that his tenure as the governor of Delta state was marked by "wide-scale theft, fraud and corruption". Ibori pleaded not guilty to 13 similar charges and was scheduled to be sentenced in April.

■ Last article pp. 50855-56.

GABON

New cabinet

As required under the constitution, Prime Minister Paul Biyoghe Mba and his cabinet

New cabinet of Gabon

- +Raymond Ndong Sima** Prime Minister
 - +Ida Reteno Assonouet** (f) Justice, Attorney General, Human Rights and Relations with Constitutional Institutions, Government Spokesperson
 - +Emmanuel Issozet Ngondet** Foreign Affairs, International Co-operation, Francophony, in charge of NEPAD and Regional Integration
 - +Léon Zouba** Health
 - +Julien Nkogwe Bekale** Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Rural Development
 - +Magloire Ngambia** Investment Promotion, Public Works, Transport, Housing and Tourism, responsible for regional planning
 - +Blaise Louembe** Digital Economy, Communications, and the Post
 - Seraphin Moundounga** National Education, Higher and Technical Education and Vocational Training, in charge of Culture, Youth and Sports
 - *Gabriel Ntchango** Water and Forests
 - *Fidèle Mengue M'engouang** Small and Medium Enterprises, Handicraft and Trade
 - Jean François Ndongou** Interior, Public Security, Immigration and Decentralisation
 - Rufin Pacome Ondzouga** National Defence
 - *Honorine Nzet Biteghe** (f) Family Welfare and Social Affairs
 - +Régis Imongault** Industry and Mines
 - *Luc Oyoubi** Economy, Employment and Sustainable Development
 - *Christiane Rose Ossoucah Raponda** (f) Budget, Public Accounts and Civil Service
 - *Etienne Ngoubou** Petroleum, Energy and Water Resources
- *New appointment.
+Altered responsibilities.
Women are denoted by (f).

ministers resigned from their posts on Feb. 13, after the Constitutional Court on Feb. 12 confirmed that the ruling Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) won a landslide victory in legislative elections contested in December 2011 [for results see p. 50805]. President Ali-Ben Bongo Ondimba on Feb. 27 appointed Raymond Ndong Sima, 56, the outgoing agricultural minister, as the new prime minister. The appointment of Ndong Sima was especially significant because he hailed from northern Gabon, thereby marking the first occasion that the post of prime minister was held by someone who was not from the ethnic Fang region of Libreville (the capital).

During his inauguration speech, Ndong Sima said that the aim of his administration was "to achieve the expectations of the Gabonese people". A new cabinet was named on Feb. 28 [for previous government changes and full cabinet list see p. 50218].

■ Last article p. 50805.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Resignations of diplomats

The Guardian of Feb. 21 reported that three senior diplomats at the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)'s embassy in London, including first secretary to the ambassador, Baby Kazadi Moussonzo, had resigned and claimed asylum in the UK. Accused of involvement in demonstrations in London in December 2011 against the DRC's disputed elections of November 2011 [see p. 50748], the three were being recalled to the DRC and feared for their lives.

The diplomats claimed that their government was guilty of abductions, arrests and assassinations, and that there had been substantial election fraud and ballot box stuffing.

Reported link between US adviser and illegal gold deal

Citing a report by the UN's Group of Experts on the DRC, *The Guardian* of Feb. 6 reported that Nigerian-born US trade adviser Kase Lawal had transferred millions of dollars to buy gold from wanted Congolese warlord Bosco Ntaganda between December 2010 and February 2011 in contravention of UN resolutions banning individuals or organisations from financing illegal armed groups in the DRC. Lawal, chairman of Houston oil firm, Camac, never received the gold. Representatives he sent to collect it were arrested as they tried to leave the DRC and were only released after paying US\$3 million in fines.

Death of presidential adviser in air crash

Augustin Katumba Mwanke, a senior adviser to President Joseph Kabila, was among five people killed on Feb. 12 when a private jet crashed while landing in the eastern city of Bukavu. Finance Minister Matata Ponyo Mapon was one of several people injured.

■ Last article pp. 50854-55.

SOUTH SUDAN

Continuing dispute with north over oil

South Sudan on Feb. 21 expelled Liu Yingcai, the Chinese head of Chinese-Malaysian oil consortium Petrodar, citing a lack of co-operation in its ongoing investigation into neighbouring (northern) Sudan's alleged theft of southern oil worth US\$815 million, and alleged collusion with the (northern) Sudanese government in the

theft. Petrodar, the biggest oil company operating in South Sudan, pumped two thirds of the country's total daily output, which was exported through a pipeline in (north) Sudan.

Landlocked South Sudan, which depended on the pipeline in the north for its exports, in January shut down its oil production, accusing the north of illegally siphoning off the oil [see p. 50853]. Since the fledgling nation gained independence from northern Sudan in July 2011 [see p. 50548], the two countries had been locked in a row over pipeline transit fees imposed by the north. (North) Sudan admitted to confiscating some oil for unpaid fees and to holding several tankers containing southern oil.

South Sudan accused Swiss-based oil trading company Trafigura of buying stolen oil on the 600,000-barrel Indian-flagged tanker, *Ratna Shradha*. Uncertainty surrounding the ownership of the oil left the vessel stranded off the coast of Japan for a week awaiting permission to dock. Trafigura on Feb. 20 said that the tanker had received permission from a UK court to deliver the contents to its destination and that the proceeds would be held by the court until ownership was established.

Signing of non-aggression treaty with north - Commencement of demarcation of common border

Following South Sudan's independence from northern Sudan [see p. 50548], the two countries, under the mediation of the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa (the capital of Ethiopia), on Feb. 10 signed a non-aggression treaty on their disputed border, agreeing to respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to refrain from launching any attack. However, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA—the armed forces of South Sudan) said that its forces in the Jau area of Unity state, bordering (north) Sudan, had been bombed by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF—the armed forces of (northern) Sudan) on Feb. 12.

South Sudan and Sudan on Feb. 15 also agreed to commence the demarcation of their common border. With 90 per cent of the demarcation areas agreed, it was hoped that the process could be completed within three months. A separate memorandum of understanding regarding the transportation and voluntary repatriation of more than 300,000 citizens from the north to the south by road, air, and river transport, was signed on Feb. 12.

Security developments

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on Feb. 3 voiced concern over a cattle raid earlier in the week in a remote area of the northern Warrap state in which 78 people were killed by warriors from neighbouring Unity state [for recent ethnic massacres in Jonglei see p. 50853].

A peace meeting in Mayendit, in Unity state, aimed at ending the violence, on Feb. 3 resulted in the deaths of at least 37 people. Officials from three states and the UN had met for talks but a row broke out. Four trucks arrived filled with gunmen, including policemen from different units, who opened fire indiscriminately.

It was reported on Feb. 21 that China had sent a platoon of combat troops to South Sudan to guard Chinese military doctors and engineers working as part of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) [for recent abduction of Chinese workers in northern Sudan see pp. 50852-53; 50915 (both Sudan)].

■ Last article p. 50853.

SUDAN

Oil dispute with South Sudan

President Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir on Feb. 3 said that Sudan would continue to take its share of South Sudan's oil to compensate for the loss of unpaid transit fees by its newly independent southern neighbour until an agreement was reached with the South Sudan government. Landlocked South Sudan, which depended on a pipeline in the north for its exports, in January announced that it was shutting down its oil production, accusing the north of illegally siphoning off oil worth US\$815 million [see p. 50853; for secession of South Sudan see p. 50548 (both South Sudan)].

The pro-government Sudanese Media Centre on Feb. 19 reported that Awad Abd-al-Fatah, director general of Sudan's ministry of oil, had announced five new oil discoveries that would increase the country's oil production from 115,000 barrels a day to around 180,000 and 200,000 by the end of 2012. This would make (northern) Sudan self-sufficient in oil with surplus for export.

Sudan and Norway on Feb. 22 signed a co-operation agreement on oil exploration, the environment, and safety, worth US\$10 million. Sudanese Minister of Petroleum Awad Ahmed al-Jaz called on Norwegian companies to invest in Sudan's oil-producing sector.

Release of abducted Chinese construction workers

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), the northern branch of South Sudan's ruling SPLM that fought for its country's independence from Khartoum, on Feb. 7 freed 29 Chinese road construction workers it had abducted on Jan. 28 from a remote encampment in Sudan's southern border province of South Kordofan during a clash with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF—the armed forces of northern Sudan) [see pp. 50852-53]. The workers were handed to the International Com-

mittee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and flown to Kenya to be received by Chinese diplomats in Nairobi (the capital of Kenya). The SPLM-N said that it had captured the workers to keep them safe from the fighting.

Also released was the body of a Chinese worker, found dead after having been missing for several days. Seventeen others who had fled the fighting were reportedly safe and well [for developments concerning Chinese workers in South Sudan see above].

Developments concerning Darfur

President Bashir on Feb. 8 in Al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur State, launched the new Darfur Regional Authority (DRA), whose primary responsibility was the implementation of the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD) [for background see p. 50806]. The ceremony was attended by the leaders of Qatar and Chad, and representatives of the UN, African Union (AU), EU, Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC).

The UN Security Council on Feb. 17 adopted Resolution 2035 (2012), extending until Feb. 17, 2013, the mandate of the four-member panel of experts originally appointed through Resolution 1591 of March 29, 2005, to monitor the arms embargo in the Darfur region [see p. 46506]. The mandate had previously been extended by Resolution 1982 of May 17, 2011 [see p. 50437].

Rebels in Darfur on Feb. 20 said that they had seized 52 Senegalese, Yemeni and Ghanaian members of the African Union (AU) and UN "hybrid" peacekeeping operation for Darfur (UNAMID), accusing them of helping Sudanese forces spy on rebel territory.

■ Last article pp. 50852-53.

ETHIOPIA

Security developments

Radio Ethiopia on Feb. 6 reported that the National Intelligence and Security Service and the Federal Police Anti-Terrorism Joint Task Force had seized al-Qaida cells that were becoming operational in Ethiopia for the first time and planning to carry out acts of terrorism. The eight suspects, who were seized during training, had ties with Somalia's militant Islamist Shabab and al-Qaida cells in Kenya, Sudan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia and South Africa. Ethiopian troops were fighting the Shabab in Somalia [see p. 50748 (Somalia)].

The opposition Radio Freedom audio website on Feb. 13 reported that 12 government soldiers had been killed in clashes with the Ogaden National Liberation Army (ONLA—the armed wing of the rebel Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)) in the Segag and Sheygoosh districts of the conflict-ridden Ogaden area of south-eastern Ethiopia.

■ Last article p. 50852.

SOMALIA

London conference

Representatives of 55 nations and international organisations, including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on Feb. 23 at a one-day conference in London on Somalia, pledged more help to combat terrorism and piracy, but demanded that the country's politicians form a stable government. A joint statement issued by the conference said that the UN-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) must make way by August for a more representative replacement; there must be no further extensions of its mandate [for previous extension see p. 50493]. Anyone hampering progress faced sanctions. Somalia had not had a working central government since 1991.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron warned that turbulence in the failed state threatened the security both of Africa and of Western nations. There were up to 50 radicalised UK nationals currently in Somalia training and fighting with the militant Islamist Shabab who could return to the UK with the expertise and motivation to launch terrorist attacks. Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, in a video posted on an Islamic internet forum on Feb. 9, announced that the Shabab had formally joined al-Qaida.

UK Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary William Hague on Feb. 2 visited Mogadishu (the capital), in what some commentators described as a new drive against the militants. Hague, who met Somali President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, was accompanied by Matt Baugh, appointed the same day as the UK's first ambassador to Somalia for 21 years.

Increase in AMISOM strength

The UN Security Council on Feb. 22 approved Resolution 2036 (2012), which increased the strength of the African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission in Somalia (AMISOM) from 12,000 to 17,731 troops, expanding the mission's presence and operations beyond Mogadishu. Empowering AMISOM to take all necessary measures to reduce the threat posed by the Shabab, the Council also imposed a ban on the export of Somali charcoal, a major source of funding for the militants.

Kenyan military spokesman Col Cyrus Oguni on Feb. 25 said that Kenyan forces, which had liberated 95,000 sq km from Shabab control since entering Somalia in October 2011 [see p. 50688], had formally received UN endorsement to join AMISOM. The EU, concerned that regional armies in Somalia pursuing separate aims could complicate efforts to resolve the conflict, had earlier pledged funds for Kenya's war effort, but only if its forces joined the peacekeeping mission. With 4,660 Kenyan soldiers expected to join AMISOM, the remainder were being withdrawn from Somalia.

Security developments

The Shabab claimed responsibility for a suicide car bomb driven into a café outside the Muna Hotel in a government and AMISOM-controlled area of Mogadishu on Feb. 8 that killed at least 11 people.

Radio Bar-Kulan on Feb. 11 reported that 15 people had been killed and more than 20 injured in fighting within pro-government forces in the Horumar neighbourhood of Beledweyne, the provincial capital of central Somalia's Hiiraan region.

Shabab militants on Feb. 21 withdrew from its five strongholds of Yurkud, Garas Amerika, Buhol Bashir, Kurtele, and Qansax Omane, in the Bay and Bakool regions of south-western Somalia, after government and Ethiopian forces closed in on the area.

Radio Mogadishu on Feb. 3 reported that an unmanned spy plane, believed to be a US drone, had crashed into the Badbaado displaced persons' camp in the capital.

Two unidentified guman on Feb. 28 shot dead Abukar Mahamud Kadam, the head of Radio Somaliweyn, in front of his house in Mogadishu. The station collapsed in May 2010 after the Shabab looted its broadcasting equipment during fighting with government forces.

Developments concerning piracy

The Danish warship *Absalon* on the night of Feb. 26-27 fired at a pirate mother ship off the coast of Somalia with 17 pirates and 18 hostages aboard, forcing it to stop. Danish forces were unable to save two hostages who were fatally wounded in the incident.

Kenya on Feb. 18 agreed to try four suspected Somali pirates captured by a Danish ship in the Indian Ocean on Jan. 7. Denmark had sought to hand the men to the Seychelles for prosecution, but its request was rejected.

The Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* on Feb. 21 reported that nine Somali pirates were to stand trial in Rome (the capital of Italy) for their part in the hijacking in October 2011 of the Italian container ship *Montecristo* [see p. 50688].

Radio Bar-Kulan on Feb. 24 reported that the Jariban district administration of Somalia's semi-autonomous regional government of Puntland had arrested 10 Somali pirates in the area since the launch of anti-piracy operations in the region.

End of famine

After a bumper harvest and surge in emergency food deliveries, the UN on Feb. 3 announced the end to a famine in Somalia declared in July 2011 [see p. 50549]. However, the UN warned that conditions were precarious, with 2.34 million people still needing emergency rations to survive.

Political party developments

Somalia's three largest Islamic political parties, Al-Itisaam, Al-Islah, and Ala-Sheikh, which had united to form the new Daljir party, on Feb. 13 elected Shaykh Dahir Mahamud Gelle of the Al-Itisaam movement as chairman.

Former senior officials of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), who had previously supported the TFG, on Feb. 18 in Mogadishu formed the new Midnimo (Unity) party headed by Shaykh Umar Dahir Abdu-rahman Muhammad.

■ Last article p. 50852.

KENYA

Proposed legal action against UK for abuses during Mau Mau rebellion

It was reported on Feb. 9 that thousands of former members of the Mau Mau movement, which fought against the UK colonial authority in Kenya between 1952 and 1960, were planning to sue the UK government for compensation for abuses, including torture, rape, and forcible displacement from their lands. Donald Rabala, a lawyer representing the victims, said that he had 6,000 statements from elderly Kenyans inspired by a ruling in July 2011 by the UK high court that four former members of the Mau Mau movement had the right to sue the UK government because they had "arguable cases in law" [see pp. 50549-50; for opening of case see pp. 50386; 50407 (UK)].

Investigation of legislators over alleged "hate speech"

The *Star* newspaper on Feb. 21 reported that the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) was investigating four MPs over alleged "hate speech" during prayer rallies hosted by suspended Higher Education Minister William Samoei Ruto and Deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta.

Ruto and Kenyatta, who were not under suspicion, were among six high-ranking Kenyans indicted in January by the International Criminal Court (ICC) based in The Hague, the Netherlands, for crimes against humanity allegedly committed during the ethnic violence that had followed Kenya's disputed elections of December 2007 [see p. 50853; for elections and background see pp. 48288; 48336-37; 48393-94; 48450]. The NCIC said that it had recordings of rallies held in Eldoret, Kirinyaga, and Meru to pray for those indicted by the ICC in which politicians made statements that might have amounted to hate speech and incitement.

Deportation of Muslim cleric

Shaykh Bilal Philips, a controversial Jamaican Muslim scholar, was on Feb. 22 deported

from Kenya because of possible links to terrorism. Philips, who was on a police list of terrorism suspects, was turned away at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Nairobi (the capital), a few hours after he landed, sparking protests from Muslim leaders. Anti-terrorism police chief Njiru Mwaniki said that the scholar was a dangerous man who had been denied entry to several countries, including the USA and the UK.

Death of environment minister

John Njoroge Michuki, environment and mineral resources minister since 2008 [see p. 48504], died of heart failure on Feb. 21, aged 80.

■ Last article p. 50853.

UGANDA

Re-introduction of anti-homosexuality bill

The London-based human rights organisation Amnesty International (AI) condemned the resurrection by the Ugandan legislature on Feb. 7 of an anti-homosexuality bill, described by US President Barack Obama as "odious". MP David Bahati, who first tabled the legislation in 2009, re-introduced the bill to a standing ovation. According to Bahati, the new bill no longer contained a provision for the death penalty, and proposed reduced prison sentences for homosexual acts instead of a life sentence. Homosexuality was illegal in conservative Uganda [for murder of prominent gay activist in 2011 see p. 50217].

Simon Lokodo, minister for ethics and integrity, accompanied by police officers, on Feb. 14 raided a gay rights conference at a hotel and demanded that one of the organisers be arrested. Lokodo told activists that their workshop was an illegal assembly and ordered them out.

■ Last articles pp. 50808; 50749.

BURUNDI

Government changes

In government changes on Feb. 8, Tabu Abdalla Manirakiza became minister of finance and planning of economic development, replacing Clotilde Nizigama, who had been finance minister since July 2007 [see p. 48027; for expansion of portfolio in 2011 see p. 50749]. Issa Ngendakumana succeeded Jean-Baptiste Gahimbare as minister at the presidency in charge of good governance and privatisation [for appointment of Gahimbare and full cabi-

net list see pp. 49972-73; for subsequent government changes see p. 50749].

Approval of new IMF credit

The executive board of the IMF on Jan. 27 approved a new three-year SDR 30 million (US\$1.00=0.6464 special drawing rights—SDRs—as at Jan. 27, 2012) arrangement for Burundi under its Extended Credit Facility (ECF) programme aimed at consolidating the gains made in terms of macroeconomic stability and further reducing poverty. The approval enabled the immediate disbursement of an amount equivalent to SDR 1 million.

A previous ECF arrangement for Burundi expired on Jan. 23, following the board's completion on Jan. 13 of the seventh and final review, which allowed the disbursement of an amount equivalent to SDR 5 million. [For IMF credit under Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) in July 2008 see p. 48680.]

■ Last articles pp. 50857; 50808; 50749.

ZIMBABWE

Inquest into death of Solomon Mujuru

The Independent of Feb. 8 reported that an inquest into the death in a suspicious house fire in August 2011 of Gen. (ret'd) Solomon Mujuru [see p. 50588], one of President Robert Mugabe's most likely successors as head of the co-ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), had ended with the court refusing appeals from his family for his body to be exhumed.

Mujuru's family had wanted a medical expert from South Africa to examine the remains. Adding to suspicion was testimony from witnesses who heard gunshots before flames were seen at Mujuru's farmhouse, and reports that a fire engine sent to the scene had no water in it.

Pledge by Mugabe of general election in 2012

President Mugabe on Feb. 19 said that he would definitely call elections in 2012, describing as "cowards" politicians who said that polls could not be held until 2013. Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's co-ruling Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) had said that polls could not go ahead until constitutional reforms were complete.

The London-based Zimbabwe independent SW Radio Africa on Feb. 9 reported that Job Sikhala, president of the opposition breakaway MDC-99 party, had said that he and 70 members of his party leadership would go on a 66-day hunger strike in early March at the Africa

Unity Square in Harare (the capital) until Mugabe was "gone". "He has to be overthrown before we hold any elections," said Sikhala.

■ Last article p. 50854.

SOUTH AFRICA

Expulsion of Malema from ANC

The ruling African National Congress (ANC) on Feb. 29 expelled its controversial youth leader Julius Malema. The 30-year-old had 14 days to appeal against the decision. In November 2011, the ANC's ruling council suspended Malema from the party for five years for sowing divisions and bringing the ANC into disrepute by calling for the overthrow of the democratically elected government of neighbouring Botswana [see p. 50750]. He was allowed to keep his party posts pending an appeal. However, the ANC on Feb. 29 rejected his appeal on the grounds that he was unrepentant. "Comrade Malema is a repeat offender...he has shown no remorse; is not prepared to be disciplined by the ANC", said the party.

Concerns over health of Mandela

Former President Nelson Mandela (1994-99) returned home from hospital on Feb. 26 after an overnight stay to determine the cause of an abdominal complaint. The 93-year-old underwent exploratory keyhole surgery, a procedure that officials declared to have been successful and that had not indicated anything seriously wrong [for admission to hospital for respiratory infection in January 2011 see p. 50221].

■ Last articles pp. 50857; 50750.

MAURITIUS

Elections to Rodrigues legislature

The Organisation du Peuple Rodriguais (OPR) won more seats than any other party in elec-

tions to the unicameral Regional Assembly of the semi-autonomous Rodrigues Island held on Feb. 5. Official results published on the government's website showed that the OPR won a total of 11 seats, while the Mouvement Rodriguais (MR) secured eight. The leader of the OPR, Serge Clair, immediately ruled out the possibility of a legislative alliance with the Front Patriotique Rodriguais (FPR), led by Johnson Roussety, which was allocated two seats in the legislature.

Rodrigues, a dependency of Mauritius, was the smallest of the Mascarene Islands, located in the Indian Ocean.

■ Last articles pp. 50552; 50123; 50017; 49826.

IN BRIEF

CAMEROON: The *Washington Post* reported on Feb. 23 that 10 women had been arrested in the town of Ambam, some 300 km south of Yaounde (the capital), on suspicion of being homosexuals. The women were detained pending their trial before a court. At least three of the women were charged with practising homosexuality, which was a criminal act in Cameroon that was punishable by a prison sentence of between six months and five years.

CONGO: The *Guardian* of Feb. 7 reported a landmark French inquiry into the source of assets held in France by the presidential families of Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon following allegations by the non-governmental anti-graft organisation Transparency International (TI) that they had plundered state funds to build personal fortunes in that country [for background see pp. 50122-23 (Equatorial Guinea); 49190; 48237; 47969 (all Gabon)]. The clan of President Denis Sassou-Nguesso of Congo had 24 properties in France in their own name, 112 bank accounts, and various sports cars, while 70 per cent of Congolese lived on US\$1 a day.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE: The International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague, the Netherlands, on Feb. 23 announced that it was extending its investigation into suspected crimes against humanity committed in the aftermath of Côte d'Ivoire's disputed presidential elections of 2010 [for recent background see pp. 50857; 50751; 50804] to include alleged war crimes committed during the country's first civil war which began in 2002. In a statement, the ICC said that the violence which erupted in the aftermath of the disputed election of 2010 was linked to a protracted power struggle that stemmed from alleged war crimes committed during the first civil war. Former President Laurent Gbagbo had

Results of elections to Regional Assembly in Rodrigues

Party	Seats won	Seats allocated	Total
Organisation du Peuple de Rodrigues (OPR)	8	3	11
Mouvement Rodriguais (MR)	4	4	8
Front Patriotique Rodriguais (FPR)	0	2	2
Total	12	9	21

(Source: Mauritius government website.)

been transferred to the ICC in November 2011 after being accused of responsibility for a whole range of crimes [see p. 50751].

DJIBOUTI: The executive board of the IMF on Feb. 6 completed its fifth review of Djibouti's economic performance under the Fund's Extended Credit Facility (ECF) arrangement and approved the government's "request for an augmentation of access" to SDR 9.54 million (US\$1.00=0.6459 special drawing rights—SDRs—as at Feb. 3, 2012) "to meet the additional external financing needs created by an increase in global commodity prices" and a drought in the Horn of Africa. The IMF's decision enabled the immediate disbursement of SDR 6.246 million, bringing total disbursements under the programme to SDR 16.014 million. The ECF had replaced the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) as the Fund's main tool for medium-term financial support to low-income countries. The Fund had in September 2008 approved a three-year SDR 12.72 million PRGF for Djibouti [see p. 48766].

GUINEA-BISSAU: Carlos Gomes Junior resigned as prime minister on Feb. 10 and immediately named Adiatio Djaló Nandigna, minister in the presidency and council of ministers and minister of social communication, and parliamentary affairs, as his interim replacement. Gomes Junior had served as prime minister since December 2008 [see p. 48929]. He resigned in order to contest presidential elections that were scheduled for March 18, following the death in January of President Malam Bacai Sanha [see pp. 50856-57]. Four presidential candidates, including Gomes Junior, filed their presidential candidacies at the Supreme Court on Feb. 9.

LESOTHO: Prime Minister Bethuel Pakalitha Mosisili resigned as the leader of the ruling Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) on Feb. 29, admitting that his attempts to save the party "from falling apart" had been "in vain". The LCD had recently suffered a series of protracted internal disputes. Mosisili immediately formed a new party, the Democratic Congress, with the support of some 45 of the 120 members of the National Assembly (the lower chamber of the bicameral legislature). [For Assembly elections in 2007 see p. 47738.] The mass defections to the Democratic Congress allowed it to secure a narrow majority in the Assembly, whilst the LCD was relegated to opposition status. [For formation of LCD in June 1997 see p. 41670; for appointment of Mosisili as prime minister in May 1998 see p. 42253.]

MADAGASCAR: At least 16 people were killed after Madagascar was struck by Cyclone Giovanna on Feb. 14. Giovanna, a category-four cyclone, made landfall near the eastern port city of Toamasina, some 200 km north-east of Antananarivo (the capital), with winds of up to 194 km/h. More than 65 people were injured on Feb. 14-16, whilst some 11,000 others were left homeless, after the cyclone ripped-up trees and electricity pylons. Some estimates suggested that at least 60 per cent of homes in the town of Vatomanjary were damaged or destroyed by the cyclone.

MALAWI: Ralph Kasambara, a human rights lawyer and a former attorney general, was arrested on Feb. 13 and Feb. 15, after publicly criticising President Bingu wa Mutharika. In an interview published in the *Weekend Nation* newspaper on Feb. 11, Kasambara said that Mutharika had "defiled the conditions of [his] service", "disobeyed"

Malawi's legislature and judiciary, and wanted to be a "dictator". Kasambara was arrested on Feb. 13 after a scuffle erupted at the offices of his law firm in the city of Blantyre (the commercial capital). Kasambara claimed that the scuffle erupted after a group of "thugs" were hired by the government to attack his office with petrol bombs. He was arrested for a second occasion on Feb. 15, hours after he was released from custody, for alleged irregularities with his bail.

MAURITANIA: The independent Al-Akhbar news agency reported on Feb. 23 that the Mauritanian security forces had that day suppressed a protest by hundreds of students against the continued detention of six black students from Nouakchott University accused of burning public property during a recent strike. Higher and Secondary Education Minister Ahmed Ould Baya was quoted as saying that the leaders of the National Union of Mauritanian Students refused to negotiate with the authorities and were using violence as a means to secure their demands.

RWANDA: It was reported on Feb. 21 that Laurent Contini, French ambassador to Rwanda, had been recalled after the government in Kigali (the capital) refused to accept Hélène Le Gal, currently France's consul in Quebec, Canada, as his replacement. Le Gal was an ally of French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé, who had held the same post during the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Juppé had long been considered hostile to the current authorities in Kigali after he was one of a number of senior French officials accused in a Rwandan report in August 2008 of complicity in the genocide [see p. 48813].

ZAMBIA: The authorities issued an international arrest warrant against Henry Banda, the son of former President Rupiah Banda (2008-11), after he failed to attend a police interview in connection with corruption allegations against him, the BBC online news service reported on Feb. 1. There were suspicions that Henry Banda had taken refuge in Kenya, where the authorities confirmed that they had intensified investigations to establish "his exact location", amid fears that the former president's son was using multiple passports to help evade capture.

AMERICAS

UNITED STATES

Presentation of budget

President Barack Obama on Feb. 13 unveiled a US\$3,800 billion budget request for fiscal 2013 (beginning in October 2012), the final budget of his administration's first term. Speaking at a community college in northern Virginia, he outlined a blueprint that called for increased spending on infrastructure and higher taxes on the wealthy. The president stressed that "We don't begrudge success in America", but added that "We do expect everyone to do their fair share". The budget forecast a deficit for fiscal year 2012 of \$1,330 billion (8.5 per cent of GDP) that would fall in 2013 to \$901 billion (5.5 per cent), \$575 billion in 2018 (2.7 per cent), and reach \$704 billion in 2022 (2.8 per cent). In doing so it relied upon some optimistic projections, with economic growth forecast at 3 per cent in 2013 and close to 4 per cent per annum in 2014-17.

The budget contained many proposals that had been outlined by Obama in September 2011 [see p. 50638], including a number of ambitious spending projects that focused on infrastructure, education and the encouragement of domestic manufacturing. Simultaneously, however, in order to comply with the spending caps enshrined in the 2011 Budget Control Act (totalling almost \$1,000 billion over a 10-year period) [see p. 50593], the budget also contained cuts in numerous government programmes, with discretionary spending scheduled to fall from 8.7 per cent of GDP in 2011 to 5 per cent by 2022. Spending reductions included a 2.7 per cent cut in the treasury department, 1.2 per cent in the Environmental Protection Agency, and smaller cuts in the budgets of the departments of homeland security, justice and labour. The president also proposed cuts of \$278 billion in

non-health mandatory spending, including farm subsidies and federal employee retirement benefits, and more than \$360 billion in savings through reforms in Medicare, Medicaid, and other health programmes over 10 years. Under Pentagon spending plans already outlined by Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta, the defence department aimed to reduce its budget by \$487 billion over a decade.

Obama's budget also proposed raising \$1,500 billion over 10 years by increasing taxes on the wealthy and through abolishing corporate tax breaks, particularly in the oil and gas sector. In terms of individual taxation, Obama reiterated his longstanding support for allowing Bush-era tax breaks for families earning over \$250,000 a year to be allowed to expire at the end of 2012. The budget proposal also incorporated the "Buffett rule", an initiative designed to ensure that those making more than \$1 million per year should pay at least 30 per cent tax on their income [see p. 50858]. It also proposed a year-long extension of the payroll tax cut and unemployment insurance—an issue which had seen a bitter partisan struggle within Congress (the bicameral legislature) [see p. 50809 and below]—and the simplification of individual tax codes in a way that "eliminates inefficient and unfair tax breaks for millionaires... while making all tax breaks at least as good for the middle class as for the wealthy." Amongst the latter measures was the proposal to tax dividends as ordinary income rather than at the preferential current rate of 15 per cent.

The budget was bitterly attacked by Republicans who denounced its spending cuts as illusory and too small and who condemned its proposed tax rises. As such, the proposal stood no chance of being enacted by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives (the lower chamber). Nevertheless, the budget request represented an important statement by Obama in advance of his bid for re-election in November. In addition to containing a roadmap for long-term deficit reduction, it continued the

populist call for greater economic fairness which had been evident in his January State of the Union address [see p. 50858; for full text of speech see p. 50904-08].

Legislative approval of payroll tax and unemployment benefit extension

Shortly after the president had unveiled his budget request, the bitterly divided Congress reached an agreement on the extension of the payroll tax cut, which had been temporarily extended in December 2011 and was due to expire on March 1.

The 2 percentage point cut in the 6.2 per cent social security payroll tax rate—a temporary measure introduced to help stimulate the economy—was worth \$40 per week to the average US family. Anxious not to be outmanoeuvred on the issue, as had occurred in December 2011 [see p. 50809], the Republican leadership in Congress announced late on Feb. 13 that they would agree to its extension until the end of 2012 without demanding spending cuts to offset its \$100 billion cost. On the issue of extending unemployment benefits to the end of the year (estimated to cost some \$30 billion), however, they said that more discussion was required before a decision could be reached. President Obama characterised the Republican stance as “good news” but called for an extension of both measures, which he described as “make or break” for the middle class. Highlighting his emerging re-election campaign theme of support for the economically embattled middle class whilst insisting that the wealthy pay their share, Obama intensified the pressure upon the Republicans by calling for the public to phone, tweet and write letters to their legislators to emphasise the importance of the extension.

In the face of such overt public pressure in an election year, members of the House-Senate committee who were negotiating over the issue announced on Feb. 15 that they had agreed to an extension of both measures until 2012, with the cost of the extension of unemployment benefits being offset by the auction of broadcast spectrums and a requirement that public sector workers pay more into their pension funds. They also agreed to prevent a significant cut in reimbursements made to doctors who accepted Medicare patients. The measures were embodied into the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act (2012), which was passed on Feb. 17 by 293 votes to 132 in the House and 60-36 in the Senate (the upper chamber). The legislation was signed by Obama on Feb. 22.

Improvement in position of President Obama - Progress over ethics legislation and banking reparations

The extension in the payroll tax cut and unemployment benefits was seen as a significant achievement for President Obama. Further-

more, the president's position was bolstered by further evidence of economic recovery and returning confidence.

Data released in early February showed US economic growth of 2.8 per cent in the final quarter of 2011, the fastest rate of growth since mid-2010. Data also showed further evidence of a strong growth in employment during January, with 243,000 new jobs being added during the month, and unemployment falling to 12.8 million (8.3 per cent). Opinion polls in February showed Obama's approval ratings having climbed above 50 per cent, with growing numbers crediting him with having made progress on the economy.

The president also received a boost from progress made in two other areas of popular concern. The first of these was a prohibition on insider trading by legislators, a measure that the president had demanded in his State of the Union speech. After three days of impassioned debate, the Senate on Feb. 2 approved (by 96-3 votes) an ethics bill that would prohibit insider trading by members of Congress and require prompt disclosure of any stock transactions by legislators and many government officers. A similar bill, the Stop Trading on Congressional Knowledge Act, was approved by the House (by 417-2) on Feb. 9. The two bills then went to committee to be reconciled into a single piece of final legislation.

The other success came with the announcement on Feb. 9 that the government, together with 49 state attorneys general, had reached an unprecedented legal settlement—worth an estimated \$25-40 billion—with five of the country's largest banks. The settlement resolved allegations that the banks had improperly seized the homes of borrowers by systematically failing to abide by proper foreclosure processes. The settlement—which nine more banks were expected to sign up to—included more than \$5 billion in fines and at least \$20 billion in borrower relief in the form of lower payments and reduced balances. In addition to providing relief for distressed mortgage holders, the settlement was widely seen as a popular measure of retribution for the role of the banking sector in precipitating the 2008 global financial crisis.

Obama welcomed the deal, stating that “No compensation, no amount of money, no measure of justice is enough to make it right for a family who's had their piece of the American Dream wrongly taken from them. And no action, no matter how meaningful, is going to, by itself, entirely heal the housing market. But this settlement is a start.” Analysts suggested that the government intended to use the deal as a means to induce Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the giant government-sponsored mortgage lenders, to reduce the mortgage principal of borrowers.

Progress of campaign for Republican presidential nomination

The campaign to choose the Republican nominee who would contest the presidential elec-

tion against President Obama continued during February with contests in a number of states. Although former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney remained the frontrunner, he was unable to establish a decisive lead. He remained disliked by many on the right of the party and increasingly faced a strong challenge from former Senator Rick Santorum, the winner of the Iowa caucuses [see p. 50859], who appeared to have eclipsed former House speaker Newt Gingrich as the “anyone-but-Romney” candidate favoured by conservatives.

After struggling in January, Romney had finished the month strongly by using his vast personal fortune and the support of wealthy backers to outspend his rivals and fight an aggressive campaign to win decisively the Florida primary. Imbued with renewed momentum, Romney won the **Nevada** caucuses on Feb. 4 with 50 per cent of the vote (a victory which secured him 14 delegates to the Republican nominating convention), compared with 21 per cent (six delegates) for Gingrich; 19 per cent (five) for Ron Paul and 10 per cent (three) for Santorum. At a press conference following the contest Gingrich vowed to remain in the race and bitterly attacked Romney, who had once again hugely outspent him in the state, for running “the most dishonest, dirty campaign I've seen in American politics”.

However, Romney's attempt to portray himself as candidate-elect and to focus his efforts against Obama were abruptly derailed on Feb. 7 when Santorum won caucuses in Colorado and Minnesota and the primary in Missouri. (The exact distribution of delegates awarded as a result of the two caucuses, as in a number of other caucuses, was unclear as it would be determined by later state conventions; furthermore, with caucuses also scheduled in Missouri in March, the primary election did not determine the allocation of delegates in that state.) In **Colorado** Santorum won 40 per cent of the vote compared with 35 per cent for Romney, 13 per cent for Gingrich, and 12 per cent for Paul. In **Minnesota** Santorum won 45 per cent; Paul 27 per cent; Romney 17 per cent; and Gingrich 11 per cent. In **Missouri** the percentage of votes received by the candidates was: Santorum 55; Romney 25; and Paul 12 per cent. Gingrich did not appear on the ballot as he had missed the deadline for filing his candidature.

In the aftermath of his Feb. 7 victories Santorum's cash-strapped campaign received a significant boost in donations. Furthermore, with opinion polls showing Santorum running neck-and-neck with Romney, the mainstream media for the first time began entertaining the possibility of his securing the nomination. The result marked Santorum's eclipse of Gingrich as the right-wing alternative to Romney and forced the latter to turn his attention upon the former Pennsylvania senator whom he denounced as a “Washington insider”.

In a bid to improve his right-wing credentials Romney gave a speech on Feb. 10 in which he mentioned “conservative” or “conservatism” 24 times in 20 minutes. Although he drew some ridicule by stating that he had been a “severely conservative” governor of Massachusetts, he managed to win a

straw poll organised by the influential Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), with 38 per cent of the vote, defeating Santorum (31 per cent); Gingrich (15 per cent); and Paul (12 per cent). Campaigning hard in **Maine**, Romney also emerged as the winner of a week of caucuses held on Feb. 4-11, receiving 38 per cent of the vote, compared with 36 per cent for Paul, 18 per cent for Santorum and 6 per cent for Gingrich.

The month ended with a crucial primary in **Michigan** on Feb. 28, where Romney campaigned strongly to avoid the humiliation of losing in his birth state. Despite running second in the polls, he won the election narrowly with 41 per cent (16 delegates) compared with 38 per cent (14) for Santorum; 12 per cent (0) for Paul; and 7 per cent (0) for Gingrich. In a primary held in **Arizona** on the same day—with the state having had half of its delegates removed by the Republican National Committee for holding the contest earlier than permitted—Romney won more comfortably with 47 per cent (14 delegates) compared with 27 per cent (eight) for Santorum; 16 per cent (five) for Gingrich; and 9 per cent (two) for Paul. Caucuses held in **Wyoming** on Feb. 11-29 also resulted in a victory for Romney with 39 per cent of the vote, compared with 32 per cent for Santorum, 21 per cent for Paul, and 8 per cent for Paul.

Legal ruling on anti-abortion legislation

A US federal district court judge ruled on Feb. 6 that he was obliged to enforce a January ruling by a higher court that had overturned a temporary ban on implementing legislation passed in Texas that was designed to discourage women from undertaking abortions. The legislation, enacted in 2011, required abortion providers to perform an ultrasound scan on pregnant women, show and describe the image to them, and play sounds of the foetal heartbeat.

A number of US states had passed similar legislation, and although women were entitled to decline to view the ultrasound images, in the cases of Texas, Oklahoma and North Carolina the law required women to listen to the provider's verbal description of the scan. In the case of Oklahoma and North Carolina, however, the laws were not being enforced pending legal challenges. Similar legislation was approved by the Virginia legislature on Feb. 28 but a provision within it requiring women to have an invasive vaginal ultrasound scan was dropped after a national furore in which opponents had characterised the requirement as a form of "state rape".

Issues concerning same-sex marriage

A federal appeals court in California on Feb. 7 ruled that Proposition 8—a referendum passed by the electorate in November 2008 which amended the state's constitution to prohibit gay marriage [see p. 48874]—was unconstitutional in that it violated the guarantee of equal protection provided by the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision meant that the case would

almost certainly go to the Supreme Court for final adjudication.

Governor Christine Gregoire on Feb. 13 signed legislation whereby Washington became the country's seventh state (in addition to the District of Columbia) to legalise same-sex marriage. Opponents of the measure immediately filed a referendum challenge seeking to overturn the new law.

IN BRIEF

The Pentagon on Feb. 9 announced that **female service personnel would be formally permitted to serve in a number of roles near the frontline** but would remain prohibited from serving in traditional combat roles. The decision gave formal recognition to what was already common practice—with more than 140 women from the US military having died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—although women in such roles had been hitherto categorised technically as temporary "attachments" to frontline battalions.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called "**underpants bomber**", was on Feb. 16 sentenced by a US district court in Detroit to four consecutive terms of life imprisonment plus 50 years. Abdulmutallab had pleaded guilty in October 2011 to attempting to blow up an airliner in December 2009 [see pp. 50697; 49564].

An unemployed Moroccan man, Amine El Khalifi, was arrested in Washington, DC on Feb. 17 and **charged with planning a suicide attack upon the US Capitol**. El Khalifi had been under surveillance for more than a year and had been given fake explosives by FBI agents posing as al-Qaida operatives.

The **whistleblowing website WikiLeaks** announced on Feb. 27 that it had begun to publish more than 5 million leaked emails from Stratfor, a huge private intelligence and risk consultancy firm that had been frequently described as the "shadow CIA".

Olympia Snowe, a three-term Republican Senator from Maine, announced on Feb. 28 that she would not seek re-election in November. After 33 years in the legislature (16 in the House prior to entering the Senate) Snowe said that her unexpected decision had been motivated by the excessive partisanship of Congress which had made it a dispiriting environment.

A judge in Portugal on Feb. 29 rejected a US extradition request for **George Wright**, a US black activist who had been captured in September 2011 after 39 years on the run [see pp. 50755; 50640].

A "**high value**" inmate of the **Guantanamo Bay prison camp**, Majid Khan, who had been arrested in March 2003, appeared before a military commission on Feb. 29 and pleaded guilty to murder and terrorism charges. His appearance followed a plea bargain whereby he was promised a substantially reduced sentence in return for pleading guilty, testifying against other detainees, and waiving his rights to sue over the terms of his imprisonment and the torture used in his interrogation.

At least nine people were killed in a **series of tornadoes** which struck areas of Illinois and Kansas on Feb. 29, causing significant local damage.

■ Last article pp. 50857-59.

CANADA

Interim report on Indian residential school system

In an interim report published on Feb. 24, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC) said that there were "difficult truths" to confront concerning Canada's former Indian residential school system, in which some 150,000 aboriginal children were forcibly sent to state-funded and Christian-run schools between the late 19th century and the late 1970s [for formal apology see p. 48628]. The TRCC also described the schools as an "assault on Aboriginal children, families, self-governing Aboriginal nations and culture".

Ministerial statement on information secured through torture

In the House of Commons (the lower chamber of Parliament, the bicameral legislature) on Feb. 7, Public Safety Minister Vic Toews said that the Canadian Intelligence Service (CSIS) could in exceptional circumstances use information secured by another country through torture if it would help save Canadian lives or protect Canadian property. Responding to a question about a directive Toews issued to the CSIS in 2010, a copy of which was obtained under freedom of information legislation, the minister said that "information obtained by torture is always discounted, but the problem is, can one safely ignore it if Canadian lives and property are at stake"?

Visit by prime minister to China

Prime Minister Stephen Harper led a Canadian delegation on a visit to China on Feb. 7-10. During a meeting in Beijing with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on Feb. 7, the two leaders discussed bilateral agreements in the energy and investment sectors and plans for a possible bilateral free trade agreement (FTA). Officials also announced on Feb. 9 that Canada would allow the sale of uranium to China for the purpose of energy generation, whilst several Canadian and Chinese businesses in the aviation, telecommunications, and finance sectors signed agreements worth an estimated US\$3 billion.

New lieutenant governor of Nova Scotia province

Prime Minister Harper on Feb. 16 announced the appointment of Brig.-Gen. John James Grant as the new lieutenant governor of Nova

Scotia province. Harper said that Grant had "established himself as an exemplary citizen in Nova Scotia - one who is devoted to his community, his province, and his country".

■ Last article pp. 50812-13.

MEXICO

Drug gang-related violence

Jose Antonio Torres Marrufo, the suspected leader of the Gente Nueva gang, the armed wing of the Sinaloa drug cartel, was arrested in Leon, in the central state of Guanajuato, on Feb. 4. Public prosecutors accused Torres Marrufo of a series of crimes, including ordering an attack in 2009 against patients at a drug and alcohol-addiction rehabilitation clinic in Ciudad Juarez, in which 18 people were killed. Prosecutors also alleged that Torres Maffufo was a senior member of the Sinaloa cartel and was involved in the murders of rival gang members from the Juarez drug cartel.

In another blow to the Sinaloa cartel, police officials announced on Feb. 14 that Jaime Herrera (also known as "The Old Man") had been arrested in the city of Culiacan, Sinaloa state, along with an alleged accomplice. The authorities alleged that Herrera was one of the leading producers of the illegal synthetic drug, methamphetamine, for the Sinaloa drug cartel run by Mexico's most-wanted drug trafficker, the fugitive Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman. Earlier, on Feb. 8, the authorities announced the seizure of 15 tonnes of pure methamphetamine, the largest known haul of the drug in Mexico, on a ranch on the outskirts of the city of Guadalajara, Jalisco state. The authorities also said that the ranch housed a laboratory that was capable of producing the seized drugs.

Marines on Feb. 7 discovered 15 bodies in two graves on ranches in Acayucan, in Veracruz state, about 540 km south-east of Mexico City (the capital). The bodies were thought to be the remains of victims of the Zetas drug gang, which was known to operate in the area. Officials were led to the graves by Zetas gang member Juan Francisco Alvarado Martagon (also known as "The Chicken H"), shortly after he was arrested at a military checkpoint.

Security officials announced that three men were killed by a mob of local residents who intervened to prevent an apparent attempt to kidnap a group of youths in the town of Chalco, near Mexico City, the BBC online news service reported on Feb. 11. The three victims were allegedly beaten, doused in petrol, and set alight by a group of local citizens armed with bars, clubs, and bottles. Twenty-three people were arrested in connection with the lynching. The BBC online news service on Feb. 22 reported that five taxi-drivers were shot dead by unknown assailants in the city of Monterrey. It was thought that the attack, at a taxi-rank in the city, was connected to criminal gangs involved in the extortion of money from local businesses.

Nuevo Leon state governor Rodrigo Medina on Feb. 20 said that the escape by 30 inmates (all of whom were linked to the Zetas drug cartel) from the high-

security Apodaca prison, near Monterrey, and the simultaneous killing of 44 rival inmates from the Gulf drugs cartel on Feb. 19 was carried out with the complicity of prison guards. The escaped inmates absconded during a riot, which the authorities said was staged as part of an elaborate escape plan. The prison's director and other senior officials, along with 18 prison guards, were dismissed from their posts and placed under investigation by the authorities.

IN BRIEF

The Partido Nueva Alianza (Panal) on Feb. 16 nominated Gabriel Quadri as its candidate in **presidential elections** scheduled for October.

The governments of Mexico and the USA on Feb. 20 signed an agreement involving plans to **jointly develop oil and gas reserves in waters straddling the US-Mexico maritime borders** in the Gulf of Mexico.

■ Last article p. 50860.

GUATEMALA

Tax reforms

Congress (the unicameral legislature) on Feb. 16 approved a series of tax reforms that were expected to increase revenues by some US\$580 million over four years, the equivalent of around 13 per cent of Guatemala's GDP.

The reforms introduced a 5 per cent dividend distribution tax to replace a 3 per cent stamp duty; reduced the corporate tax rate from 31 per cent to 25 per cent by 2014; increased the tax rate on some business profits; increased existing vehicle tax, as well as creating a new tax on vehicles; introduced a new customs law; and banned the import of used vehicles aged more than seven years, according to the *Latin America Weekly Report* of Feb. 23.

Approval of extradition of drug trafficker

A court on Feb. 28 approved the extradition to the USA of Juan "Chamale" Ortiz Lopez, who was accused of being one of Guatemala's main international drug traffickers. Ortiz, who was arrested in March 2011, was wanted by a federal court in the US state of Miami on suspicion of smuggling cocaine into the USA.

■ Last article p. 50860.

HONDURAS

Prison fire

At least 359 inmates died in a fire at a prison in the city of Comayagua, some 80 km north-west of Tegucigalpa (the capital), on Feb. 14-15. More than 850 prisoners managed to escape to

safety during the blaze, with some survivors claiming that prison guards left inmates to die trapped inside their cells and shot at others when they tried to escape.

The director of police intelligence, Elder Madrid, claimed that the fire was set during a fight between inmates over a mattress. However, victims' relatives blamed overcrowding, negligence by the guards, and a "failed" justice system for the disaster.

Approval of extradition legislation

Congress (the unicameral legislature) on Feb. 1 approved legislation allowing the extradition of citizens charged overseas with offences relating to drug trafficking, terrorism and organised crime. The legislation, which came into effect immediately, allowed Honduras to sign extradition treaties with other countries such as the USA, which had been seeking the amendments.

■ Last article p. 50860.

PANAMA

Protests against mining and hydroelectric developments

Two indigenous Ngöbe-Buglé citizens were killed and dozens more were injured on Feb. 5-6 during a police crackdown on protests in the San Felix district of Chiriquí province against mining and hydroelectric development projects. Several thousand indigenous Ngöbe-Buglé citizens had launched a series of protests on Jan. 30, including a blockade of the Inter-American Highway in San Felix, to demand that the government approve legislation annulling several mining and hydroelectric development contracts on their territory.

The victims (Jerónimo Rodríguez Tugri and Mauricio Méndez) died on Feb. 5 and Feb. 6 respectively, after being shot by police officers. The crackdown triggered widespread condemnation from civil society groups, international human rights activists, and other indigenous communities in Panama.

Hospitalisation of Noriega

Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega Morena, 77, the former dictator of Panama (1983-89), was transferred on Feb. 5 from the El Renacer prison to the Hospital Santo Tomas in Panama City (the capital) after suffering high blood pressure and a possible stroke. The former dictator, who was serving a 20-year prison sentence for the murder of government opponents during his tenure, was conscious but "put under observation in intensive care for 24 hours", according to Health Minister Franklin Vergara. [For return of Noriega to Panama see p. 50815.]

■ Last article p. 50861.

COLOMBIA

Abandonment of kidnapping by FARC

In a statement released by the Sweden-based Annco news agency on Feb. 26, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Colombia's largest leftist guerrilla organisation, announced that it would immediately "abandon the practice" of kidnapping for ransom. In the statement, the FARC also pledged to release six police officers and four members of the military, all of whom the rebels had been holding hostage for more than 10 years. The announcement was widely regarded as a clear indication that the rebels were seeking formal peace negotiations. President Juan Manuel Santos responded to the statement by saying that his government "valued" the announcement, which he described as an "important and necessary step in the right direction", but also warned that the rebels' pledge was "not enough".

Earlier, on Feb. 22, military officials said that six rebels were killed during two separate gun battles in the town of Tulua, some 350 km west of Bogota (the capital), and in the Vigia del Fuerte region. The BBC online news service reported on Feb. 11 that the security forces seized some three tonnes of explosives and arms which the FARC rebels had been storing at a remote camp near the river Yari, in southern Colombia. The seizure included some 3,200 sticks of explosives, landmines, and grenades.

The authorities on Feb. 27 asked Interpol to issue an international arrest warrant against Luis Carlos Restrepo, who served as Colombia's peace commissioner from 2002 until 2009, after he failed to attend a court hearing in connection with an investigation into allegations that he falsely staged the demobilisation of FARC rebels. Prosecutors alleged that citizens from poor areas of Bogota were recruited in 2006 to pose as rebels who were handing themselves in to the authorities. Officials suspected that Restrepo had fled Colombia.

Arrest of AUC commanders in Venezuela

Officials in Venezuela and Colombia announced on Feb. 6 that the authorities in the central Venezuelan state of Anzoategui had arrested Hector German Buitrago (also known as "Martin Llanos") and his brother Nelson Buitrago Parada, former commanders of the United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), a now-demobilised paramilitary organisation. Both men were extradited to Colombia, where they were wanted on multiple counts of murder, terrorism, kidnapping, and extortion, on Feb. 9. In another development affecting the AUC, public prosecutors opened a preliminary investigation into allegations that Victor Carranza, a prominent and wealthy diamond dealer, helped finance Colombian paramilitary groups such as the AUC in the 1990s.

■ Last article p. 50861.

ECUADOR

Media developments

President Rafael Correa on Feb. 27 pardoned the editor and three executives of the *El Universo* newspaper, after it published an editorial in which the president was described as a "dictator" [for background see pp. 50557; 50598].

The pardon followed a Supreme Court ruling on Feb. 16 upholding prison sentences and libel damages handed down to the executives in a lower court in July 2011 [see p. 50557].

In another development concerning the media, journalists Juan Carlos Calderon and Christian Zurita were in early February each fined around US\$1 million after being convicted of defamation for alleging in a book (entitled *The Big Brother*) that Correa knew government road construction contracts, worth around US\$600 million, had been awarded to companies operated by his brother, Fabricio Correa. The judge ruled that the allegations damaged the president's "honour, dignity, good name [and] professional prestige".

Foreign investment agreements in oil sector

Minister for Non-Renewable Natural Resources Wilson Pastor announced on Jan. 31 that Petroecuador, the state-owned energy company, and foreign energy companies had signed a series of foreign investment agreements in the oil sector worth some US\$1.7 billion, according to the *Latin America Weekly Report* of Feb. 9.

Pastor described the agreements, with French-US company Schlumberger and Argentina's Tecpetrol, as the "biggest foreign investment in this history of Ecuador's oil sector". The agreements were designed to boost production in Ecuador's two main oil fields, Shushufindi and Libertador, from 59,000 barrels per day (bpd) to between 70,000 and 90,000 bpd within two years.

■ Last article p. 50861.

PERU

Developments concerning Shining Path

The security forces captured two senior commanders from the formerly Maoist Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) rebel group in February.

Florindo Eleuterio Flores-Hala (also known as "Comrade Artemio"), 50, the leader of the Shining Path faction operating in the Upper Huallaga region, was captured following a gunfight with the security forces in the village of Puerto Pizana on Feb. 9. He was subsequently charged with a series of offences, including terrorism and drug trafficking, and transferred to a maximum security prison, pending the start of his trial. President Ollanta Humala responded to the capture of Flores-Hala by declaring that the guerrilla group was "no longer a threat".

The security forces in Churcampa province, Huanavelica region, also detained Albino Toscano Taípe (also known as "Tucán"), the second most senior rebel in the Shining Path faction that operated in the Vrae area, the *Latin America Weekly Report* noted on Feb. 16.

At least 1,000 citizens protesting against mining development projects in northern Peru arrived in Lima (the capital) on Feb. 9, after marching some 800 km from the north-western Cajamarca province. The protesters were demonstrating against the construction of a US\$4.8 billion open-cast gold mine in Cajamarca, owned by the US-based multinational mining company Newmont Mining Corporation [see pp. 50811; 50758].

■ Last article pp. 50860-61.

BOLIVIA

Approval of referendum on plans for controversial road

Legislators in the Plurinational Legislative Assembly (also known as the National Congress, the bicameral legislature) on Feb. 9 approved a bill authorising the holding of a non-binding referendum for citizens of the Isiboro Sécure (Tipnis) national park, in Bolivia's Amazon rainforest, on the question of plans to build a new 300 km road through the area. Plans for the proposed road had been scrapped in October 2011 but a public demonstration of support for the project in January by the indigenous group Consejo Nacional Indígena del Sur (CONISUR) appeared to have revived the possibility of the government-supported plans being implemented. The referendum was scheduled to be held within 120 days.

Severe flooding

The government on Feb. 22 declared a state of emergency, after severe flooding affected more than 9,000 families in nine departments, most notably in La Paz (the administrative capital), Cochabamba, Beni, and Pando. The flooding caused severe damage to roads and other public infrastructure, as well as inundating large swathes of farmland with water. It was feared that several villages were destroyed in Pando department, where the river Acre burst its banks.

■ Last article pp. 50861-62.

ARGENTINA

Heightened tensions with UK over Falkland (Malvinas) Islands

Protracted tensions between Argentina and the UK over the disputed Falkland (Malvinas) Is-

lands were heightened again in February [for recent background see pp. 50862; 50814 (Americas); 50812; 50501-02]. President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on Feb. 26 stated that "the defence" of Argentina's natural resources was key to resolving the sovereignty dispute, an apparent reference to recent drilling for oil and gas by a UK company in waters near the disputed archipelago [see pp. 49674-75].

Industry Minister Debora Giorgi on Feb. 28 urged at least 20 Argentine business leaders to replace British imports with those from countries that respected Argentina's sovereignty claims over the disputed archipelago. A day earlier, two British-linked cruise ships that had visited the Falklands were denied authority to dock at a port in Argentina's Tierra del Fuego province.

Train crash at Buenos Aires station

A commuter train carrying more than 800 passengers during the morning rush hour on Feb. 22 crashed as it reached Once station in Buenos Aires (the capital). At least 49 people were killed and more than 600 others were injured when the train, which was travelling at an estimated 26 kph, crashed into the track's buffers on arrival. An investigation into the cause of the tragedy, widely presumed to be brake failure, was launched immediately.

Protests against mining exploration project

The Osisko mining corporation, a Canada-headquartered multinational mining company, on Jan. 30 temporarily suspended its Famatina exploration project, near the towns of Famatina and Chilecito, La Rioja province, the BBC online news service reported on Feb. 1. The suspension followed a series of protests against the project by citizens living in the affected areas, with activists saying that the exploration would damage the environment. In a press release issued on Jan. 30, Osisko officials pointed out that the project was "exploratory" and there was "no current plan, design or intent for any mining operations".

■ Last article pp. 50862-63.

BRAZIL

Crime wave in Bahia state - Murder of newspaper editor

Police officers in the north-eastern state of Bahia on Feb. 11 agreed to end an 11-day strike, which had unleashed a crime wave of looting, assaults, and vandalism and resulted in the death of at least 150 people. More than 6,000 police officers in Bahia state (about 20

per cent of the entire state force) began the walkout on Jan. 31 to demand increased pay. President Dilma Rousseff responded to the strike by dispatching some 3,000 troops to Bahia to restore order.

A strike by the civil police in the city of Rio de Janeiro was also ended on Feb. 11, less than one week before the city was scheduled to host its annual five-day carnival which was expected to attract more than 850,000 tourists.

Newspaper editor and renowned anti-corruption activist Paulo Rodrigues, 51, was shot dead whilst driving in the town of Ponta Pora, Mato Grosso do Sul state, on Feb. 12. Local police officials revealed on Feb. 13 that Rodrigues was shot five times by two gunmen as they approached the editor's car on a motorcycle.

Privatisation of airports — New president of state-owned energy company

The government raised an estimated US\$14 billion on Feb. 6 after the state-owned Brazilian Agencia Nacional de Aviacao Civil (ANAC) oversaw an auction for contracts to operate three of Brazil's busiest airports (in the cities of Sao Paulo, Brasilia, and Campinas).

The contracts required the successful bidders to become the majority shareholder in a joint venture with state-owned Empresa Brasileira de Infraestrutura Aeroportuaria (Infraero). The proposed joint ventures were required to maintain, operate, and expand the airports, ahead of FIFA's 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, both of which were scheduled to be hosted in Brazil.

Maria das Gracias Silva Foster on Feb. 13 became the first woman to head state-owned energy company Petrobras. During a speech delivered following her inauguration, Silva Foster pledged to continue the leadership style of her predecessor, Sergio Gabrielli.

■ Last article pp. 50812-13.

VENEZUELA

Reform of legislation on organised crime and terrorism financing

Legislators in the National Assembly (the unicameral legislature) on Jan. 31 approved reforms to "the Organic Law Against Organised Crime and Terrorism Financing", the Venezuela-based AVN news agency reported on Feb. 1. The original legislation was designed to "prevent, investigate, prosecute, characterise, and punish" acts of organised crime and the financing of terrorism, according to Andres Eloy Mendez, a legislator from the ruling Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV),

who was cited in the agency's report. The reforms added 25 new articles to the existing legislation, and amended 30 others, including a provision imposing longer prison sentences on persons convicted of organised crime or the financing of terrorism.

New attorney general

President Hugo Chávez Frías on Jan. 31 appointed Cilia Flores as the attorney general, the AVN news agency reported on Feb. 1. Flores was appointed to replace Carlos Escarra, who died in January after suffering a heart attack [see p. 50863].

In a separate development, Vice President Elias Jaua announced on Feb. 28 that Chávez was in "good physical condition" and "recovering" from surgery in Cuba to remove a lesion from his pelvis. During 2011, Chávez had spent time in Cuba undergoing chemotherapy for cancer [see pp. 50644; 50598].

Selection of opposition presidential candidate

The opposition Coalition for Democratic Unity's (MUD) primary elections on Feb. 12 were won by Henrique Capriles Radonski, the former governor of Miranda state [see p. 50644]. Capriles secured over 1.9 million votes, more than twice the number of votes garnered by his closest rival, the governor of Zulia, Pablo Pérez.

■ Last article p. 50863.

AMERICAS

UN report on drug trafficking

The *Annual Report and Precursors Report for 2011* of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), an independent and quasi-judicial body monitoring the implementation of UN drug control conventions, was published on Feb. 28. In the report, the INCB said that the Central America and Caribbean regions continued "to be used as a major transit area for the trafficking of drugs from South America to North America", adding that drug trafficking organisations had "increased their operations in the region" and thus posed "a serious threat to the security of the region", most notably in Central America.

Resignation of chief justice of Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court

The chief justice of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court, Hugh Anthony Rawlins, an-

nounced that he was resigning from his post with effect from Aug. 1, the Caribbean Media Corporation news agency reported on Feb. 22. The chairman of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), St Lucia's Prime Minister Kenny Anthony, announced that a committee had been activated to pick Rawlins's successor. Rawlins had held the post since May 2008, following the retirement of Sir Dennis Byron.

■ Last article pp. 50760-61.

IN BRIEF

BELIZE: Prime Minister Dean Barrow announced that legislative elections to the House of Representatives (the lower chamber of the National Assembly, the bicameral legislature) would be held on March 7, some eleven months before an election was constitutionally due, the *Latin America Weekly Report* noted on Feb. 9 [for results of previous legislative elections in February 2008 see p. 48401]. Making the announcement, on national radio and television, Barrow said that the government would save money by holding the election on March 7, the date on which municipal elections were scheduled.

CHILE: The country reopened its main border crossing with Peru on Feb. 22, two days after closing it because more than 100 landmines were displaced by torrential rain and washed into the vicinity of a road linking Arica in Chile and Tacna in Peru. The border area was closed for two days whilst Chilean bomb disposal officers detonated several anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, relics from the 1970s (when bilateral diplomatic tensions ran high between the two countries) in controlled explosions. The tensions were widely regarded as a legacy of the War of the Pacific (1879-83), during which Chile took swathes of Peruvian territory.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: The *Latin America Weekly Report* of Feb. 16 noted that the government had failed to reach an agreement with the IMF on extending the Dominican Republic's 28-month standby credit agreement beyond Feb. 28 [for details of agreement see p. 49515]. Under the terms of the agreement, the government had been required to increase electricity tariffs by 18 per cent. However, the newsletter said that Economy Minister Temístocles Montás rejected the requirement, saying that it would be an unacceptable political risk to impose the increase ahead of presidential elections scheduled for May. Some US\$510 million of the standby credit agreement, from a total of US\$1.7 billion, remained undisbursed.

GRENADA: Former Prime Minister George Brizan, 69, died on Feb. 18 following a long battle against diabetes. Brizan became prime minister in February 1995 [see p. 40402], following the resignation of Nicholas Braithwaite [ibid.], but his National Democratic Congress (NDC) was defeated in legislative elections to the National Assembly (the unicameral legislature) held in June 1995 [see p. 40592]. The government declared two days of national mourning for Brizan, whose body was scheduled to be buried following a state funeral on March 16.

HAITI: Prime Minister Garry Conille resigned from his post on Feb. 25, some four months after he was inaugurated [see p. 50701] and following political tensions with President Michel Martelly. The tensions surfaced over Conille's plans to audit contracts relating to Haiti's reconstruction, following the dev-

astating earthquake that struck the island in January 2010 [49625], and legislative investigations into allegations that some government ministers held dual citizenship, which was illegal under Haitian law. Despite his resignation, Conille was required by law to remain in the post until a successor assumed office.

ASIA-PACIFIC

MALDIVES

Resignation of President Nasheed

President Mohamed Nasheed on Feb. 7 resigned in the face of a mutiny by police following weeks of increasingly violent street protests against the government by the opposition. In his resignation broadcast Nasheed said that he was stepping down because the alternative would have been the use of the military to stay in power. The police mutineers had set fire to an office of Nasheed's ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and seized control of the state broadcasting service. Nasheed was replaced by Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik, the vice president, who formed a "national unity" cabinet between Feb. 8 and Feb. 19.

The demonstrations organised by the opposition were in protest against the arrest on Jan. 17 by the military of Abdulla Mohamed, chief justice of the criminal court [see pp. 50875-76]. The arrest had been ordered by Nasheed, who considered that Mohamed was abusing his position and bringing the judiciary into disrepute by preventing the prosecution of corruption cases against allies of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, whom Nasheed defeated in the Maldives' first democratic presidential election in October 2008, ending 30 years of autocratic rule [see pp. 48825-26]. Nasheed also said that Mohamed and 200 other judges had been illegally sworn in for life terms under Gayoom.

In interviews with journalists given hours after he stepped down Nasheed claimed that his resignation was not voluntary but "at gunpoint" under pressure from the police and elements of the military. He also said that Waheed was complicit in what was effectively a coup on behalf of Gayoom's allies. Thousands of Nasheed's supporters on Feb. 8 took to the streets in Male (the capital), Addu, the Maldives' second largest city (on Addu island) and on other atolls. In clashes with the police about 50 demonstrators were seriously injured and required hospital treatment; at least 90 were arrested and 18 police stations were set on fire. As unrest continued on Feb. 9 the criminal court issued an arrest warrant for Nasheed, although the charges against him were not disclosed.

At a rally in Male on Feb. 10 Nasheed called for new legislative elections to be held within two months, a proposal initially dismissed by Waheed on the grounds that the current envi-

ronment was not conducive to elections. However, on Feb. 16 Waheed conceded that elections scheduled for late 2013 could be brought forward, but only when conditions were right. Although the stand-off between the MDP and the security forces became calmer in Male by the end of the month, it was reported on Feb. 27 that dozens of MDP supporters, many of them women, were injured on the night of Feb. 26-27 in a police and army crackdown on the streets of Addu.

It was reported by the *International Herald Tribune* on Feb. 14 that on Feb. 7 a group of suspected Islamic extremists had smashed some 30 Buddhist statues in the National Museum, relics of the country's pre-Islamic heritage.

International reaction

After his resignation Nasheed appealed for intervention by the international community to "maintain the peace" and rescue the country's fragile democracy. The Indian government initially appeared to have no qualms over the legitimacy of the new government, but later said that it favoured early elections. China and Japan were broadly supportive of Waheed's government. Nasheed had been seen by Western governments as a standard bearer for democracy and human rights. He had also become internationally prominent as a campaigner on the issue of climate change, in which role he had been critical both of Western industrialised countries and the major developing economies for failing to adopt radical measures to combat global warming.

A team of UN officials led by Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, assistant secretary general for political affairs, arrived on Feb. 5 in response to an appeal by Nasheed for assistance in the political crisis, on the issue of reform of the judiciary. At the end of his visit on Feb. 13 Fernandez-Taranco urged all sides to step back from a "descent into violence" and recommended the formation of a national unity government. He said that he had no mandate to determine the legality of Nasheed's fall from power, saying that this was a matter for Maldivians to decide. The USA on Feb. 11 sent Robert Blake, assistant secretary of state for south Asia, to the Maldives in an attempt to calm the situation. In a two-day visit Blake held talks with Waheed, Nasheed and other political leaders, endorsing the proposal for a national unity government and saying that he doubted that free and fair elections

New cabinet of Maldives

Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik President
Mohamed Waheed Deen Vice President
Mohamed Jameel Ahmed Home Affairs
Col (retd) Mohamed Naseem Defence; National Security
Ahmed Jamsheed Mohamed Health and Family
Asim Ahmed Education
Ahmed Mohamed Economic Development
Ahmed Shamheed Transport and Communication
Mohamed Hussain Sharif Human Resources; Youth and Sports
Ahmed Adheeb Abdul Gafoor Tourism, Arts and Culture
Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed Islamic Affairs
Mohamed Muiz Housing and Environment
Dhunya Maumoon (f) Minister of State for Foreign Affairs
Aishath Ashima Shakooru (f) Attorney General

All new appointments.
 Women are denoted by (f).

could be held in the current situation. The US state department subsequently issued a clarifying statement to the effect that it had not yet recognised the Waheed government.

The Commonwealth ministerial action group (CMAG) on Feb. 12 decided to send a delegation to the Maldives to investigate the transfer of power. Consisting of the foreign ministers of Trinidad and Tobago, Australia and Bangladesh, the team visited the Maldives on Feb. 17-19, reporting back to CMAG. In a statement on Feb. 23 CMAG urged the holding of elections before the end of 2012 and suspended the Maldives from the nine-member CMAG, which monitored violations of Commonwealth values and principles. The UK and Germany on Feb. 13 called for an independent inquiry into the transfer of power. President Waheed on Feb. 22 created by presidential decree a commission of national inquiry into the events from Jan. 14 to Feb. 8 that resulted in a change of government. Two of the commission's three members were former ministers in the government of former President Gayoom.

Formation of new government

President Waheed, who said that he wanted to preserve stability and constitutional democracy, invited all parties to join a government of national unity. The MDP declined the invitation, regarding the government as illegitimate. The ministers appointed by the end of the month included members of the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP), Gayoom's recently established Progressive Party of the Maldives (PPM), the Dhivehi Qaumi Party (DQP), the Jumhoory Party (JP) and the conservative Islamist Adhaalath Party (Justice Party). Amongst the ministers were several former

ministers or officials of Gayoom's government, including former Justice Minister Mohamed Jameel Ahmed. Gayoom's daughter Dhunya Maumoon was appointed minister of state for foreign affairs. [For 2008 Nasheed cabinet see p. 48884.]

■ Last article pp. 50875-76.

SRI LANKA

Developments concerning end of war against LTTE

In a statement on Feb. 15 the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) announced that it would conduct an investigation into allegations that its troops caused significant civilian casualties and committed war crimes in the last phase of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which ended with the crushing of LTTE forces in May 2009 [see pp. 49198-201]. The statement said that SLA commander Lt-Gen. Jagath Jayasuriya had appointed a five-member panel to examine the report of the government-appointed Commission on Lessons Learned and Reconciliation (CLLR), which was published in December 2011 and a television documentary made by the UK Channel 4 shown in June 2011 that purported to show footage of atrocities perpetrated by SLA soldiers, including the execution of naked prisoners [see pp. 50820; 50507]. The government had consistently dismissed the Channel 4 film as faked footage. The CLLR report did recognise that civilians had been killed, possibly unintentionally, by SLA shelling.

However, in November 2011 the government had for the first time admitted that some civilians may have been killed by individual soldiers who were "out of control", whilst continuing to deny that any policy existed to target civilians [see p. 50763]. It was reported on Feb. 24 that a report compiled by the government's department of census and statistics estimated that in the first five months of 2009 some 9,000 people died in the northern war zone that was the final stronghold of the LTTE. Of these 7,400 were said to have died from undefined or "other causes", implying that they were victims of the fighting. Some 2,600 other people were said to have gone missing. Although it was unclear whether the death toll included LTTE fighters in addition to civilians, the total did roughly match early UN estimates of casualties. However, a report of an expert panel commissioned by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, published in April 2011, concluded that as many as 40,000 civilians may have been killed [see p. 50401].

The USA on Feb. 13 announced that it would support a resolution to be tabled in March at a session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), which commenced on Feb. 27, urging the Sri Lankan government to hold an inquiry into allegations of war crimes by its own forces.

■ Last article p. 50875.

INDIA

Ruling by Supreme Court on telecoms scandal

The Supreme Court on Feb. 2 ordered the government to cancel 122 telecommunications licences awarded in the 2008 round of second-generation (2G) mobile telephone licences allocations, and ordered that the licences should be put up for open auction by June 2. The then Communications and Information Technology Minister A. Raja (Andimuthu Raja), who was currently on trial on corruption charges, had in 2008 awarded the licences on a "first-come-first-served" basis, costing the state up to US\$40 billion in revenues, according to the government's chief auditing body [see p. 50762]. The Supreme Court noted numerous irregularities in the 2008 licensing process, which it described as "stage-managed". The court also ordered an investigation of Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, who was finance minister in 2008, to determine whether he shared any responsibility for the scandal. [For January Supreme Court ruling on Raja see p. 50874.]

Analysts said that the initial effect on India's fast-growing mobile telephone market would be chaotic, because many of the licences in question had subsequently changed hands through mergers. In the long term the licences were likely to be concentrated amongst fewer, larger operators. Current Communications and Information Technology Minister Kapil Sibal on Feb. 12 announced a series of proposed changes of policy in the telecoms sector, including the simplification of rules on mergers and acquisitions and the shortening of licences from 20 years to 10 years. There were currently 15 mobile telephone operators and 793 million subscribers.

Tensions with Italy over maritime incident

Naval marines aboard an Italian oil tanker, the *MV Enrica Lexie*, on Feb. 16 fired on an Indian fishing boat off the coast of the southern state of Kerala, killing two crew members. The Italians claimed that they were firing in self-defence, fearing that they were about to be attacked by armed pirates, but Indian officials said that the fishermen were unarmed. The Indian government at once made a diplomatic protest over the incident, which Italy said occurred in international waters, giving the Italian crew legal immunity. However, the *Enrica Lexie* then entered Indian territorial waters and anchored off the Kerala port of Kochi, where on Feb. 19 Indian police boarded the ship, arrested two marines and took them into custody on shore, where a case of murder was registered against them.

As feelings ran high in both countries numerous meetings took place between Indian and Italian of-

ficials, culminating in a visit to New Delhi on Feb. 28 by Italy's Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi for talks with India's External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna. Both ministers agreed to pursue the matter in a spirit of "understanding and co-operation", but it was clear that fundamental differences remained.

Uttar Pradesh state assembly elections

Voting began in elections to the legislative assembly of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, which would be completed in seven phases on Feb. 8, Feb. 11, Feb. 15, Feb. 19, Feb. 23, Feb. 28 and March 3 [see also p. 50874]. It was reported on Feb. 21 that Rahul Gandhi, general secretary of the Indian National Congress (INC) party, the lead party in the federal ruling coalition, had been accused of violations of electoral rules whilst campaigning in the city of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh.

Although not standing for election himself, Rahul Gandhi had the lead role in the campaign to revive the INC's fortunes in the state, alongside his mother, Congress president Sonia Gandhi, and his popular sister Priyanka Gandhi.

IN BRIEF

The Calcutta (Kolkata) book fair on Feb. 1 cancelled the launch of a new book by the self-exiled Bangladeshi author **Taslima Nasreen**, forcing her publisher to launch the book outside the book fair venue. Reportedly the police in Calcutta (capital of West Bengal state) had asked the book fair organisers to cancel the launch on security grounds after protests by Islamic groups. Nasreen claimed that the cancellation had been made under pressure from the state government, which she accused of pandering to fanatics. She had lived in exile in India and Sweden after fleeing death threats in her homeland [see pp. 49737; 48469; 48247]. [See also withdrawal from Indian literary festival of novelist Salman Rushdie p. 50874.]

Three ministers of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in the southern state of **Karnataka** on Feb. 8 resigned after two of them, Co-operation Minister Laxman Savadi and Women and Children Minister C.C. Patil, were filmed by a television crew watching pornographic footage on a mobile telephone during a session of the state assembly. A third minister, the owner of the telephone Ports Minister Krishna Palemar, also resigned. Speaker of the assembly K.P. Bopaiah ordered an investigation and barred the former ministers from the assembly until it was concluded, whilst a court in Karnataka ordered a criminal investigation. The incident was a further embarrassment to the BJP in Karnataka, where its chief minister B.S. Yeddyurappa was forced to resign in 2011 over allegations of corruption [see p. 50705].

The high court of western **Gujarat** state on Feb. 15 issued a contempt of court notice to the state government, giving it 15 days to explain why it had not carried out the court's 2011 order to pay compensation to 56 owners of shops destroyed during anti-Muslim riots in 2002. The court on Feb. 8 condemned the BJP state government, led by chief minister Narendra Modi, for its "inaction and negli-

gence" in failing to protect religious structures during the riots, ordering it to pay compensation for more than 500 destroyed or damaged mosques or other religious buildings. Modi had been widely accused of turning a blind eye to or even conniving in the anti-Muslim violence, in which over 1,000 people died. However, the high court on Feb. 1 rejected a petition to compel Modi to appear before the Nanavati commission, set up in 2008 by the Supreme Court to investigate the riots [for recent developments and background see pp. 50763; 50287].

Elections were held to the **Bombay (Mumbai—capital of western Maharashtra state)** city council on Feb. 16, resulting in a fourth consecutive victory for the BJP, which with its ally Shiv Sena won 106 seats on the 227-member Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), against 65 for Congress (I) and its ally the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Turnout was low at 45 per cent, slightly higher than it was in 2007.

The Supreme Court on Feb. 16 opened hearings on a petition challenging a July 2009 ruling by the Delhi high court that overturned section 377 of the penal code criminalising **consensual adult homosexual relations** [see p. 49320]. The judges asked the petitioners to define "unnatural" sex, the term used in section 377. On Feb. 28 the court criticised the government for its "shifting" attitude, after a senior government lawyer described homosexuality as "immoral", only to be disowned by the home ministry.

A report by a government committee published on Feb. 20 found that about **15,000 people were killed annually on India's railways**. The majority of the deaths were the result of people being run down by trains whilst crossing lines illegally, there being insufficient numbers of footbridges or other types of crossing and inadequate fencing of the tracks. The report was critical of Indian Railways, saying that no civilised society should accept such a high number of deaths. Some 6,000 of the fatalities occurred on the Bombay suburban network alone.

The Supreme Court on Feb. 24 ordered the prosecution of police officers who took part in a violent crackdown on supporters of the anti-corruption yoga guru **Baba Ramdev** in New Delhi in June 2011 [see p. 50506]. Some 60 people were injured, including one woman who died from her injuries in September. The judges described a police action using batons and teargas against sleeping protesters as not only brutal but as an assault on the "basic democratic values" enshrined in the constitution. The court was also critical of Ramdev and ordered the prosecution of those of his supporters who were violent.

■ Last article pp. 50874-75.

BANGLADESH

Murder of journalist couple

Two prominent television journalists, Sagar Sarwar and his wife Meherun Runi, were murdered on Feb. 11 in their apartment in Dhaka (the capital) by unknown assailants who stabbed the couple to death. It was not known whether the killings were connected to their

work, but it was reported that no valuables had been stolen from their home. Despite widespread publicity given to the case the police had made no arrests by the end of the month.

The High Court on Feb. 28 described a statement on Feb. 27 by Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), that the government was responsible for the murders as tantamount to contempt of court. The police said on Feb. 26 that they were "almost sure" of the motive for the killings, but released no details.

Border incident

The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on Feb. 7 lodged a protest with its Bangladeshi counterpart the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) after a BSF soldier died of his injuries three days after a beating by alleged Bangladeshi cattle smugglers. The BSF said that the soldier and his comrades had refrained from using their firearms against the smugglers.

It was reported on Feb. 25 that the BSF had initiated court martial proceedings against eight of its personnel accused of torturing a Bangladeshi national intercepted on the border [see p. 50875].

■ Last article p. 50875.

NEPAL

Demobilisation of former Maoist combatants

The demobilisation began on Feb. 3 of some 19,575 former combatants of the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA), who had been quartered in camps established under UN supervision since the Maoist leadership signed a peace agreement in November 2006 [see p. 47573]. It was reported that at least 9,000 had opted for integration into the army, well in excess of the 6,500 specified in a seven-point agreement by the major political parties in November 2011 [see p. 50764]. Some 7,300 were said to have chosen grant-aided rehabilitation packages for civilian life.

The Maoist rebellion began in 1996 and cost some 13,000 lives before the insurgency ended in 2006.

The missions of EU countries, Norway and Switzerland on Feb. 15 issued a statement calling for all payments to former Maoist combatants to be made directly to them, noting "allegations of financial irregularities". It had been reported that Maoist commanders were looting payments made to combatants who opted to rejoin civilian life.

Conclusion of parliamentary session

The monsoon session of Parliament (the Constituent Assembly—CA, the unicameral leg-

islature) concluded on Feb. 21 after 293 days. Although Parliament passed the budget estimates, it failed to make progress on three bills relating to anti-money laundering measures and two bills relating to the peace process, on a truth and reconciliation commission and on missing persons.

Conviction of minister for corruption

The Supreme Court on Feb. 21 convicted Communications Minister Jaya Prakash Prasad Gupta of corruption and sentenced him to 18 months' imprisonment and a fine of NR8.4 million (US\$1.00=78.2960 Nepalese rupees as at Feb. 40, 2012). There was no right of appeal against the conviction, which disqualified Gupta from his cabinet post and his seat in Parliament. Gupta, a member of the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum—Ganatantrik (MJF—G) party, a minor party in the ruling coalition, was appointed in September 2011 [see pp. 50652-53].

Bombing in Kathmandu

At least three people were killed and several injured on Feb. 27 when a bomb exploded outside the head office of the Nepal Oil Corporation in Kathmandu (the capital). A telephone call from a previously unknown group, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), claimed responsibility, saying that the blast was a protest against corruption and recent fuel increases.

■ Last articles pp. 50878; 50764.

PAKISTAN

Contempt of court charge against prime minister

The Supreme Court on Feb. 13 formally indicted Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani with contempt of court for his refusal to reopen a corruption case in Switzerland against President Asif Ali Zardari [for background see p. 50873]. The court had already on Feb. 10 rejected an appeal against the charge by Gillani, who argued that he had merely been following legal advice and was not intentionally flouting the authority of the court. Gillani, who appeared at the Feb. 13 hearing, based his refusal to reopen the case against Zardari on the argument that an incumbent president enjoyed legal immunity whilst in office. Gillani was the first Pakistan prime minister to be charged with contempt of court; if convicted, he faced a prison sentence of up to six months and probable disqualification from public office.

Many observers saw the Supreme Court as acting in alliance with the military, with which the civilian government's relations had deteriorated almost irreparably over the past few months [see p. 50873]. It was widely accepted that the army wished to oust Zardari, who was regarded in military circles as corrupt, incompetent and untrustworthy. However, also on Feb. 13 the Supreme Court demonstrated its independence when, under orders from the court, the army's powerful Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) directorate reluctantly produced before the court seven men who had disappeared in 2007-08 following their acquittal by an anti-terrorism court. It had emerged in January that four other men who had disappeared at the same time had died in 2011. A lawyer representing the seven in court said that they had been recently held in a hospital in Peshawar, capital of north-western Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (KPK) province, or in a nearby detention centre.

Supreme Court chief justice Mohammed Iftikhar Chaudhry ordered the ISI to produce a report explaining what law the men were being detained under. He also ordered that the seven suspects, who were all in poor health, be given immediate medical treatment and that henceforth they should be held in civilian custody. The Supreme Court also on Feb. 29 revived an investigation into allegations that the ISI donated some US\$6.5 million to conservative opposition parties in advance of 1990 legislative elections, in which the right-wing Pakistan Muslim League led by Nawaz Sharif defeated the Pakistan People's Party, led by former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

The investigation had stalled after being originally requested in 1996 by Air Marshal (ret'd) Asghar Khan, who was also the prime mover behind its revival. However, proceedings were suspended on the opening day when it was disclosed that crucial documents and a key witness, former ISI director Lt-Gen. (ret'd) Asad Durrani, could not be found.

Developments in conflict with militants - Sectarian violence

Military officials said on Feb. 3 that in an attack by Tehrik-i-Talibaan Pakistan (TTP) militants on an army checkpoint in Kurram agency, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) near the border with Afghanistan, the previous night at least 18 militants were killed for the loss of seven soldiers. In a similar attack on Jan. 31 in Kurram eight soldiers and about 20 Talibaan fighters were reported killed, in response to which the air force on Feb. 1 launched bombing raids in the Jogi area of Kurram, in which it was claimed that at least 12 militants were killed. The army began an offensive against the TTP in Kurram in July 2011 [see p. 50559].

A suicide bomber on Feb. 17 blew himself up in a market close to a mosque in the town of Parachinar in Kurram agency, killing 26 people and injuring about 50. Fazal Saeed Haqqani, leader of a faction of the TTP, claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that it was targeted against the minority Muslim Shia community because it had been involved in anti-Talibaan activities. Gunmen on Feb. 28 stopped a bus in the mountainous Kohistan district of KPK province and ordered the 45 passengers to disembark. After checking their identity cards they shot

dead the 18 Shia passengers. The Jundullah faction of the TTP claimed responsibility, describing the victims as "infidels". The bus had been travelling in a convoy to the town of Gilgit in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

A car packed with explosives on Feb. 23 blew up at a bus stop in Peshawar, capital of KPK, killing at least 12 people and wounding at least 35. No group claimed responsibility. On the following day up to five gunmen attempted to storm a police station in Peshawar, killing four policemen and wounding seven. At least three of the gunmen also died, reportedly after blowing themselves up. Gunmen on motorcycles on Feb. 28 shot dead a Chinese woman and her male Pakistani companion on a street in Peshawar. No motive was known for the murders.

Two US CIA-controlled pilotless drone-launched missile strikes on Feb. 8-9 in the FATA agency of North Waziristan killed at least 19 people, including Badar Mansoor, a senior militant leader linked to al-Qaida, according to Pakistani officials. Some reports claimed that Mansoor's family was also killed by the strike. Two further attacks in North Waziristan on Feb. 16 were said to have killed 21 suspected militants. Defence Minister Ahmed Mukhtar said on Feb. 14 that Pakistan would reopen for a "limited period" the supply route for NATO forces in Afghanistan from the port of Karachi to the border crossing in Khyber agency in the FATA. The convoys would be confined to carrying perishable food-stuffs, not military materiel or fuel.

Developments in Baluchistan

Attacks by separatist militants on Jan. 31 in the south-western province of Baluchistan killed at least 15 Frontier Corps (FC) paramilitaries and wounded 12 at military posts guarding coalmines in the Margut area, 60 km east of Quetta, the provincial capital. The banned Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that it was in response to the murder by gunmen in Karachi (capital of southern Sind province) on Jan. 31 of the wife and daughter of a Baluchistan legislator, Nawabzada Bakhtiar Khan Domki, who were shot dead in their car together with their driver. The women were also the sister and niece of Bramdagh Bugti, leader of the Baluch Republican Party (BRP), and the grand-daughter and great-grand-daughter of the late legendary Baluch separatist leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti.

The BRP and the Baluchistan National Party (BNP) called strikes on Feb. 2-6 in Quetta and other towns of the province to protest against the killings. Nasreen Khetran, a provincial minister, on Feb. 6 resigned in protest against the murders. There was widespread outrage in the province that women had been killed in pursuit of a political or personal feud. The Baluchistan assembly on Feb. 6 passed a resolution demanding that federal Prime Minister Gillani visit Quetta as soon as possible to hear the concerns of its members over the incident and the general security situation in the province.

Gunmen on Feb. 8 killed Nazriati Maulana Abdul Ghani, leader of the Islamist Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam

(JUI) party in Baluchistan, outside a mosque in Chaman district. Baluchistan legislators on Feb. 9 renewed their demand that Gillani visit the province. Separatist feeling in Baluchistan was fuelled by the perception of neglect and exploitation of the province by the federal government.

Demolition of bin Laden compound

The civil authorities on Feb. 26 unexpectedly began to demolish the three-story building in a compound in Abbottabad, some 55 km north of Islamabad (the capital) where Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaida, was killed in a raid by US special forces in May 2011 [see pp. 50441-43 (USA); 50450-51]. The military sealed off the compound whilst the building was razed. Although no official reason was given for the demolition, commentators speculated that the authorities wished to eradicate what had become a symbol of a humiliating episode. Not only had the USA not informed Pakistan that the raid was to take place, but US helicopters had evaded detection by the Pakistan military until the raid was completed. Furthermore, bin Laden and his family had apparently lived in the compound undetected for six years, in a major garrison town.

It was reported by *The Guardian* on Feb. 15 that on Feb. 9 the brother of bin Laden's youngest wife had lodged an appeal with chief justice Chaudhry for her release. Amal Ahmed al-Sadah, 30, who was reportedly shot in the leg whilst trying to shield bin Laden during the raid, remained in detention in Pakistan with her five children, two other wives of bin Laden who lived in the compound, and four of his grandchildren. It was thought that they were in the custody of the ISI.

Material released on Feb. 28 by the WikiLeaks freedom-of-information website appeared to indicate that some mid-ranking Pakistani officials may have known of bin Laden's presence in Abbottabad. Emails allegedly between employees of the US security think tank Stratfor claimed that unnamed ISI officials and a retired Pakistani general knew of bin Laden's safe house.

IN BRIEF

Attackers with guns and grenades on Feb. 10 killed one person and injured 12 at a rally addressed by **Imran Khan**, leader of the Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaaf (PTI) party in Swabi in KPK province. Seven of those injured were policemen. Imran, who was currently rated the most popular politician in the country in opinion polls, had already left the rally when the attack took place [for recent PTI rallies see pp. 50819; 50762].

Interior Minister Rehman Malik said on Feb. 21 that Pakistan would ask Interpol to issue an arrest warrant for **former President Gen. (ret'd) Pervaiz Musharraf** for his failure to provide adequate security to prevent the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 [see pp. 48299-301]. Musharraf, who lived in exile, mainly in London, had announced in January that

he would return to Pakistan later in the month, but an official of his political party the All-Pakistan Muslim League (APML) subsequently said that amid current political tensions Musharraf had postponed his return.

■ Last article pp. 50873-74.

AFGHANISTAN

Revision of US military strategy

US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta announced on Feb. 1 that US troops in Afghanistan would withdraw from combat missions in mid- to late-2013, up to 18 months before the planned cessation date of the US-led war effort at the end of 2014. Panetta said that US forces would remain "combat-ready" but that they would move into an "advise and assist" role alongside Afghanistan's security forces.

Panetta's surprise statement, made on an aircraft whilst en route to a NATO summit of defence ministers, held in Brussels on Feb. 2-3, created some confusion in that it did not clearly define the revised role envisaged for the 90,000 US forces in Afghanistan, nor make clear whether the change in their role would lead to a swifter withdrawal than had been hitherto planned. Nevertheless, it did appear to indicate a clear desire by US President Barack Obama, who was facing a difficult re-election campaign, to reduce US casualties and to be able to present a plan for imminent disengagement from what had become a deeply unpopular war with the US electorate. Military sources later suggested that the revised US strategy—which remained unofficial pending its anticipated formal announcement at a NATO summit scheduled for Chicago in May—would involve a significant increase in the use of US special forces both as trainers for the Afghan army and in a counter-insurgency role.

The announcement by Panetta came only days after a statement in late January by French President Nicolas Sarkozy that all French troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2013, a year earlier than the internationally agreed schedule [see p. 50873]. The US defence secretary's remarks were immediately followed by a statement from the UK Prime Minister David Cameron which asserted that "the strategy hasn't changed... it envisaged that Afghan forces should have the lead security responsibility across the country by the end of 2013, and that ISAF [the International Security and Assistance Force] will increasingly move from a combat role to a training role." A similar line was taken at the Brussels meeting, with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stating that the revised US strategy was consistent with the agreed withdrawal timetable which envisaged the completion of the handover of security responsibilities to Afghan forces by the end of 2013, prior to the planned withdrawal of the final international forces by the end of 2014.

By contrast, the Afghan government responded with dismay to Panetta's announcement, appealing to its US ally to abide by the

agreed schedule which it had interpreted as meaning that US forces would have continued to play a combat role up to the end of 2014. The interior ministry suggested that more time was needed to develop the capability of Afghan forces and that they would not be ready to assume responsibility for security in 2013. Furthermore, the widely held reservations over the abilities of Afghanistan's nascent military were exacerbated by discussions at the NATO meeting over the possible reduction in the size of the planned Afghan security forces. Currently standing at 305,000 police and troops, there were plans to expand it to 350,000. However, in announcing his revised strategy, Panetta also recognised the political difficulty of sustaining the huge international financial commitment to maintaining such a force at a time of economic recession, stating that "funding is going to largely determine the kind of force we can sustain in the future".

Progress of peace negotiations

President Hamid Karzai visited Pakistan and participated in a trilateral regional summit on Feb. 16-17 with President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan and President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad of Iran. Karzai had arrived in Pakistan stating that he was keen to explore how the Pakistan government could assist in fostering peace negotiations with the Taliban. At the conclusion of the summit, however, Pakistan's foreign minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, described the expectation that her country could bring the Taliban leadership to the negotiating table as "not only unrealistic but preposterous".

With regard to the ongoing effort to begin peace negotiations, Karzai confirmed that "there have been contacts between the US government and the Taliban; there have been contacts between the Afghan government and the Taliban; and there have been contacts that we have made, all of us together, including the Taliban". However, a Taliban spokesman on Feb. 17 reiterated the movement's opposition to holding talks with the Karzai government which it considered to be a puppet regime of the West. Zabihoillah Mojahed stated that "the Taliban do not have any intention to hold talks with the administration of Hamid Karzai and neither have they held talks in the past with his administration".

Nevertheless, shortly after his return to Afghanistan Karzai issued a statement on Feb. 21 in which he stated his support for the agreement in January to establish a Taliban liaison office in Qatar [see p. 50872], and stated that "for the success of the peace process, I invite the leaders of the Taliban group to hold direct talks with the Afghan government".

Popular violence after US burning of copies of Koran

There was a surge in violence throughout Afghanistan in late February after it was re-

vealed that US troops had burned a number of copies of the Koran at Bagram air base, one of the largest US facilities in the country, on Feb. 20. Angry protests began immediately after the discovery of some of the half-burnt Korans by Afghan workers, and by the end of the month at least 40 people had been killed in related violence as mobs targeted NATO and UN facilities as well as symbols of the USA and other Western countries. There were violent clashes between police and demonstrators in Kabul (the capital) and elsewhere, and attacks against Western military bases, including the detonation of a Taliban car bomb outside Jalalabad air base on Feb. 27 which killed at least nine Afghans.

The circumstances of Koran burning were under investigation by both the US and the Afghan authorities. However, preliminary information suggested that the copies of the Koran were amongst more than 1,600 items removed by the US authorities from the library of the adjoining Parwan detention facility, where some 3,000 Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners were being held. The materials were removed because of a lack of space and because it was believed that inmates were communicating with each other by writing inside the books. The operation to incinerate the material was halted after Afghans raised the alarm and pulled a number of books, including copies of the Koran, from the flames. Despite Afghan government appeals for calm, the burning unleashed a wave of spontaneous anti-Western protests fuelled by the strict Islamic prohibition on desecration of the Koran by infidels. The protests were encouraged by some members of the Afghan legislature as well as by the Taliban. A statement issued by the latter denounced the desecration and called for attacks on Western bases and convoys in order to "kill them, capture them, beat them and teach them a lesson that they will never again dare to insult the Holy Koran".

Coming within weeks of video footage showing US soldiers urinating over Afghan corpses [see p. 50872], the incident was a major embarrassment for the US authorities. In a statement addressed to the "noble people of Afghanistan" within hours of the incident, ISAF commander US Gen. John Allen, stressed that the Korans had been burnt in "error" and promised a full investigation. "When we learned of these actions we immediately intervened and stopped them", he wrote. "The materials recovered will be properly handled by appropriate religious authorities... We are thoroughly investigating the incident and we are taking steps to ensure this does not ever happen again. I assure you—I promise you—this was NOT intentional in any way". Panetta was also quick to apologise for the "inappropriate treatment of the Korans". On Feb. 23, amid intensifying violence, President Obama sent a formal letter of apology to Karzai, characterising the burning as "inadvertent" and vowing to hold those involved accountable.

The tide of anti-Western sentiment embodied by the protests shook the Western presence in Afghanistan and undermined the already fragile level of trust between ISAF troops and Afghanistan's security forces. Western fears stemming from surprise attacks by rogue Afghan soldiers and police [for latest, in Jan-

uary, see p. 50873] were aggravated by several such incidents associated with the Koran burning protests. An Afghan soldier shot dead two US troops at a base in Nangarhar province, in eastern Afghanistan, on Feb. 23 before fleeing into a crowd of protesters that had gathered outside the base and which was then fired upon by US guards. On Feb. 25 two US military officers were shot dead inside the interior ministry in Kabul where they were working as advisers. Following their killing, which was believed to have been at the hands of an Afghan guard, Western countries announced the withdrawal of their advisers from Afghan ministries. On Feb. 27 the UN also scaled back its operations, including the evacuation of a base in the northern city of Kunduz that had been attacked by protesters.

Issues relating to civilian casualties

A report by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), released on Feb. 4, stated that civilian casualties had increased in Afghanistan for the fifth consecutive year, with 3,021 civilian deaths in 2011, an 8 per cent increase over the number killed in 2010. Insurgents killed 2,332 people during the year (77 per cent of the total who died and a 14 per cent increase compared with 2010), with 967 of them (32 per cent of all civilians killed) dying from roadside bombs. Pro-government forces were adjudged to have killed 410 people (14 per cent of the total and 4 per cent down on 2010), with a further 279 civilian deaths (9 per cent of the total) being unattributable to either side.

Later in the month, on Feb. 19 President Karzai repeated his calls for an end to the controversial tactic of night raids by US special forces which were a major source of civilian casualties and popular anger. Speaking at a meeting with a US delegation led by Senator John McCain, Karzai repeated his insistence that a cessation of night raids was a pre-

condition for the signature of a long-term strategic agreement with the USA. This position was reiterated on Feb. 21 with Karzai also insisting upon the transfer of coalition-run prisons, a demand made in January [see p. 50872] and which included control of the Parwan detention facility.

After an investigation undertaken in conjunction with the Afghan government, NATO acknowledged on Feb 15 that an air strike in a remote area of Najrab district, in Kapisa province, on Feb. 8, had killed eight youths who were tending livestock.

IN BRIEF

An ISAF spokesman on Feb. 1 confirmed the existence of a secret report, entitled *The State of the Taliban*, which had been compiled from **information extracted from the interrogation of more than 4,000 Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners**. The leaked report suggested that the Taliban was confident of victory and was in receipt of assistance from elements within the Afghan government and from Pakistan's intelligence service.

The government announced in late February that **bitterly cold winter weather had resulted in 41 deaths**, many of them children. According to figures released in a report by Amnesty International on Feb. 22, at least 28 children had died of cold in refugee camps in Kabul; it was estimated that some 500,000 people were living in temporary camps in Afghanistan, often in appalling conditions, having fled their homes because of fears of violence.

■ Last article pp. 50872-73.

TURKMENISTAN

Presidential elections

Presidential elections held on Feb. 12 were won by the incumbent, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, with 97 per cent of the vote, against seven other candidates. The poll was

Results of presidential elections in Turkmenistan

Candidate	Position	% of vote
Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov	Incumbent president	97.14
Annageldi Yazmuradov	Water management minister	1.07
Yazmuhammed Orazgulyev	Energy and industry minister	1.02
Recep Bazarow	Deputy governor of Dasoguz region for agrarian issues	0.28
Saparmyrat Batyrov	Director of Gokdepe cotton spinning factory	0.19
Kakageldi Abdyllyayev	Head of Mary gas production department at Turkmengaz	0.16
Gurbanmammet Mollanyazow	Head of the oil and gas repair directorate of Turkmennebit state concern	0.08
Esendurdy Gayypov	Head of Lebap regional construction association	0.06
Total		100.00

Turnout: 96.7 per cent (2,888,887 voters).

(Source: Central Election Commission.)

New cabinet of Turkmenistan**Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov**

President and Prime Minister

+**Annageldi Yazmuradov** Deputy Prime Minister (agrarian sector)***Akmyrat Yegeleyev** Deputy Prime Minister (construction sector)**Annamuhammet Gochyev** Deputy Prime Minister (finance and economics)**Sapardurdy Toyliev** Deputy Prime Minister (science, education, sport and healthcare)+**Rozymyrat Seyitkulyev** Deputy Prime Minister (energy and industry)**Rashid Meredov** Deputy Prime Minister; Foreign Affairs***Bagul Nurmyradova** (f) Deputy Prime Minister (culture and media)**Baymyrat Hojamuhammedov** Deputy Prime Minister (oil and gas)+**Nokerguly Atagulyev** Deputy Prime Minister (trade, commerce, textiles and customs)***Nazarguly Sagulyev** Deputy Prime Minister (transport and communications)**Hojamuhammet Muhammedov** Deputy Prime Minister; Chief of Executive Office of President and Cabinet of Ministers**Maj.-Gen. Yalym Berdiyev** National Security and Secretary of State Security Council**Gen. Begench Gundogdiyev** Defence**Maj.-Col Iskander Mulikov** Interior**Murad Garriyev** Justice**Bayramgeldi Nedirov** Oil and Gas Industry and Mineral Resources**Basimmurad Hojamuhammedov**

Economics and Development

Dovletgeldi Sadykov Finance**Batyr Abayev** Trade and Foreign Economic Relations**Yazmuhammed Orazgulyev** Energy and Industry**Dzumageldi Bayramov** Construction**Babaniyaz Italmazov** Building Materials**Bayram Annamerodov** Railways**Serdar Berkeliyev** Motor Transport**Bayramgeldi Ovezov** Communications**Arslan Yagsymammedov** Municipal Economy**Aynabat Babayeva** (f) Textile Industry***Guncha Mammedova** (f) Culture**Gulsat Mammedova** (f) Education**Gurbanmammet Elyasov** Health and

Medical Industry

***Merdan Byramov** Water Management and Agriculture**Babageldi Annabayramov** Environmental Protection**Bekmurad Samuradov** Labour and Social Protection

*New appointment.

+Altered responsibilities.

Women are denoted by (f).

dent, who had taken office on the death of his predecessor, Saparmurad Niyazov, in December 2006 and won his first election in February 2007 with over 89 per cent of the vote [see p. 47756]. Following his inauguration on Feb. 17, Berdimuhammedov made appointments to a new cabinet, in which the majority of ministers came from the president's native Akhal province. [For previous cabinet list see p. 47756.]

State-controlled media announced on Feb. 25 that the theme of Berdimuhammedov's second term was to be "the era of supreme happiness".

■ Last articles pp. 50824; 50775; 50715; 50604.

KAZAKHSTAN**Disappearance of alleged bank fraudster**

Mukhtar Ablyazov, the former chairman of BTA bank, which the Kazakh government had taken over in 2009 after it defaulted on its debts [see p. 49043], was sentenced by the High Court in London on Feb. 16 to 22 months in prison for contempt of court. Ablyazov did not appear for the sentencing and was believed to have fled the country.

Ablyazov had chaired BTA between 2005 and 2009 and was granted asylum in the UK after fleeing Kazakhstan. The now state-owned BTA had brought nine civil lawsuits against him for fraud amounting to US\$5 billion. In a prelude to this embezzlement suit, Ablyazov was sentenced on three counts of contempt of court relating to his attempts to hide assets worth £34 million (US\$1.00=0.6323 UK pounds as at Feb. 17, 2012), including properties in the UK. Of the larger embezzlement case, Mr Justice Teare, the judge who issued the prison sentence, said: "In short, fraud on an epic scale is alleged."

Strategic partnership deal with Germany

Kazakhstan signed over 50 separate accords with Germany on Feb. 8, worth around US\$4 billion, in a strategic partnership that would give German companies the right to search for and mine rare earths in Kazakhstan. In return for investment in Kazakhstan, German companies would be given access to largely untapped deposits of rare earths, the 17 elements essential in manufacturing high-technology products. [See p. 50941 (Germany).]

Germany had signed a similar agreement with Mongolia in October 2011 [see p. 50709 (Mongolia)]. The Federation of German Industries welcomed the accord with Kazakhstan, although human rights organisations said that such economic deals undermined attempts to pressure the Kazakh government to improve its human rights record.

IN BRIEF

On Jan. 20, **Nurlan Nigmatulin** was unanimously elected chairman of the Majlis, the lower house of the Kazakhstan bicameral legislature. Nigmatulin was first deputy chairman of the ruling Nur Otan party.

■ Last article p. 50871.

KYRGYZSTAN**Plan to end US military presence**

President Almazbek Atambayev reiterated on Feb. 20 that the USA must withdraw its troops from the Manas airbase, near the capital, Bishkek, when the current lease expired in summer 2014. The USA used the airbase as a transit point for its operations in Afghanistan. Atambayev made the point to a US delegation led by Susan Elliot, the deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asian affairs. Atambayev had promised after his election in October to end the US presence at Manas [see p. 50709; for background on Manas see pp. 50341; 49256].

Strike at gold mine

A strike at the Kumtor gold mine in Issyk-Kul province shut down production for 10 days. More than 1,000 miners went on strike on Feb. 7 over social insurance payments; they returned to work on Feb. 17, after accepting an offer of a pay rise and annual bonuses. Kumtor, which produced the equivalent of 20 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's industrial output, was wholly owned by Centerra Gold, a company based in Canada, in which the Kyrgyz government held 33 per cent of the shares.

The strike highlighted problems in the Kyrgyz mining industry, which was widely suspected of being corruptly managed. There was also criticism of failure properly to regulate the effects of gold mining on Kyrgyzstan's fragile alpine environment. On Feb. 14 the first deputy prime minister, Aaly Karashev, ordered a review of the environmental impact of Kumtor and the legality of its alleged use of land belonging to an adjoining nature reserve.

■ Last article p. 50818.

CHINA**Attempted defection of ruling party official**

The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was shaken by the apparent attempted defection of Wang Lijun, vice mayor of the major city of Chongqing. Wang was a close associ-

characterised by Western analysts and non-governmental organisations as an exercise in sham democracy and as being, rather, a way of demonstrating broad support for the presi-

ate of Bo Xilai, the high profile head of the party in Chongqing and a member of the CCP's politburo. The furore surrounding Wang's conduct was seen as having jeopardised Bo's anticipated elevation to the nine-member standing committee of the politburo amid the leadership changes planned for the 2012 party congress.

At the beginning of the month Wang had been abruptly relieved of his post as head of the public security bureau—a position in which he had won the reputation as a resolute opponent of organised crime—amid reports that he was under investigation for corruption. On Feb. 6 Wang travelled 300 km to the US consulate in the city of Chengdu where he held talks with US officials and was believed to have asked for, but been denied, political asylum. The US state department refused to comment on the matter other than to state that Wang had left the consulate at “his own volition”. Having left the consulate on Feb. 7 Wang was immediately detained by Chinese security officials. On Feb 8 the authorities stated that Wang was suffering from “immense mental stress” as a result of “long-term overwork” and was currently receiving “vacation-style treatment”. Bo continued to exercise his normal duties during the affair, but an open letter, allegedly written by Wang, appeared on websites on Feb. 9 accusing Bo of corruption and calling him the “greatest gangster in China”.

Visit to USA by Xi Jinping

Vice President Xi Jinping, 58, made a three-country official visit on Feb. 13-22 which began with a five-day stay in the USA. His high-profile visit fuelled the expectation that he would succeed Hu Jintao as CCP general secretary and state president upon the latter's scheduled retirement from the posts in 2012 and 2013, respectively.

During his visit Xi held talks with US President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden and made an unusual visit to the Pentagon where he met leading civilian and military figures in the US defence department. After visiting the USA Xi went on to Ireland and Turkey.

Continuing Tibet protests - Unrest in Xinjiang

The authorities continued to impose a heavy security presence in Sichuan province following the unrest that had occurred amid protests over China's rule in neighbouring Tibet [see p. 50870]. Although no mass demonstrations were reported, during the course of the month there were further instances of self-immolation in Sichuan by pro-Tibetan protesters.

In an unconfirmed case, three Tibetan livestock herders were reported to have committed self-immolation on Feb. 3, at least one of whom died. Two monks set themselves on fire in separate instances in Sichuan and Tibet on Feb. 8 and Feb. 9, respectively. On Feb. 11 a nun died after committing self-immolation near the town of Ngaba, in Sichuan province, and a monk ignited himself in the same area on Feb. 13, but survived after police extinguished the flames and arrested him. There were two further instances of fatal self-immolation: in Tibet on Feb. 17 and Sichuan on Feb. 19, bringing to 22 the total number of confirmed cases to have occurred between March 2011 and the end of February.

In the north-western region of Xinjiang, another restive area of China, at least 12 people were reported to have been killed in rioting in the city of Kashgar on Feb. 28. The region had been tense since outbreaks of ethnic violence in 2009 and July 2011 [see pp. 50562; 49311-12] between the disadvantaged native Muslim Uighurs and the Han Chinese migrant majority. In the latest incident a group of Uighurs armed with knives was reported to have run amok in Yecheng county and killed 10 people before police shot dead two of the assailants.

IN BRIEF

The **village of Wukan** on Feb. 1 elected an 11-member election committee and on Feb. 11 staged a first round of local elections as part of an experiment in democracy agreed to by the Chinese authorities after the village had rebelled against corrupt CCP officials in December 2011 [see pp. 50870; 50817]. The polling was conducted fairly and saw a turnout of more than 80 per cent of the 8,000-strong electorate.

It was reported on Feb. 10 that Zhu Yufu, a **political dissident and a founder member of the banned Democracy Party of China**, had been sentenced by the Hangzhou Intermediate People's Court to seven years in prison and three years loss of political rights having been convicted of “inciting subversion”.

■ Last article pp. 50870-71.

HONG KONG

Scandal over candidate for chief executive election

Henry Tang Ying-yen, former chief secretary of the administration of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), was engulfed in controversy on Feb. 17 after the Hong Kong media discovered that he had broken strict property regulations by secretly building a luxurious recreational basement at a house owned by his wife. Tang, 59, further harmed his reputation when at first he appeared to attempt to shift the blame onto his wife, Lisa Kuo. Tang resigned as chief secretary in September 2011 [for appointment see p. 47992].

Tang was widely regarded as the preferred candidate of the mainland People's Republic of China (PRV) in elections to the post of chief executive of the HKSAR scheduled in March, to succeed incumbent Donald Tsang. Opinion polls found that more than 50 per cent of respondents thought that Tang should withdraw from the election, whilst over 79 per cent said that the scandal cast doubts on his integrity. The chief executive was elected by a 1,200-strong committee representing “functional constituencies”, such as business and the professions. The other candidates were C.Y. Leung (Leung Chun-ying), a former convener of the Legislative Council (LegCo), and Albert Ho of the Democratic Party (DP).

Legal challenge to ruling on residency rights

The HKSAR government on Feb. 21 began an appeal in the Court of Appeal against a high court ruling in September 2011 that paved the way for some 117,000 foreign maids and domestic workers who had lived in Hong Kong for at least seven years to apply for permanent residency rights [see p. 50648].

■ Last articles pp. 50824; 50648.

TAIWAN

New cabinet

President Ma Ying-jeou on Feb. 6 swore in his reshuffled cabinet (Executive Yuan) following his re-election as president in January [for presidential and legislative elections see pp. 50869-70; for last full cabinet list see p. 49408; for recent reshuffles see pp. 50291-92; 49896; 49840-41].

■ Last article pp. 50869-70.

NORTH KOREA

Agreement with USA on nuclear programme

The US state department on Feb. 29 announced that following talks between US and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) officials on Feb. 23-24 in Beijing (the capital of China) the DPRK had agreed to suspend tests of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles and uranium enrichment activity at its Yongbyon main nuclear complex. The DPRK would also allow nuclear inspectors of the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to return to North Korea to monitor activity at Yongbyon. In return the USA would resume the supply of food aid to the DPRK, with a total of 240,000 tonnes of high-protein biscuits, infant formula and other nutritional supplements to be delivered in 12 monthly consignments.

The talks in Beijing were led by chief North Korean nuclear negotiator Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye

New cabinet of Taiwan

Ma Ying-jeou President
+Wu Den-yih Vice President
+Sean Chen Premier
+Jiang Yi-huah Vice Premier
+Lee Hong-yuan Interior
***Lin Yi-Shih** Cabinet Secretary General
***Steven Chen (Chen S.K.)** Cabinet Deputy Secretary General
***Chen Ching-tsai** Cabinet Deputy Secretary General
+Christina Y. Liu (f) Finance
Timothy Yang (Yang Chin-tien) Foreign Affairs
Kao Hua-chu Defence
Shih Yen-shiang Economic Affairs
***Tseng Yung-fu** Justice
Wu Ying-yi Overseas Compatriots Affairs Commission
+Yiin Chii-ming Council for Economic Planning and Development
***Chiang Wei-ling** Education
Chiu Wen-ta Health
Mao Chi-kuo Transportation and Communications
Jennifer Wang (Wang Ju-hsuan) (f) Council of Labour Affairs
Philip Yang Government Information Office
+Cyrus Chu National Science Council
***Chen Bao-ji** Council of Agriculture
***Lung Ying-tai** (f) Council for Cultural Affairs
***Chen Yi-zhen** National Youth Commission
Perng Fai-nan Governor of Central Bank
Shih Su-mei (f) Directorate General of Budget Accounting and Statistics
Wu Tai-cheng Directorate General of Personnel
***Stephen Shu-hung Shen** Environmental Protection Administration

Chou Kung-shin (f) Director, National Palace Museum
Lai Shin-yuan (f) Mainland Affairs Council
Tseng Chin-lin Veterans' Affairs
Tsai Chuen-horng Atomic Energy Council
Chu Chin-peng Research, Development and Evaluation Council
Wu Shiow-ming Fair Trade Commission
Tai Hsia-ling (f) Sports Affairs Council
Sun Ta-chuan Council of Indigenous Peoples
Wang Ginn-wang Coast Guard Administration
Huang Yu-cheng Council for Hakka Affairs
Chang Po-ya (f) Central Election Commission
Chen Yuh-chang Financial Supervisory Commission
Chang Yu-hern Aviation Safety Council
Su Heng (f) National Communications Commission
Chang Jin-fu Minister without Portfolio
James Hsueh (Hsueh Cherng-tay) Minister without Portfolio
Lin Junq-tzer Minister without Portfolio
Luo Ying-shay Minister without Portfolio; Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission
***Huang Kuang-nan** Minister without Portfolio
***Chang San-cheng** Minister without Portfolio
***Yang Chiu-hsing** Minister without Portfolio
***Kuan Chung-ming** Minister without Portfolio
***Chern Jenn-chuan** Minister without Portfolio; Public Construction Commission

 *New appointment.
 +Altered responsibilities.
 Women are denoted by (f).

Workers' Party (KWP) and the national defence commission (NDC) had awarded the late **Kim Jong Il** the title of Generalissimo, a promotion from his previous rank of Marshal.

It was reported on Feb. 17 by the South Korean news agency Yonhap that according to the Russian newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* Kim Jong Il's eldest son **Kim Jong Nam** was in financial difficulties after the DPRK and China cut off his allowance, following criticisms Kim made of his younger half-brother Kim Jong Un. In an interview with a Japanese newspaper Kim said that the new North Korean leader was too inexperienced to hold onto power for long, adding that his father disagreed with hereditary succession in a socialist state. Kim Jong Nam, who reputedly enjoyed a playboy lifestyle, was said to have been evicted from a luxury hotel in the Chinese territory of Macao because he was unable to pay his bill.

It was reported by the state media on Feb. 20 that the politburo of the KWP had decided to **convene the KWP conference** in mid-April in order to "glorify" the late Kim Jong Il. The last conference of the party had been in September 2010, when Kim Jong Un was elevated to positions in the hierarchy that appeared to confirm his succession to his father [see p. 50030].

■ Last article pp. 50868-69.

SOUTH KOREA

Renaming of ruling party and other political developments

The ruling Grand National Party (GNP) on Feb. 2 announced that it had changed its name to the Saenuri (New Frontier) party, in an apparent attempt to shore up its waning support before legislative elections scheduled for April. Interim party chairwoman Park Geun Hye said that the GNP would be "reborn as an entirely new party". Analysts said that the party's increasing unpopularity was caused by a series of corruption scandals and the perception that it was responsible for widening income inequality.

Park Tee Hai, Saenuri speaker of the National Assembly (the unicameral legislature), on Feb. 9 resigned as prosecutors launched an investigation into an allegation by a GNP legislator that in 2008 Park had employed bribery in his successful campaign to be elected chairman of the GNP. Park, who became speaker of the National Assembly in June 2010, said that he took full responsibility for the scandal, although he did not specifically address the bribery allegation.

Park Won Soon, the independent mayor of Seoul (the capital), who inflicted a surprise defeat on a GNP candidate in an October 2011 mayoral election, announced on Feb. 15 that he would join the main opposition Democratic United Party (DUP) [for election see p. 50710; for inaugural congress of DUP see p. 50869].

President Lee Myung Bak on Feb. 24 appointed Ahn

Gwan and US special representative for North Korea policy Glyn Davies. Commentators were surprised at the extent of the DPRK's concessions so soon after the death in December 2011 of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and the succession of his son Kim Jong Un [see pp. 50815-16; 50868-69]. The DPRK media's rhetoric towards South Korea had resumed its customary bellicosity, and there had been fears that the North might provoke a military incident [see p. 50933 (North-South Korea)]. However, analysts speculated that a deal to secure much-needed food aid might serve to consolidate the new ruler's position.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the agreement as a "modest first step in the right direction" but said that the USA still had "profound concerns" over the DPRK's activities. The DPRK in 2005 agreed in the context of six-party talks also involving USA, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea to dismantle its nuclear programme as the first step in a process to secure permanent peace on the Korean peninsula. However, as the talks stalled the DPRK conducted small nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, in the latter year also expelling a team of IAEA inspectors [see pp. 49208-09; 49139-40; 47515-16]. The DPRK also then announced its permanent withdrawal from the suspended six-party talks [for last round of talks see p. 48943].

Demand by KEDO for compensation

It was reported by the South Korean Yonhap news agency on Feb. 7 that the international consortium the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) was to renew its demand for US\$1.89 billion from the DPRK in compensation for expenses on an abandoned project to build in North Korea two light-water moderated nuclear power generators, which was officially terminated in 2006, although construction had been suspended in 2003 [see p. 47318]. The KEDO project had been established in 1995 in exchange for the DPRK's 1994 undertaking to abandon its nuclear weapons programme.

In September 2011 the DPRK had demanded US\$5.7 billion from the KEDO in compensation for the consortium's failure to build the reactors.

IN BRIEF

The Korean Central Broadcasting (KBC) station announced on Feb. 15 that the Supreme People's Assembly (the unicameral legislature), the central defence commission (CDC) of the ruling Korean

Ho Young, a diplomat, as first vice foreign minister, and Kim Sung Han, a professor of international relations, as second vice foreign minister.

Veto on bill and resolution on refugees

It was reported by the *Joong Ang Daily* newspaper on Feb. 7 that opposition legislators on the National Assembly's foreign affairs, trade and unification committee had exercised their veto on a bill proposed by the unification ministry to raise funds from the annual budget to prepare for the unification of North and South Korea. The opposition DUP said that it was the wrong time to raise funds for unification because North Korea was in a "sensitive" phase of transition during which South Korea would be seen as preparing for "absorption" of the North.

The National Assembly on Feb. 28 adopted by 154 votes to nil (with two abstentions) a resolution urging China not to repatriate some 30 North Korean refugees detained in north-eastern China because they faced severe punishments and even the risk of execution if they were returned to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The resolution also called on the UN to press China to adhere to the provisions of the UN Convention on Refugees.

■ Last article p. 50869.

NORTH-SOUTH KOREA

Tensions over South Korean military exercises

A bulletin broadcast by the North Korean Central Broadcasting (KCB) station on Feb. 19 described a live fire drill conducted by South Korean forces on Feb. 20 in the western Yellow Sea near the two countries' maritime border as a "grave military provocation", and threatened to make "merciless retaliatory strikes". However, no such response was made as South Korean Marines Corps units fired some 5,000 rounds from the border islands of Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong in what South Korea described as a routine weapons-testing exercise. South Korea had notified the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK) in advance of the drill.

In November 2010 North Korean coastal artillery had shelled Yeonpyeong island, killing two civilians and two marines and causing extensive damage [see pp. 50132-33].

The DPRK's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on Feb. 25 carried a statement by a spokesman for the powerful National Defence Commission (NDC) threatening to launch a "sacred war" in response to two joint military exercises conducted by South Korea and US forces from Feb. 27 to March 1 and from March 1 to April

30. The DPRK claimed to regard the annual exercises, part of which consisted of computer simulations, as a preparation for invasion.

Visit to Kaesong industrial complex

A delegation of eight South Korean legislators on Feb. 10 visited the joint venture industrial complex at the North Korean border town of Kaesong, the highest-level visit by officials from the South to the DPRK since the death in December 2011 of DPRK leader Kim Jong Il [see pp. 50815-16 (North Korea)]. About 50,000 North Koreans worked in light industrial units in Kaesong run by over 120 South Korean companies.

Family reunions

The state-run North Korean *Minju Choson* newspaper on Feb. 18 rejected an appeal made on Feb. 14 by the South Korean Red Cross for talks on resuming reunions between members of families separated by the Korean War 1950-53. The newspaper demanded an apology for the South's "disrespectful conduct" since the death of Kim Jong Il and the cancellation of the annual South Korean US military exercises [see above].

About 20,000 family members had been briefly reunited since 2000, but no reunions had taken place since October 2010 [see p. 50083].

■ Last article p. 50869.

JAPAN

Cabinet changes

It was announced on Feb. 9 that Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda had appointed former Education Minister Masaharu Nakagawa as minister of state for disaster management. Nakagawa also assumed responsibility for the ministry of state portfolios of declining birthrate and gender equality, and the new public commons, both of which had been in the temporary custody of Katsuya Okada, who had been appointed as deputy prime minister in the January cabinet reshuffle [see p. 50867-68 and also for full ministerial list]. The latest changes were seen as an attempt to improve the government's ability to manage the huge reconstruction effort in those areas ravaged by the earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011 [see pp. 50337-38], as well as freeing up Okada to deal with his core responsibility for overseeing a comprehensive overhaul of the social security and tax system [see p. 50868].

The appointment of Nakagawa meant that Tatsuo Hirano, state minister for disaster reconstruction, was relieved of his disaster management portfolio

but remained in the cabinet as minister for comprehensive review of measures in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake. He was also named minister of reconstruction and appointed head of a new post-disaster reconstruction agency that was formally established on Feb. 11. The reconstruction agency, which was scheduled to operate until 2021, was designed to manage ongoing efforts to rebuild those areas of Japan affected by the 2011 disaster. In addition to responding swiftly to local government requests in the disaster zone, the new agency would also work with municipalities to draw up reconstruction plans, allocate reconstruction funds from a central budget, and authorise local governments to establish special reconstruction zones.

Report on Fukushima accident

The first independent inquiry into the Fukushima disaster published its findings on Feb. 28 in the form of a 400-page report based on interviews conducted with some 300 people involved in the crisis, including the then prime minister, Naoto Kan, members of his government and key bureaucrats. The report found that the overall handling of the emergency by Kan's administration had been "a failure", and that the government had "failed in releasing information" relating to the crisis, and had thereby "diminished public trust."

The investigative panel was chaired by Koichi Kitazawa, an emeritus professor at the University of Tokyo and a former president of the Japan Science and Technology Agency. He criticised the Fukushima plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco), for having been "negligent" in preparing for such a disaster, and stated that regulators had "failed in their supervision" of the plant's operation. The inquiry also revealed government fears in the immediate aftermath of the disaster that there could be a chain reaction with failures at nuclear plants nearer to Tokyo which would force the evacuation of some 30 million people from the vicinity of the Japanese capital.

The report detailed the tension and miscommunication between the government and Tepco in the aftermath of the disaster. In this respect it endorsed the findings of a government inquiry that had released an interim report in December 2011 [see pp. 50816-17]. However, the more recent report differed markedly from the earlier one in its assessment of the significance of Kan's belligerent arrival at the headquarters of Tepco in the early hours of March 15, 2011. Having heard that Tepco wanted to withdraw staff and abandon the stricken nuclear plant Kan had uncompromisingly prohibited such a course, choosing instead to create an integrated task force to combat the crisis, a response which the report acknowledged had "made some difference" in dealing with the disaster.

Change of monetary policy

In an unexpected move the Bank of Japan (BoJ—the central bank) on Feb. 14 eased monetary policy by announcing that it would expand its asset-purchasing programme in 2012 by some 10,000 billion yen (US\$1.00=79.3600

yen as at Feb. 17, 2012), from 55,000 billion yen to 65,000 billion. The move—which amounted to a commitment to buy around 25 per cent of government bonds sold—was designed to boost the country's ailing economy using the main policy tool available (given that interest rates were effectively at zero). Furthermore, in a bid to combat the threat of deflation, the BoJ revised its position on inflation by announcing that it was aiming to achieve a 1 per cent year-on-year rise in the consumer price index.

Both measures had been called for by the Noda government. There had also been demands by an increasing number of legislators for the BoJ to adopt greater economic stimulus measures or else be brought under government control. The BoJ's governor, Masaaki Shirakawa, a fierce guardian of the bank's independence, denied that the change of policy had been the result of political pressure.

Revision of accord on US troops in Okinawa

The governments of Japan and the USA announced on Feb. 8 that they had agreed to revise the 2006 bilateral agreement whereby tangible progress on relocating the US marine corps Futenma air base to another area of Okinawa had been a precondition for the removal of some 8,000 of the 18,000 US marines (and 9,000 of their dependants) from Okinawa to Guam. With negotiations surrounding the relocation of the base bogged down by local opposition to its continued presence on the island, the two governments agreed to decouple the elements of the 2006 agreement, with the USA going ahead with the redeployment of the 8,000 marines to Guam and other Pacific locations.

Both sides stressed that the move would in no way compromise Japan's security or the defence relationship between the two allies. They also suggested that negotiations to move the Futenma base from its current location—the crowded city of Ginowan—to a less densely populated area of the island would continue. [For background see pp. 49792; 49524; 47255; 47203-04.]

■ Last article pp. 50867-68.

BURMA

Developments in by-elections campaign

Leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) Aung San Suu Kyi on Feb. 11 began her campaign for a by-election on April 1 to the parliamentary seat of Kawhmu, a suburb of Rangoon (the former capital) [for re-registration of NLD as political party see p. 50865]. Suu Kyi's candidacy had been officially approved on Feb. 6 by the Union Election Commission (UEC). However, following

this the eligibility of her candidacy was challenged by a rival candidate, U Tin Yi of the Unity and Peace Party (UPP), who claimed that Suu Kyi profited from property and other assets in the UK. This objection was definitively rejected on Feb. 29 by the Rangoon regional election commission.

The defeat of the challenge meant that Suu Kyi was able to campaign on her own behalf, whereas previously she had been able only to support other NLD candidates. It was reported on Feb. 11 that cheering crowds lined the roads when Suu Kyi visited Kawhmu, where she gave a speech that emphasised the need for unity amongst the country's ethnic groups as a precondition for peace and prosperity. In other campaign speeches she also stressed the importance of progress in employment, education and healthcare. It was a mark of the new status of Suu Kyi as a partner in the reformist programme of President Gen. (retd) Thein Sein that when she on Feb. 20 complained that the NLD was being unfairly denied the use of sports stadiums for election rallies, the UEC at once lifted the ban, thought to have been imposed by Sports Minister Tint San.

Relations with UN and EU

Burma's engagement with Western countries and international institutions that had regarded the former military government as a pariah regime developed apace [see also p. 50865]. The UN special rapporteur on human rights in Burma Tomas Ojea Quintana on Feb. 5 concluded a six-day visit to the country with a press conference in which he praised the positive impact of the "continuing wave of reforms" in Burma. However, Quintana warned that serious challenges remained and that there was a risk of the government retreating from reform. During his visit Quintana held talks with senior government ministers, Aung San Suu Kyi and some remaining political prisoners. He said that the UEC was considering allowing international election monitors to observe the 48 by-elections scheduled for April 1.

A joint visit was made to Burma on Feb. 13-17 by Vijay Gambiar, special adviser to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and Ajay Chhibber, UN Development Programme (UNDP)'s regional director for Asia and the Pacific, with the rank of assistant secretary general. Gambiar said that in talks with officials he stressed the priorities of fair and transparent by-elections on April 1, the building of durable peace and national reconciliation with dissident ethnic minority groups, sound economic policies to promote health, education and job creation, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. The centrepiece of the UN visit was a meeting on Feb. 15 in Naypyidaw (the capital) devoted to economic development policy, attended by some 450 participants, both Burmese and international. The meeting agreed on the staging later in the year of a large-scale international aid conference, with the aim of reducing poverty levels in Burma from 26 per cent to 16 per cent by 2015.

During a visit to Burma on Feb. 13-14 EU Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs announced an

EU aid package of US\$200 million to be devoted to health, education and infrastructure. The first delegation of the European Parliament to visit Burma arrived on Feb. 29, intending to meet President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi and to establish formal relations with the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (the Assembly of the Union, the bicameral legislature). The EU on Feb. 20 lifted travel restrictions on 87 Burmese officials, including the president, the vice presidents, legislators and members of their families, in recognition of recent reforms, including the release of political prisoners.

Foreign debt

It was reported on Feb. 2 that during a debate in the Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Assembly—the lower house of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) on the 2012-13 budget, Finance Minister Hla Tun revealed that Burma's foreign debt totalled more than US\$11 billion, of which some US\$8.4 billion was incurred in 1962-88 by the government of the late Gen. Ne Win [for details of legislature see p. 50231]. In the era since 1988, when Burma had been largely isolated from foreign funding, China had become its largest creditor, being owed some US\$2.13 billion.

Analysts said that the open release of such financial data was unprecedented. Details of the budget were unavailable by the end of the month, but it was reported that the planned allocation for education was doubled, and that for health increased fourfold.

Detention of Buddhist monk

Police on Feb. 10 briefly detained Buddhist monk Ashin Gambira, one of many prominent political prisoners released in January [see p. 50865]. One of the leaders of the 2007 "Saffron Revolution" crushed by the military, Gambira was subsequently sentenced to 67 years' imprisonment [see pp. 48131; 48199; 48891]. Since his release Gambira had expressed scepticism over the new government's reforms and reopened three monasteries in Rangoon that had been shut down after the failed uprising. The Thailand-based *Irrawaddy* website on Feb. 20 reported that at the instigation of the state-backed Sangha Council of monks charges were to be brought against Gambira for breaking into monasteries and resuming his monkhood without authorisation.

IN BRIEF

It was reported by the *Myanmar Times* newspaper on Jan. 30 that Immigration and Population Minister Khin Yi had announced that the government planned to hold a **census** in December 2014, Burma's first since 1983. Khin Yi said that the government would ask international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for assistance in preparations for collecting the data.

It was reported by the *International Herald Tribune* on Feb. 4 that Zipporah Sein, general secretary of the ethnic **Karen National Union** (KNU), had said

in an interview that a team of negotiators who in January had announced a ceasefire with government forces did not have the authority to sign a ceasefire agreement [see pp. 50865-66]. She said that all that had been agreed was that further talks would be held. One KNU demand was that any ceasefire should apply simultaneously to all conflicts with ethnic minorities.

It was reported by the New Delhi-based Mizzima news agency on Feb. 20 that Myat Nyar Na Soe, a **legislator in the Amyotha Hluttaw** (National Assembly—the upper house of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw), had left the National Democratic Force (NDF) party to become a member of the NLD, its first legislator.

■ Last article pp. 50865-66.

THAILAND

Attempted terrorist attack in Bangkok

Police on Feb. 14 arrested two suspected terrorists after they were called to an incident in the Ekkamai district of Bangkok (the capital) in which an explosion blew off the roof of a house. Three men, all later named as Iranian nationals, fled the property, two initially escaping. The third, named as Saeid Moradi, threw a grenade at a taxi, injuring five people. Moradi was arrested after accidentally injuring himself with a second grenade and losing both his legs. A second suspect, Mohammed Hazeai, was arrested at Bangkok's international airport attempting to board a flight to Malaysia, whilst the third was arrested on Feb. 15 by Malaysian police in Kuala Lumpur (the capital of Malaysia). The Thai police, who found explosives and detonators in the house in Bangkok, also said that a fourth suspect, an Iranian woman who had rented the property, had left Thailand earlier in the month.

Police chief Gen. Prewpan Dhamapong said on Feb. 15 in a television interview that he thought that the terrorist operation was targeted at Israeli diplomatic personnel and that the explosives found were similar to those used in two attacks directed at Israeli diplomats on Feb. 13 in India and Georgia [see p. 50956 (Israel)]. The police on Feb. 26 arrested in Bangkok three more Iranians, two men and a woman, in connection with the investigation. Israel held Iran responsible for the attempted attacks in all three countries [see also January arrest of Lebanese terrorist suspect p. 50866].

Conviction of Red and Yellow Shirt leaders

A court on Feb. 28 convicted Surachai Danwattananusorn, 70, a former leader of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), known as the Red Shirts, of charges of lèse majesté (insult to the monar-

chy) and sentenced him to seven-and-a-half years in prison. The sentence was halved from 15 years because Surachai pleaded guilty to three of the five charges.

The UDD backed self-exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, mounted a campaign of street demonstrations in 2010 against an anti-Thaksin government and lent its support to a successful general election campaign in 2011 by Thaksin's sister, the current Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra [see pp. 50598-99; 50564].

Also on Feb. 28 a court convicted Sondhi Limthongkul, a media tycoon and founder of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, known as the Yellow Shirts), of 17 counts of falsifying documents to obtain 11 billion baht (US\$1.00=30.3700 baht as at Feb. 24, 2012) of loans in the 1990s for his media company. Sondhi had been a bitter commercial rival of former Prime Minister Thaksin, who made a fortune through his telecommunications business. After Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006 a pro-Thaksin party was elected to government in 2007 [see p. 48310]. Sondhi founded the monarchist PAD pressure group, which through a succession of sometimes violent street demonstrations in 2008 effectively brought down two pro-Thaksin governments [see pp. 48934-35].

The court sentenced Sondhi to 20 years in prison (commuted from 85 years), and freed him on bail pending the outcome of an appeal. Sondhi also faced terrorism charges [see p. 50346].

Economic cost of floods

According to figures released on Feb. 20 by the government's National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) the economic effects of the severe floods that hit the country in 2011 were more serious than expected, with the economy contracting by 9 per cent in the last quarter of 2011 (compared with the previous year), against estimates of 4 per cent to 5 per cent. The contraction from the previous quarter was 10.7 per cent, manufacturing industry being worst affected, with a shrinkage of 23 per cent. Overall, GDP grew by only 0.1 per cent in 2011.

However, the NESDB forecast GDP growth of 5.5 per cent to 6.5 per cent in 2012. Analysts said that an economic recovery was already under way,

partly supported by the government's plans to invest in flood recovery and future flood defences [see p. 50866].

Approval of constitution-drafting body

The cabinet on Feb. 13 approved an amendment to clause 291 of the constitution to establish an assembly to draft a new constitution. Prime Minister Yingluck said that of the 99 members of the assembly the 77 provinces would elect one member each and the remaining 22 would be chosen by the House of Representatives (the lower house of the legislature).

■ Last article p. 50866.

CAMBODIA

Senate elections

In elections held on Jan. 29 to 57 seats of the 61-member Senate (the upper house of the bicameral legislature) the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) increased its majority, winning 46 seats against 11 for the opposition Sam Rangs Party (SRP) [for 2006 elections see pp. 47046-47]. The electorate for the 57 elected senators consisted of 11,351 commune councillors and 119 legislators of the National Assembly (the lower house). The CPP and the SRP were the only parties to contest the election. In 2006 the royalist Funcinpec party won 10 seats.

Of the remaining four Senate seats two were nominated by King Norodom Sihamoni and two by the National Assembly.

Life sentence for Comrade Duch

The appeal body of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) on Feb. 3 rejected an appeal by Kang Kek Ieu (commonly known as Comrade Duch and also rendered Kaing Guek Eav) against his original sentence of 35 years in prison for crimes against humanity, and instead increased the sentence to life imprisonment [for July 2010 conviction see p. 49946]. Although Duch, 69,

Results of elections to Cambodian Senate

Party	Valid votes	% of valid vote	Seats
Cambodian People's Party (CPP)	8,880	78.1	46
Sam Rangs Party (SRP)	2,503	21.9	11
Total	11,383	100.0	57

Turnout: 99.49 per cent (including 29 invalid ballots).

(Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union.)

had not been a senior official of the Khmer Rouge government (1975-79), as commandant of the Tuol Sleng S-21 interrogation centre he had presided over the deaths of some 16,000 people, many of whom were tortured.

Although early in his trial Duch had shown remorse he later seemed to disclaim responsibility for his actions as camp commander. His appeal against the sentence was grounded in the defence that he was merely a "junior officer" who feared for his life if he were to disobey orders. However, when pronouncing the life sentence Judge Kong Srim, president of the court, said that Duch's crimes were "among the worst in human history" and deserved the "highest possible penalty".

International donors Japan, Germany, the UK and the EU on Feb. 28 pledged US\$89 million in funding for the process of the ECCC in 2012-13. Funding for the ECCC 2006-11 had totalled US\$141.1 million, of which US\$107.9 million had been supplied by international donors. Currently three surviving senior Khmer Rouge leaders were on trial for genocide and other crimes against humanity [for November 2011 commencement of trial see p. 50769].

Conditions of garment workers

The Asia Floor Wage Campaign (AFWC) organised a "People's Tribunal" on Feb. 6-8 in Phnom Penh (the capital) to examine wages and conditions for Cambodian garment and footwear workers. The tribunal, a panel of international and local judges, recommended that the multinational corporations supplied by Cambodian factories commit themselves to a "mandatory living wage" at all levels of the supply chain, although it did not set a level for this.

The AFWC said that garment workers should be paid a minimum of US\$281 a month, compared with the current minimum wage of US\$66 a month. The panel also urged the corporations to do more to improve working conditions. Over the past two years there had been numerous incidents of mass fainting in garment factories.

■ Last articles pp. 50877-78; 50824; 50769.

VIETNAM

Meeting of CPV

The ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) on Feb. 27-29 held a national conference in Hanoi (the capital) of some 1,000 delegates, including the politburo and central committee, to discuss the future of the party and possible reforms. CPV general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong had said in an interview at the beginning of the year that the party must reform or die, accusing many party members of being motivated by individualism, selfishness and opportunism.

At the conference, Trong emphasised the necessity to combine a revival of the party's traditional values and discipline with greater openness. He said that the party had to face new challenges. Major themes of the conference included the fight against corruption and waste, income inequality and failures of leadership. Some commentators said that the CPV appeared to be on the brink of major reforms.

■ Last article p. 50769.

INDONESIA

Trial of Bali bombings suspect

The trial began on Feb. 13 of Umar Patek, suspected bomb maker and Islamic militant, on a string of terrorism-related charges, the chief one being that he constructed the bombs used in the bombing attacks in Bali in October 2002 in which 202 people were killed [see pp. 45034-36]. He was also accused of involvement in the bombing of Christian churches in Jakarta (the capital) in 2000 and in the establishment of a militant training camp in the north Sumatran province of Aceh.

Patek, who was extradited from Pakistan in August 2011, was the last major Bali suspect to be sought by the police, the others having been tried and executed or imprisoned or killed in police operations [see p. 50600].

Ruling on prison term for militant cleric

The Supreme Court on Feb. 27 overturned a high court ruling in October 2011 that reduced a prison term imposed for inciting terrorism on militant Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir from 15 to nine years [see p. 50712]. The alleged spiritual leader of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) group, thought responsible for the Bali bombings, Bashir, 73, was acquitted of involvement in terrorism in 2003 [see p. 45594].

■ Last article p. 50867.

PHILIPPINES

Reported progress in peace talks with MILF

It was reported by the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* newspaper on Feb. 17 that in the latest round of negotiations between the government and the separatist group the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Kuala Lumpur (the capital of Malaysia), government negotiators had agreed, with the approval of President Benigno "Noy" Aquino III, on a MILF proposal for a parliamentary form of government in the area

of the southern island of Mindanao currently designated the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). MILF had reportedly abandoned its original goal of independence and agreed to discuss a broad form of autonomy.

The next round of talks was scheduled for March [for recent developments in southern insurgency and peace talks see pp. 50712; 50600].

At least three people were killed when some 50 gunmen on Feb. 19 failed in an attempt to storm a prison in Kidapawan City, North Cotabato province, Mindanao. Those killed were a Red Cross worker and two bystanders. The police accused the MILF of trying to free an imprisoned leader, but the separatist group denied responsibility.

Air strike on militants

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) claimed that an air strike on Feb. 2 in the island of Jolo in south-western Sulu province killed about 15 Islamic separatist militants, including three militant leaders. Military spokesmen named two senior members of the regional militant network Jemaah Islamiah (JI), Zulkifli bin Hir (alias Marwan), a Malaysian, and Abdullah Ali (alias Muawiyah), a Singaporean, and a leader of the Philippine separatist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Umbra Jumdail (alias Dr Abu). However, doubts were cast on the veracity of the claim because the AFP was unable to recover any bodies from the remains of the militants' jungle camp.

It was reported that the raid made use of US-supplied intelligence. Marwan, a bomb maker, was on a US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) most wanted terrorists list with a reward of US\$5 million offered for his capture.

IN BRIEF

An **earthquake** measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale struck Negros Island (Negros Oriental province) in the central Philippines on Feb. 6, triggering landslides that killed at least 26 people and injured 52. It was reported on Feb. 8 that 71 people were still missing and believed dead.

Former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on Feb. 23 pleaded not guilty in a court in Manila (the capital) at the opening of a trial for electoral fraud. She was accused of vote rigging on behalf of her allies in legislative elections in 2007 [for background see pp. 50768-69; 50600]. Macapagal-Arroyo, who was being treated for a spinal condition, was currently being detained in a military hospital.

■ Last article p. 50867.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Ferry disaster

An inter-island ferry, the *MV Rabaul Queen*, on Feb. 2 capsized in rough seas and sank 16

km off the northern coast of the main island of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The ferry had been carrying at least 350 passengers from Kimbe on New Britain island to the coastal city of Lae in Morobe province. Rescuers, including ships and helicopters sent by Australia's maritime safety authority (AMSA), saved 238 people on the day of the sinking. The *PNG Post-Courier* newspaper on Feb. 6 cited reports that there may have been up to 780 passengers on the *Rabaul Queen*, which had a certificate to carry only 310 passengers. Only four bodies were recovered by the end of the month.

Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, who admitted that safety in the shipping industry was lax, on Feb. 6 authorised an independent investigation into the disaster. A petition by survivors of the sinking demanded that the ferry owner and crew be charged with manslaughter. It was reported by Radio Australia on Feb. 16 that the commission of inquiry would be headed by Warwick Andrew, an Australian judge who was a member of a commission of inquiry into the sinking in 2009 of the Tongan ferry *MV Princess Ashika* with the loss of 74 lives [see pp. 49367; 49417; 49473; 49690; 49796 (all Tonga)]. Works and Transport Minister Francis Awesa on Feb. 26 revealed that five other vessels operated by Rabaul Shipping, the owner of the *Rabaul Queen*, had been involved in maritime accidents over the past decade.

Parliamentary business

The speaker of the National Parliament (the unicameral legislature) on Feb. 15 recognised Dame Carol Kidu, a former cabinet minister, as leader of the opposition. In consequence of a continuing dispute between Prime Minister O'Neill and former Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare over which headed a legitimate government, Somare's supporters had been boycotting Parliament since O'Neill took power in August 2011 [for background see pp. 50876; 50823; 50607]. It was later reported that a handful of other MPs had joined Dame Carol, who had previously been the only member on the opposition benches.

A bill to reserve 22 seats in the National Parliament for women failed to gain the backing of the 73 votes (a two-thirds majority) necessary to pass a constitutional amendment, partly because of the boycott by Somare's supporters and partly because of deliberate abstention. The bill, passed on Feb. 23 by 55 votes to one, had been tabled by Dame Carol and backed by the O'Neill government.

Parliament on Feb. 23 passed a bill to establish a sovereign wealth fund (SWF). O'Neill on Feb. 24 said that the initial deposit in the SWF would be 100 billion kina (US\$1.00= 2.0639 kina as at Feb. 24, 2012), the revenues from a liquefied natural gas (LNG) project. O'Neill said that the fund would ensure that the revenues were spent well to improve the standard of living of the people, especially through employment and education.

Government changes

Prime Minister O'Neill on Feb. 27 removed the finance portfolio from Don Polye, leader of the Triumph Heritage Empowerment Party (THEP), leaving Polye with the treasury and border development portfolios [for appointment see p. 50607]. Regarding the demotion of Polye, hitherto one of O'Neill's chief allies, the prime minister cited "runaway expenditure" in the finance department and Polye's handling of infrastructure development grants to landowners in areas affected by the LNG project. O'Neill took on the finance portfolio himself on a temporary basis.

■ Last article pp. 50876-77.

AUSTRALIA

Labor leadership contest - Government changes

Prime Minister Julia Gillard on Feb. 27 fought off a challenge to her leadership of the ruling Australian Labor Party (ALP) in an election amongst ALP MPs, which she won by 71 votes to 31 for former Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd, who was also Gillard's predecessor as prime minister. A challenge to Gillard's leadership became inevitable when Rudd on Feb. 22, during an official visit to Washington DC, announced his resignation as foreign minister, claiming that senior cabinet ministers were undermining his position with Gillard's approval. He did not, however, announce his challenge for the leadership until Feb. 24.

Analysts were unsurprised by Gillard's comfortable victory: although Rudd remained the most popular national politician with the electorate, contrasting with the current weak opinion poll ratings of Gillard and the ALP minority government, he was disliked by many in the parliamentary ALP for his allegedly autocratic style as prime minister. Gillard had ousted Rudd from the party leadership in June 2010 [see p. 49902].

In the wake of his defeat Rudd pledged "absolute support" for Gillard and said that he would not make another challenge for the leadership before legislative elections due in 2013.

Gillard had on Feb. 22 reassigned the foreign affairs portfolio to Trade Minister Craig Emerson in an acting capacity.

Recommendation by Senate committee of apology to single mothers

Concluding an 18-month inquiry on Feb. 29 a committee of the Senate (the upper house of the federal legislature) recommended that federal, state and territory authorities make a formal national apology to some 150,000 unmarried

mothers whose babies had been taken away from them at birth for adoption between 1950 and 1980. The mothers had been coerced or deceived into signing consent forms for adoption.

Former Prime Minister Rudd had in 2008 made a public apology for the country's mistreatment of Aborigines, including a specific apology to the "stolen generations" of Aborigine children compulsorily adopted by white families [see p. 48418]. In 2009 Rudd made a similar apology for Australia's role in a UK migration policy that saw some 10,000 children from poor families in the UK sent to Australia for adoption before the scheme ended in 1967 [see p. 49529].

Floods

Severe flooding caused by torrential rains on Feb. 3 began to affect parts of the eastern states of Queensland and New South Wales (NSW) either side of the state border, resulting in the evacuation of thousands of people from the Queensland towns of St George, Mitchell and Roma and the NSW town of Moree. One woman was drowned in Roma when her car was swept away by the flood. By the end of the month exceptionally heavy rainfall was affecting southern areas of NSW, including Sydney (the state capital), and Canberra (the Australian Capital Territory—ACT) [for 2011 cyclone and floods in Queensland see pp. 50283; 50228].

■ Last article p. 50876.

NEW ZEALAND

Report on Christchurch earthquake

A government report on the earthquake that struck the city of Christchurch in South Island in February 2011, published on Feb. 9, found that the Canterbury Television (CTV) building that collapsed, killing 115 people, did not meet the earthquake-resistant structural standards that obtained when it was built in 1986. The building's load-bearing concrete columns were insufficiently reinforced with steel.

The final death toll in the earthquake was raised from 181 to 185 [see p. 50282].

Block on sale of farms to China

The high court in Wellington (the capital) on Feb. 15 asked the government to reconsider its intention to sell 16 farms in North Island, comprising nearly 8,000 hectares of land, to a subsidiary of China's Shanghai Pengxin company. Justice Forest Miller said that the government had overestimated the benefits of the sale and that the buyers had inadequate knowledge of the dairy industry.

Guilty pleas by ship's officers

The captain and navigator of the cargo ship *MV Rena*, which ran aground on the Astrolabe reef off North Island in October 2011, on Feb. 29 pleaded guilty to a series of charges, including operating a vessel in a manner causing unnecessary risk and attempting to pervert the course of justice. The ship, which broke up in January, leaked hundreds of tonnes of fuel in what was regarded as New Zealand's worst maritime pollution disaster [see pp. 50878; 50715]. The two ship's officers could not be named until they were sentenced in May.

■ Last articles pp. 50878; 50822-23.

TONGA

Reorganisation of ministries

Alfred Soakai, deputy secretary to the prime minister's office, announced on Feb. 14 that as part of a process of streamlining the government, reducing it from 26 ministries to 13, two new umbrella ministries were being created, to come into operation on July 1.

An infrastructure ministry would combine civil aviation, transport and works, whilst other portfolios were to be brought under that of internal affairs. [For previous government changes see p. 50656; for full cabinet list see p. 50229.]

Cyclones Jasmine and Cyril

Cyclone Jasmine, which struck Tonga on Feb. 15, resulted in heavy flooding in residential areas of Nuku'alofa (the capital) and other parts of Tongatapu, the main island. Many power and telephone lines were brought down by the winds, crops were ruined and several fishing vessels, including one South Korean trawler, sank in the storm.

Cyclone Cyril, which at one stage threatened to cause serious flooding on Tongatapu, moved away in an easterly direction on Feb. 7, having left some damage on Vava'u island.

■ Last articles pp. 50878; 50824.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

Dismissal of foreign minister

Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo on Feb. 9 dismissed Foreign Minister Peter Shanel (also known as Peter Shanel Agovaka). Early in the month Shanel had returned from a visit to Fiji, where he held talks with visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, including discussion of a proposal to establish diplomatic relations. Lilo said that Shanel was dismissed

because he acted unilaterally and breached the rule of collective cabinet responsibility [for appointment of Shanel see p. 50773].

In addition to appointing on Feb. 28 Police Minister Clay Forau Soalaoi as Shanel's replacement, Lilo had earlier conducted a minor cabinet reshuffle. It was reported on Feb. 29 that Lilo was likely to continue the reshuffle. [For last full cabinet list see p. 50773.]

The posts affected by the reshuffle were as follows:

+Clay Forau Soalaoi Foreign Affairs
+Walter Folotalu Communication and Aviation
*David Tome Provincial Government
*Seth Gukuna Infrastructure
+Alfred Ghiro Fisheries

*New appointment.
+Altered responsibilities.

Budget

Parliament (the unicameral legislature) on Feb. 2 passed a 2012 budget totalling SI\$3.1 billion (US\$1.00=7.0646 Solomon Islands dollars as at Feb. 3, 2012) of expenditure. Finance Minister Rick Houeniopwela said that some 50 per cent of the budget was allocated to rural provincial development. A surplus of SI\$2.2 billion meant that the budget was fully funded and that there was no need for further borrowing.

Death of former governor general

Sir Baddeley Devesi, the first governor general of the Solomon Islands, who served two terms 1978-88, died on Feb. 16, aged 70. Sir Baddeley also served as foreign minister 1989-90, interior minister 1990-92 and deputy prime minister 1990-93 and 1997-2000 [see p. 42405].

■ Last article pp. 50823-24.

EUROPE

GREECE

Second EU-IMF rescue plan - Internal political developments

After 14 hours of negotiations, euro zone finance ministers in Brussels in the early hours of Feb. 21 formally agreed a second EU-IMF bailout package for debt-stricken Greece totalling €230 billion (US\$1.00=0.7428 euros as at Feb. 24, 2012) [for first €110 billion EU-IMF rescue in May 2010 see pp. 49856-57]. First promised in October 2011 [see p. 50725], the second bailout aimed at reducing the country's debt from 160 per cent of GDP to 120 per cent of GDP by 2020. Without the new funds,

IN BRIEF

COOK ISLANDS: It was reported by the *Cook Islands News* on Feb. 21 that former Foreign Minister Wilkie Rasmussen had been unanimously elected leader of the opposition by the Democratic Party (DP), whose leader Robert Wigmore was on medical leave. The Cook Islands Party (CIP) was currently in power under Prime Minister Henry Puna, with 16 seats in the 24-member Parliament (the unicameral legislature), against eight for the DP [for November 2010 elections see p. 50143].

FIIJI: Two new cabinet ministers were sworn in on Feb. 22 to posts newly created by Prime Minister Commodore Frank (J.V.) Bainimarama. Commander Viliame Naupoto was appointed minister for youth and sports, whilst Jone Usamate became minister of labour, industrial relations and employment.

MALAYSIA: Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein on Feb. 13 dismissed protests by human rights groups against the deportation on Feb. 12 to Saudi Arabia of a Saudi journalist who had fled to Malaysia after being accused of blasphemy in his homeland. Hamza Kashgari, 23, had posted remarks on the online social forum *Twitter* that were considered insulting to the Prophet Mohammed, but he had subsequently removed the offending remarks. Hussein said that Malaysia could not be a safe haven for terrorists or those who were "wanted in their countries of origin". Kashgari faced the possible death penalty if convicted of blasphemy in Saudi Arabia.

VANUATU: It was reported by the *Vanuatu Daily Post* newspaper on Feb. 14 that, according to a "reliable source" within the government elections to the 52-member Parliament (the unicameral legislature, also known as the National Assembly) would be held on Oct. 30 [for 2008 elections see p. 48788]. Radio New Zealand International (RNZI) cited acting principal electoral officer Gullain Malessas as the source for the date.

Greece would be unable to meet a €14.5 billion debt repayment due on March 20 and would face bankruptcy.

Under the deal, the EU and IMF would provide €130 billion in new financing. Private sector holders of Greek sovereign bonds (banks, insurers, pension funds, and investment funds) were expected to contribute an additional €100 billion to debt relief by accepting a larger than expected voluntary loss (a "haircut") of 53.5 per cent in the face value of their investments in exchange for safer debt with lower interest rates in the future [see pp. 50725; 50715-16 (EU)]. Overall, the restructuring represented a decrease of over 70 per cent in the "net present value" of Greek sovereign bondholdings. The Vouli (the unicameral legislature) on Feb. 24 approved the retroactive insertion of collective-action clauses (CACs), obliging private bondholders to join the haircut programme once a critical mass

of two thirds of voluntary participants was found. If invoked, the CACs would make the debt exchange involuntary. The government had until March 12 to persuade a majority of bondholders to take part in the debt swap.

In return for the rescue, Greece was required to make further spending cuts of €3.3 billion, amounting to 1.5 per cent of GDP. Underscoring the mistrust between the cash-strapped country and its international lenders, Greece would also have to accept an “enhanced and permanent presence on the ground” in Athens (the capital) of inspectors from the “troika”—the EU, IMF, and European Central Bank (ECB)—who would monitor the government’s implementation of its fiscal commitments. The country would also be required to set up a special escrow (third party) account to service its debts, depositing sums in advance to meet payments that fell due in the following three months, and to pass legislation prioritising repayments to creditors above spending on social services. The troika agreed to lower the interest rate on Greece’s existing bailout loans from 4.8 per cent to 3.65 per cent, while the ECB said it would distribute to euro zone member states any profits it made by owning Greek bonds. The country was given nine days to complete the reforms or forfeit the bailout.

Credit ratings agency Fitch on Feb. 22 downgraded Greece’s long-term debt by two notches, from CCC to C, one level above default. The agency said that it would follow up with a further downgrade to a “restricted default” when the bond swap was completed. Standard & Poor’s (S&P) on Feb. 27 classified Greek debt as being in “selective default”, saying that the retroactive insertion of the CACs [see above] had weakened the creditors’ negotiating power and was regarded as “distressed debt restructuring”.

After the caretaker national unity government missed several deadlines to agree the bailout austerity measures, the Vouli in a dramatic debate on Feb. 12, by 199 votes to 74 (with 27 abstentions), approved the far-reaching spending cuts and tax increases demanded by the troika. They included a 22 per cent cut in the minimum wage, a reduction in welfare spending, and the loss by 2015 of 150,000 public sector jobs, 15,000 of them in 2012, when unemployment already stood at a record 20.9 per cent. As the vote took place amid a 48-hour general strike against austerity, 80,000 angry protesters massed outside the legislature, throwing rocks at the police and setting over 40 buildings ablaze in the worst damage in Athens since May 2010 [see p. 49857]. Eighty people were injured.

Ahead of the vote, Georgios Karatzaferis, leader of the junior coalition far-right Popular Orthodox Rally (Laos), on Feb. 10 announced that his party would not support the austerity measures, saying that the creditors had humiliated Greece. Laos’s Infrastructure, Transport, and Networks Minister Makis Voridis and its three junior ministers resigned from the cabinet. Two junior ministers from the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) also stood down.

After the vote, the two mainstream coalition parties, Pasok and the centre-right New Democracy (ND), expelled 43 of their members for failing to support the measures. Voridis, who voted with the government, was expelled from Laos but retained his portfolio after talks with Prime Minister Lucas Papandreou, and later joined ND. [For previous government changes and full cabinet list see p. 50783.]

The resignations and expulsions reshaped the composition of the 300-seat legislature, with Pasok down to 131 MPs from the 160 elected in 2009 [see p. 49475], and ND down to 62 from 91. The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) held 21 seats, Laos 14, and the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) 9. Independents now numbered 63, making them the second largest grouping in the Vouli.

The EU’s endorsement of the bailout was postponed from Feb. 15 until Feb. 20 after Jean-Claude Juncker, chairman of the euro group of finance ministers, demanded more detail on new austerity measures and written assurances that key Greek politicians would not renege on the deal after a general election scheduled for April. ND leader Antonis Samaras, who had earlier suggested that he might tear up the bailout agreement, was widely expected to lead the next government. The government on Feb. 18 agreed to €325 million of additional cuts demanded by the troika as part of the €3.3 billion austerity package.

Anger and humiliation over the troika’s demands sparked a public backlash. The Greek Federation of Police Officers on Feb. 10, called for arrest warrants to be issued for the troika negotiators, accusing them of extortion and of promoting the elimination of Greece’s democracy and national sovereignty.

Greek President Karolos Papoulias on Feb. 15 accused German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble of insulting his country after the latter appeared to suggest that Greece might go bankrupt. Schäuble had recently compared aid to Greece to pouring money into a “bottomless pit”. Earlier, Papoulias gave up his annual salary of €283,694 in a gesture of support for recession-hit citizens.

KKE general secretary Aleka Papariga on Feb. 9 called for the overthrow of what she described as the “black front” government, accusing Pasok, ND, and Laos of mocking the Greek people when they said that their negotiations with the troika had prevented the worst from happening.

Even as the country’s second bailout—the biggest in Western history—was endorsed, EU officials were already indicating that it had merely bought time, and that Greece would need more assistance.

IN BRIEF

Culture and Tourism Minister Pavlos Geroulanos offered to resign after **two armed and masked robbers on Feb. 17 broke into a museum at Olympia, in southern Greece**, the site of the ancient Olympics, and stole dozens of treasures. The thieves were believed to have taken some 60 gold, bronze, and clay artefacts from the Olympia Archaeological Museum.

Independent MP Panos Kammenos on Feb. 24 announced the formation of a **new political party called “Independent Greeks” (AE)**, an anti-bailout movement opposed to what he described as Greece’s concession of national sovereignty.

■ Last article p. 50883.

CYPRUS

Reunification developments

Dervis Eroglu, president of the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), on Feb. 10 said that July 1, the day Greek Cyprus assumed the rotating EU presidency, would be “the natural end” of negotiations aimed at the reunification of the divided island. Speaking at the inauguration of a “Youth Workshop” organised by the Turkish ministry of youth and sports and the Turkish Cypriot ministry of national education, Eroglu said that the Turkish Cypriot youth was an inseparable part of the Turkish nation. [For launch of negotiations in September 2008 see p. 48803; for recent reunification developments see p. 50884.]

Second round of gas exploration licensing

Greek Cyprus on Feb. 11 launched the second round of licenses for the offshore exploration of hydrocarbons in Blocks 1 to 11, and 13 of its 51,000 sq km exclusive economic zone in the eastern Mediterranean. Block 12 was currently under concession to US company Noble Energy, which in December 2011 had discovered a significant natural gas deposit of some 7 trillion cubic feet [see p. 50838], close to where Israel had reported significant discoveries.

■ Last article pp. 50883-84.

BULGARIA

Corruption developments

The European Commission (EC), in a report on Romania and Bulgaria on Feb. 8, was particularly critical of the latter’s efforts in fighting organised crime and corruption. Highlighting the need for greater commitment in tackling crime gangs and corruption, alleged electoral malpractice, and failed investigations into EU subsidy fraud, it was a further setback to Bulgaria’s hopes of joining the EU’s passport-free Schengen zone. The country’s entry was vetoed by the Netherlands and Finland in September 2011 amid concerns about crime and corruption [see p. 50658]. The Netherlands sought to block the

Schengen membership of Romania and Bulgaria until both had received two consecutive monitoring reports that were positive.

Suspension of ratification of Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement

Economy Minister Traicho Traikov on Feb. 14 said that he would ask his government to suspend ratification of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) on Feb. 15 until the EU dealt with opposition to the treaty. The Czech Republic [see p. 50948 (Czech Republic)], and Poland [see p. 50948 (Poland)] had also delayed a decision on whether to sign the international copyright treaty that some internet users said could lead to online censorship.

Floods

At least four people drowned on Feb. 6 when a dam on the Ivanovo reservoir collapsed after heavy rain, sending a 2.5-metre wave through the village of Bisser, in southern Bulgaria. Four more people died in floods when their cars were swept away by rising waters.

■ Last articles pp. 50893; 50839; 50790; 50723-24.

ROMANIA

New government

Prime Minister Emil Boc of the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) resigned on Feb. 6, having come under intense pressure from widespread protest demonstrations in January that were also directed at President Traian Basescu [see p. 50884]. Boc was succeeded on Feb. 9 by Mihai Razvan Ungureanu (PDL), who formed a three-party coalition maintaining the PDL's alliance with the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR) and bringing in the National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR). [For original formation of Boc coalition in December 2008 see pp. 48953-54; for subsequent government changes see pp. 49006; 49476; 49544; 49584; 50047; 50421; 50614; 50658.]

Ungureanu, 43, had been foreign minister in 2004-07 and subsequently director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SIE). His government was approved by a joint session of the two houses of Parliament on Feb. 9 by 237-2 in a vote boycotted by the opposition Social Liberal Union (USL), which on Feb. 16 challenged its legality at the Constitutional Court. The USL had been formed in February 2011 as an alliance of the Social Democratic (PSD), National Liberal (PNL), and Conservative (PC) parties. The UNPR had been formed in March 2010 by dissident factions of the PSD and the PNL.

New cabinet of Romania

- ***Mihai-Razvan Ungureanu** (PDL) Prime Minister
- Marko Bela** (UDMR) Deputy Prime Minister
- Cătălin Marian Predoiu** (non-party) Justice
- ***Cristian Diaconescu** (UNPR) Foreign Affairs
- Leonard Orban** (non-party) European Affairs
- ***Bogdan Dragoi** (PDL) Finance
- ***Lucian Bode** (PDL) Economy, Trade, and Business Environment
- ***Gabriel Berca** (PDL) Administration and Interior
- Gabriel Oprea** (UNPR) National Defence
- ***Cristian Petrescu** (PDL) Regional Development and Tourism
- ***Alexandru Nazare** (PDL) Transport and Infrastructure
- ***Stelian Fuia** (PDL) Agriculture and Rural Development
- ***Catalin Baba** (PDL) Education, Research, Youth, and Sport
- ***Razvan Mustea** (PDL) Communications and Information Society
- ***Claudia Boghicevici** (f) (PDL) Labour, Family, and Social Protection
- Kelemen Hunor** (UDMR) Culture and National Heritage
- Laszlo Borbely** (UDMR) Environment and Forestry
- Ladislau Risli** (UDMR) Public Health

(PDL) Democratic Liberal Party.

(UDMR) Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania.

(UNPR) National Union for the Progress of Romania.

*New appointment.

Women are denoted by (f).

IN BRIEF

A state of emergency was declared in eastern Romania on Feb. 13 because of very **heavy snowfall**, which had cut off many villages. However, President Basescu rejected an opposition demand that he should declare a national state of emergency.

A court in Bucharest (the capital) on Feb. 14 sentenced former agriculture ministers Decebal Traian Remes and Ioan Avram Muresan [see p. 48213] to three years' imprisonment after convicting them of **corruption in the award of state contracts**. A co-defendant, businessman Gheorghe Ciorba, received a three-year suspended sentence.

The government confirmed on Feb. 21 that EU funding of €3.5 billion (US\$1.00=0.7428 euros as at Feb. 24, 2012) was being frozen because of the discovery of **serious irregularities in programmes intended to help disadvantaged groups** such as Roma (Gypsies). [For non-admission of Romania to Schengen passport-free zone see pp. 50949; 50666; 50525 (all EU).]

■ Last article p. 50884.

LATVIA

Language referendum

A national referendum on Feb. 18 resulted in almost three-quarters of those voting in a relatively high turnout rejecting a proposition that the Latvian constitution should be amended so that Russian became the country's second official language in addition to Latvian. Voters therefore rejected any change in the Official Language Law of 2000, under which Russian was regarded as a foreign language [see p. 43714; for recent language issues see pp. 50658; 50414; 47426; 46542; 45867]. The referendum was the result of an initiative launched in 2010 by the National Alliance representing ethnic Russians, who were usually reported as forming about a third of the country's population.

Result of referendum in Latvia

Question: Do you support the adoption of the draft law "Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia", which provides for the Russian language to have the status of the second official language?

	Votes	% of votes
No votes	821,722	74.80
Yes votes	273,347	24.88
Valid votes	1,095,069	99.68
Invalid or blank votes	3,524	0.32
Total votes	1,098,593	100.00

Turnout: 71.11 per cent.

(Source: Central Election Commission (CVK).)

■ Last articles pp. 50838; 50790; 50727.

FINLAND

Presidential elections

In a second round of presidential elections held on Feb. 5, Sauli Niinistö, a former finance minister and a member of the senior ruling conservative pro-EU National Coalition Party (KOK), was elected as the 12th president of Finland since the country's independence from Russia in 1917. Niinistö, with 62.59 per cent of the vote, won a convincing victory over Pekka Haavisto, the candidate of the junior coalition centrist Green League (VIHR), who gained only 37.41 per cent. A former environment minister, Haavisto was the first openly gay presidential candidate in Finland's history.

The run-off contest was held after none of the eight candidates in the first round of voting on Jan. 22 gar-

Results of second round of presidential elections in Finland

Candidate	Party	Votes	% of vote
Sauli Niinistö	National Coalition Party (KOK)	1,802,328	62.59
Pekka Haavisto	Green League (VIHR)	1,077,425	37.41
Total		2,879,753	100.00

Turnout: 68.9 per cent (2,904,886 votes cast of which 25,133 were invalid).

(Source: Finnish ministry of justice.)

nered more than 50 per cent [see p. 50886-87; for previous presidential elections held in 2006 see p. 47063]. The result meant that the KOK now controlled both the prime minister's office and the president's office. Niinistö succeeded outgoing President Tarja Halonen of the Social Democratic Party (SSDP), who had been head of state since February 2000 [see pp. 43426-27] and was standing down after a second six-year term.

■ Last article pp. 50886-87.

SWEDEN

Birth of Princess Estelle

Crown Princess Victoria on Feb. 23, gave birth to her first child, a daughter. Named Estelle Silvia Ewa Mary, the infant would be second in line to the throne after her mother and have the title of Princess Estelle, Duchess of Oester-
goetland [for abrogation of Salic Law limiting succession to male heirs see p. 30020]. Victoria, 34, in June 2010 married commoner Daniel Westling, 38, her former fitness trainer, who was given the title of Prince Daniel, Duke of Vaestergoetland.

Assassination attempt on Uzbek imam

An unknown assailant in Stromsund on Feb. 22 fired several shots at Obid Gori Nazarov, a dissident Uzbek imam suspected of organising an attempt on the life of imam Anyar Tursunov, and of the murder of police officer Hasan Asadov in Uzbekistan in 2009. Nazarov, who had lived in Sweden since 2006, was taken to a local clinic, where he underwent surgery.

■ Last articles pp. 50894; 50839; 50658-59.

GERMANY

Resignation of president

Christian Wulff of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) resigned as federal president on Feb. 17 after prosecutors had requested that his immunity be lifted so that he could be investigated about a loan of €500,000

(US\$1.00=0.7597 euros as at Feb. 17, 2012) from the wife of a business friend [see pp. 50886; 50835]. Wulff's successor, to be elected in March, would be Germany's third president in less than two years, following the early resignation of his predecessor in May 2010 [see pp. 49910; 49854]. On Feb. 20 former East German Protestant pastor Joachim Gauck (non-party) was nominated to succeed Wulff, despite opposition to his candidacy from CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Wulff declared that he had resigned in order to fight allegations that the loan, which he had received in 2008 when he was Lower Saxony state premier, had been connected with the granting or acceptance of business favours and because Germany needed a president who enjoyed the full trust of the people. He insisted that the investigation of his conduct would lead to "complete exoneration".

Gauck had been nominated for the presidency in 2010 by the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens. In re-nominating him, the SPD and Greens were joined by the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the junior partner in the federal coalition headed by the CDU and also including the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). Despite their similar backgrounds in East German Protestantism under communist rule, Merkel was disinclined to back Gauck's nomination; but the insistence of FDP leader Philipp Rösler left her no political alternative.

The Left party on Feb. 27 nominated as its presidential candidate Beate Klarsfeld, who had worked with her husband Serge Klarsfeld in tracking down former Nazis and who had dual German and French citizenship. In 1968 she had been imprisoned for slapping the face of then Chancellor Kurt-Georg Kiesinger (CDU) because of his past membership of the Nazi party.

Neo-Nazi cell developments

Police in Düsseldorf on Feb. 1 arrested a suspected associate of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground (NSU) cell uncovered in November 2011 [see pp. 50886; 50835; 50780-81]. He was believed to have supplied weapons and money to cell members over a five-year period during which they had carried out six of the 10 murders attributed to them. It was reported on Feb. 13 that German investigators had requested the assistance of the US authorities in discovering what internet contacts had been entered into by cell members.

Chancellor Merkel on Feb. 23 attended a memorial service in Berlin for the 10 known victims of the NSU, eight of them ethnic Turks and one a Greek. Calling the killings "an attack on our country", she led a minute's national silence for those murdered.

Conviction of terrorist

Arid Uka, an ethnic Albanian Muslim from Kosovo, was on Feb. 10 sentenced to life imprisonment after being convicted by a Frankfurt court of the murder of two US airmen and the attempted murder of three others at Frankfurt airport in March 2011 [see p. 50356; for charging of Uka see p. 50572]. Uka was believed to have acted alone in carrying out what was described as the first violent act of Islamist extremism on German soil.

Vote on euro bailout

The Bundestag (the lower house of the bicameral legislature) on Feb. 27 voted by 496-90 with five abstentions in favour of German participation in a further €130 billion euro zone bailout package for Greece, as approved by EU finance ministers on Feb. 21 [see pp. 50938-39 (Greece); for previous Bundestag vote on bailout see p. 50722]. Opinion polls showed that Germany's dominant contribution to the bailout was deeply unpopular, amidst perceptions of Greek financial irresponsibility aggravated by resentment over caricatures in the Greek press of Germans as Nazi oppressors.

The parliamentary vote was followed on Feb. 28 by a further ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court (BVG), supplementing its judgments of September and October 2011 [see pp. 50722; 50660], that the establishment by the Bundestag of a nine-member committee to authorise resort to the bailout fund was "in large part" unconstitutional because of its limited scope. The BVG ruled that the committee should have more members and should reflect the parliamentary balance.

IN BRIEF

Chancellor Merkel and President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan on Feb. 8 reached agreement in Berlin on a €3 billion strategic partnership under which German companies would have the **right to search for and mine rare earths and other minerals in Kazakhstan** in return for German investment. The 17 elements known as rare earths, most of which were currently produced by China, were vital for the manufacture of high technological items such as smart phones and solar panels. [See p. 50930 (Kazakhstan).]

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle on Feb. 9 announced the **expulsion of four Syrian diplomats from Germany**. The decision followed the arrest on Feb. 7 in Berlin of a Syrian national and a Lebanese national suspected of having spied on supporters in Germany of the uprising against the regime in Syria [see pp. 50957-59; 50897-98 (both Syria)].

Councillors in the city of Cologne on Feb. 13 exonerated postmistress **Katharina Henot**, who had been tortured and burnt at the stake as a witch in 1627. About a dozen German cities and towns had in recent years granted pardons to persons executed for witchcraft, numbering some 25,000 in German lands between 1500 and 1782.

The use in Germany of **surgical castration of sex offenders** was condemned as "degrading" on Feb. 22 by the anti-torture committee of the Council of Europe. Whilst acknowledging that the practise was voluntary, rarely used, and carefully controlled, the committee registered its "fundamental objections". The government said that it would consider the opinion, whilst noting that castration was seen as a treatment rather than a punishment. Of the 27 EU member states, only Germany and the Czech Republic still used the procedure.

■ Last article p. 50886.

NETHERLANDS

Regional disquiet over PvdV

Ten central and eastern European countries on Feb. 17 urged the government to take down a controversial website set up by Geert Wilders's far-right anti-immigration Party for Freedom (PvdV) that encouraged Dutch citizens to record examples of "nuisance, trouble, noise and drunkenness" caused by EU migrants from Poland, Hungary and their neighbours. Between 200,000 and 350,000 central and eastern Europeans lived in the Netherlands.

Job Cohen, leader of the opposition Labour Party (PvdA) since April 2010 [see p. 49799], resigned on Feb. 20 as opinion polls showed that the PvdA was supported by under 10 per cent of the electorate, less than half of its level at the last elections [see pp. 49904-05].

Injury of prince in skiing accident

Prince Johan Friso, second son of Queen Beatrix, was caught in an avalanche and seriously injured while skiing near the Alpine resort of Lech, in Austria's western province of Vorarlberg, on Feb. 17. Holidaying with members of the Dutch royal family, the prince was skiing off-piste and was buried in the snow for 25 minutes before rescuers retrieved him using a location device. It took a further 50 minutes to resuscitate him. Dr Wolfgang Koller, head of trauma at the hospital in Innsbruck (in the Austrian Tyrol) where the 43-year-old was being treated, on Feb. 24 said that oxygen starvation had caused massive brain damage and that the prince might never regain consciousness.

Prince Johan Friso on Oct. 10, 2003, renounced his right of succession to the throne so that he would not need official permission to marry human rights activist Mabel Wisse Smit, who had previously had a relationship with a notorious criminal [see p. 45670].

■ Last articles pp. 50894; 50834-35.

BELGIUM

Passage of 2012 budget

The Chamber of Representatives (the lower house of the bicameral legislature) on Feb. 2, by 85 votes to 53, adopted an austerity budget for fiscal 2012, projecting growth at close to 0 per cent, down from the 0.8 per cent previously envisaged [see p. 50824]. Reduced revenues meant that an additional €1 billion (US\$1.00=0.7621 euros as at Feb. 3, 2012) in savings would be required to meet the deficit target of 2.8 per cent of GDP. [For 2009 budget see p. 49005.]

Traffic at Belgian ports came to a halt on Feb. 14 as port workers walked out on strike over plans in the budget to raise the retirement age [see p. 50824]. At Antwerp, a stoppage by tugboat and traffic operators left more than 30 ships unable to enter or leave.

■ Last article p. 50886.

FRANCE

Presidential campaign

President Nicolas Sarkozy of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) announced on Feb. 15 that he would seek a second five-year term in the presidential elections to be held in two rounds in April and May. His rather belated official entry into the race was seen by commentators as intended to use the imminence of voting to reverse his very low opinion poll ratings against the candidate of the opposition Socialist Party (PS), François Hollande. A particular issue was whether Sarkozy would get through to the second round of voting or whether the leader of the radical right-wing National Front (FN), Marine Le Pen, would emulate her father Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002 by coming second in the first round [see pp. 44798-99; 44736-37; for election of Sarkozy in 2007 see pp. 47936; 47886].

Sarkozy made it clear that his campaign would emphasise his experience in government in difficult economic times, seeking to downplay the significance of France's loss of its triple A credit rating in January [see p. 50878] and depicting Hollande as inexperienced and "dangerous" for France in his economic policy prescriptions. It had been confirmed on Feb. 6 that German Chancellor Angela Merkel would campaign in France in support of Sarkozy—news which left analysts undecided whether she would help or hinder his re-election prospects.

Hollande on Feb. 28 put forward a policy programme described as unashamedly socialist, reiterating his hostility to "the world of finance" responsible for the post-2008 financial crisis and calling for a 75 per cent rate of tax on annual incomes of over €1 million (US\$1.00=0.7428 euros as at Feb. 24, 2012). He also pledged to renegotiate the stability, co-ordination, and governance pact

agreed by 25 of the 27 EU members in January [see pp. 50948-49; 50887 (both EU)]. On Feb. 29 Hollande brought his campaign to London, seeking support among the 300,000 French residents of the UK capital, the sixth largest French city in terms of population.

Marine Le Pen suffered a setback on Feb. 21 when the Constitutional Council rejected her submission that the names of the 500 local or national elected representatives (out of some 47,000 across France) whose signatures of support were required by would-be presidential candidates should not be made public. She had complained that the rule requiring the names to be published discriminated against a smaller party such as the FN, because the UMP and the PS could pressurise mayors not to endorse her. Le Pen said at the time of the ruling that she had promises for 410 of the required 500 signatures, the deadline for the collection of which was March 16.

Strauss-Kahn affair

Former IMF managing director Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who had escaped being prosecuted in New York and Paris on allegations of sexual assault and attempted rape made by two women [see pp. 50720; 50661; 50611], was on Feb. 21 taken in for questioning by the police in Lille in northern France about allegations that he had been a client of a prostitution ring based in the city and financed by businessmen [see p. 50777]. He was released after 48 hours, having reportedly told the police that he had not been aware that women introduced to him at parties by police officers had been prostitutes.

Law on Armenian genocide

The Constitutional Council on Feb. 28 struck down, on the grounds that it infringed the right to freedom of expression, a new law making it a criminal offence to deny that the mass killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I amounted to genocide. The measure had been adopted in December 2011 by the National Assembly (the lower chamber of the bicameral legislature) and in January by the Senate (the upper chamber) [see pp. 50878; 50833-34]. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu responded that the ruling had stopped a "gulf" opening between Turkey and France. However, President Sarkozy reiterated his support for the law and pledged that a revised text taking account of the ruling would be tabled.

IN BRIEF

An appeal court on Feb. 2 upheld a fine of €600,000 imposed on the French branch of the **US-based Church of Scientology** in October 2009 for carrying out "organised fraud" in preying financially on vulnerable adherents [see p. 49479]. The court also imposed suspended prison sentences of

up to two years and fines on five Scientologists, including Alain Rosenberg, the head of the church in France.

Bordeaux magistrates announced on Feb. 9 that former UMP minister **Eric Woerth** would be placed under formal judicial investigation on suspicion of "passive influence peddling" in raising funds for Sarkozy's 2007 presidential election campaign from L'Oréal heiress Liliane Bettencourt [see pp. 50043; 49957].

The trial opened in Paris on Feb. 9 of **celebrated parfumeur Jean-Pierre Guerlain** on charges of "proffering racial insults" in a television interview in 2010 in which he had twice used the word "nègre", the French equivalent of "nigger". Guerlain apologised in court for making "imbecilic" and "old-fashioned" remarks.

In a potentially landmark ruling, a court in Lyons on Feb. 14 found the **US bio-technology firm Monsanto** guilty of ruining the health of a cereal farmer in western France who had accidentally inhaled fumes from Monsanto's Lasso herbicide in 2004. Facing a large compensation award, Monsanto claimed that the farmer had not followed safety procedures and gave notice of appeal.

An appeal court on Feb. 16 upheld the conviction in February 2008 of then FN leader **Jean-Marie Le Pen** [see above] for condoning war crimes by asserting in a magazine interview that the German occupation of France during World War II had been relatively benign, for which he had been given a three-month suspended prison sentence and fined €10,000 [see p. 48434]. Le Pen said that he would appeal to the Cour de Cassation, the highest appeal court.

■ Last article pp. 50878-79.

UNITED KINGDOM

Resignation of Huhne

Chris Huhne (Liberal Democrat) on Feb. 2 resigned as energy and climate change secretary in his party's coalition government with the Conservatives headed by Prime Minister David Cameron, after the director of public prosecutions had announced that he and his former wife, Vicky Pryce, would be charged with conspiracy to pervert the course of justice [see p. 50610]. Becoming the first cabinet minister since 1721 to resign over a criminal charge, Huhne denied any wrongdoing and said that he would mount a "robust defence". He was immediately replaced by Ed Davey (Liberal Democrat), hitherto parliamentary under-secretary of state for business, innovation, and skills.

The charges against Huhne and Pryce, the end of whose marriage of 26 years had been announced by Huhne in June 2010 [see p. 49906], arose from allegations that Huhne, then a member of the European Parliament, had been caught by a police camera in 2003 exceeding the speed limit near London. The suspicion was that he had claimed, with Pryce's connivance, that she had been driving

the car so that the resultant three penalty points were put on her driving licence and he avoided a driving ban.

Levenson inquiry proceedings - Related developments

The public inquiry headed by Lord Justice (Brian) Levenson into the culture and ethics of the UK printed media, which had been set up by Prime Minister Cameron in July 2011 in light of disclosures about hacking into mobile telephone voicemail messages by the *News of the World* Sunday tabloid newspaper [see pp. 50831; 50779; 50662; 50609; 50567-68], continued to hear witnesses in February. In parallel, the Metropolitan Police (Met) pursued their inquiries not only into phone hacking but also into corrupt payments by journalists to police officers and other public officials and into hacking of computers and emails. From the huge array of information produced from these processes, it was confirmed inter alia that phone hacking and other illegal practices had been widely practised by UK newspapers.

News International, which had been the publisher of the *News of the World* until its closure in July 2011, continued to give priority to reaching out-of-court settlements with victims of phone hacking, the largest in February being one of £600,000 for singer Charlotte Church and her family (US\$1.00=0.6323 UK pounds as at Feb. 17, 2012). Political figures involved included former Labour deputy leader John Prescott, who accepted £40,000. It was reported on Feb. 8 that at least 50, and possibly hundreds, of lawsuits alleging phone hacking were being prepared by celebrities against News International. On Feb. 22 lawyers for Cherie Blair, the wife of former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, announced that she was suing News International for the alleged hacking of her telephone.

The arrest on Feb. 11-12 of five present or former journalists of *The Sun*, the daily sister newspaper of the *News of the World*, for police questioning about suspected illegal payments brought to nine the number arrested from *The Sun* to date. The arrests caused considerable resentment among journalists on *The Sun* that News International, in its anxiety to be seen to be co-operating with the police, was handing over large numbers of emails covering journalistic activities regarded as legitimate. On Feb. 17 Rupert Murdoch, the chairman and chief executive of the US-based News Corporation, the parent company of News International, arrived in London and sought to reassure his journalists. His main purpose was to supervise the launch on Feb. 26 of a Sunday edition of *The Sun* as effectively the successor to the *News of the World*.

Further damage was done to the Murdoch empire when Met deputy assistant commissioner Sue Akers told the Levenson inquiry on Feb. 27 that a "culture of illegal payments" had prevailed at *The Sun* and that its reporters and editors had paid hundreds of thousands of pounds for information not only to police officers but also to a "network of corrupted officials" in the military and the government. It was announced on Feb. 29 that Rupert

Murdoch's son James Murdoch, who had been accused of having early knowledge of illegal phone hacking by the *News of the World*, had resigned as executive chairman of News International and would focus on News Corporation's television businesses.

Seized upon with delight by the non-Murdoch media was the revelation on Feb. 28 that Rebekah Brooks, a former editor of the *News of the World* and *The Sun* who had resigned as chief executive of News International in July 2011, had in 2008 been loaned a retired police horse by the Met. Under an established scheme for such animals, she had cared for the horse at her house in Oxfordshire, near the constituency home of Cameron, a personal friend of hers.

Release of Abu Qatada

The Special Immigration Appeals Commission (SIAC) on Feb. 6 ordered the release from detention on bail of radical Muslim cleric Omar Mahmood Abu Othman (known as Abu Qatada), following a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in January that he could not be deported to his native Jordan because there was a risk of evidence obtained by torture being used in a retrial there [see p. 50880]. Home Secretary Theresa May (Conservative) regretted the decision and stated that the UK government would seek an agreement with Jordan that would enable Abu Qatada to be deported without transgressing the ECHR ruling.

Abu Qatada was released from prison on Feb. 13 under strict bail conditions. He was placed under house arrest for 22 hours a day, banned from any internet or telephone use, allowed only approved visitors, and required to wear an electronic tag. He was also banned from leading Muslim prayers, preaching, giving lectures, and making any public statement without the home secretary's prior approval. On Feb. 14 the parliamentary under-secretary of state for home affairs, James Brokenshire, flew to Jordan to begin negotiations on revising the UK-Jordan memorandum of understanding signed in 2005 with the aim that suspected terrorists could be deported from the UK without their human rights being infringed [see p. 46909].

Other security developments

Nine UK Muslim men of Bangladeshi origin were on Feb. 9 sentenced at Woolwich crown court in south-east London to prison terms of between five and 17 years, having all eventually pleaded guilty to terrorism-related offences, including a plot to blow up the London Stock Exchange and other targets in the UK capital. They were also convicted of planning to raise funds for a training camp in Pakistan. [For arrests in December 2010 and trial proceedings see pp. 50831; 50193.]

German nationals Christian Emde and Robert Baum, both converts to Islam, were on Feb. 6 sentenced to prison terms of 16 and 12 months respectively after

pleading guilty at the Old Bailey to possessing al-Qaida bomb-making instructions and Islamist propaganda. Believed to members of the extremist network "Die Wahre Religion" ("The True Religion"), the two men had been arrested at the UK port of Dover in July 2011 [see p. 50612 (Germany)].

Division of Border Agency - Immigration and asylum issues

Home Secretary May announced on Feb. 20 that the UK Border Agency (UKBA) would be split into two organisations, on the basis of the report of an official inquiry into the UKBA's unauthorised relaxation of entry controls at London's Heathrow airport and the Eurostar train terminal at St Pancras [see p. 50778]. Under the reorganisation, the border force wing would be separated from the UKBA from March and would be a "disciplined law enforcement organisation" headed by a director general reporting directly to ministers. The chief constable of Wiltshire, Brian Moore, was named as the new agency's interim head.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported on Feb. 23 that the net inflow of immigrants for UK residence of a year or more was 250,000 in the 12 months to June 2011, representing an increase of 15,000 in the coalition government's first year in office. [For 2010 figures see p. 50609.] The net figure arose from the entry of 593,000 people into the UK, including a record number of 170,000 from the Indian sub-continent and Africa, and the emigration of 343,000. The figures were seen as demonstrating the government's difficulty in fulfilling its pledge to reduce net immigration from hundreds of thousands a year under the previous Labour government to "tens of thousands" by 2015 [see p. 50146].

Home Office figures on Feb. 23 showed that applications for political asylum in the UK in 2011 numbered 19,804 (excluding dependants), a rise of 11 per cent compared with the total in 2010 [see p. 50297], confirming the UK's ranking as 13th among the 27 EU member states for asylum seekers per head of population. There were 17,496 initial asylum decisions in 2011 (15 per cent fewer than in 2010), of which 68 per cent were refusals, 24 per cent grants of asylum, and 8 per cent leave to remain.

Cameron-Sarkozy meeting

Meeting in Paris on Feb. 17, Prime Minister Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy strove to put aside recent strains in their relations arising in particular from EU and euro zone issues [see pp. 50887; 50831 (both EU); 50831] and to emphasise areas of co-operation such as the joint role of the UK and France in helping to remove the regime of Col Moamer al-Kadhafi in Libya [see pp. 50679; 50620 (both Libya)].

The two sides agreed to co-operate on the construction of new nuclear power stations in the UK [see

pp. 50521; 50089] and also to develop their co-operation on security and defence. Casting something of a cloud, however, was the decision of India to give preferred bidder status to Dassault of France for the US\$20 billion purchase of 126 Rafale fighter aircraft [see p. 47329] in preference to the Typhoon Eurofighter, in which BAE Systems of the UK had a large stake. Cameron had pledged on Feb. 1 to try to persuade India to reverse its decision.

Church of England issues

Meeting in London on Feb. 6-10, the general synod of the Church of England engaged in inconclusive debate on how to implement a commitment to the ordination of women bishops made in 2005 [see pp. 49699; 46748]. Proposed church legislation that would have enabled traditionalists not to accept the authority of women bishops was rejected, as was a call for the speedy ordination of women bishops. The issue was referred to the next general synod in July.

The Church of England on Feb. 29 issued a rare "unreserved" national apology for the sexual abuse of children by some of its clergy. The apology coincided with the publication of a church report detailing how a convicted paedophile had been ordained as an Anglican priest, in which capacity he had abused at least 12 boys.

IN BRIEF

Prime Minister Cameron attended a summit of the **Northern Future Forum** on Feb. 8-9 in Stockholm, the Swedish capital, together with the leaders of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden, a year after the inaugural session of the what was then called the Northern Alliance in London in January 2011 [see p. 50247]. Meeting leaders who were mainly of like political orientation on the centre-right, six of them from other EU member states, Cameron hoped that the summit, which focused on the need for economic growth, would show that he was not isolated in Europe [see pp. 50887; 50838 (both EU); 50831].

The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) recommended on Feb. 8 that the **annual salaries of MPs** should be frozen at £65,737 in the 2012-13 financial year beginning in April, the same level as in 2011-12 and 2010-11 [see p. 49755]. IPSA chairman Sir Ian Kennedy said that "we must be mindful of the conditions in the rest of the public sector, where pay has remained static".

It was confirmed on Feb. 12 that a **Roman Catholic monk** who had sexually abused boys at an abbey and school in Ealing, west London, over three decades [see p. 50718] and had been imprisoned for five years in October 2009 had been defrocked by the Vatican. [For full details see p. 50955 (Vatican).]

The retrial at Southwark crown court of **Met commander Ali Dizaei** ended on Feb. 13 with his conviction on charges of attempting to pervert the course of justice and misconduct in a public office, for which he received a three-year prison sentence. His previous conviction in February 2010 had been

quashed as unsafe by the appeal court in May 2011, following which he had been reinstated in his £90,000-a-year post in September 2011 but under suspension pending the retrial [see p. 50662].

The UK Treasury confirmed on Feb. 14 that it had filed suits at the European Court of Justice aimed at preventing the **European Central Bank (ECB)** from requiring that financial clearing houses which did a substantial proportion of their business in euros should be located in the euro zone [see pp. 50781 (Germany); 50666]. The ECB's aim in this respect was seen as posing a threat to the dominant trading position of the City of London.

Prime Minister Cameron on Feb. 16 had talks in Edinburgh (the capital of Scotland) with Scottish first minister Alex Salmond on the latter's plans to hold a **referendum on Scottish independence**, the two leaders remaining deeply divided on the modalities and timing of such a consultation [see p. 50879]. Speaking during the visit, Cameron delivered a clarion call for the preservation of the UK union, whilst holding out the prospect of greater devolved powers for the Scottish Parliament. On Feb. 26 the first Scottish edition of the *Sun on Sunday* [see above] contained a "world exclusive" to the effect that Salmond wanted to hold the referendum on Oct. 18, 2014.

Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Secretary Caroline Spelman declared on Feb. 20 that **drought conditions** existed in south-eastern, eastern, and parts of central England, following one of the driest winters on record. Speaking after a "drought summit" at her department, she warned that unless heavy rainfall arrived soon, restrictions on water consumption were inevitable. [For drought in 2011 see p. 50479 (EU).]

Clashes between **whites and Asians in Rochdale** in north-western England on Feb. 23 were believed to be linked to the start of a trial at Liverpool crown court of 11 Asian men charged with "grooming" under-age white girls in Rochdale for indiscriminate sex by plying them with drugs and alcohol.

The chairman of the Action for Employment (A4e) welfare-to-work group, Emma Harrison, resigned on Feb. 23 as **Prime Minister Cameron's adviser on jobless problem families**, after investigations of alleged fraud related to her company's receipt of lucrative government contracts. The following day Harrison resigned as head of A4e, from which she had paid herself dividends of £8.6 million in 2011. Controversy developed about the extent to which Cameron had been alerted to Harrison's possible lack of probity.

Charges were preferred on Feb. 24 against **Labour MP Eric Joyce** on three counts of common assault in a brawl in a bar in the House of Commons (the lower chamber of the bicameral Parliament), in which he was reported to have headbutted at least two Conservative MPs and punched a Labour colleague before being restrained and arrested by the police. Having been elected to the Commons in a by-election in the Scottish constituency of Falkirk West in 2000 [see p. 43914], Joyce was deprived of the Labour whip pending the outcome of the case.

The Department of the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) reported on Feb. 26 that the **Schmallenberg virus**, which caused stillbirths and chronic deformities in sheep, cattle, and goats, had

appeared on at least 74 farms in southern and eastern England following its discovery in Germany in 2011 [see p. 50886]. DEFRA warned that the virus, which was transmitted by insect bites, could seriously damage reproducing flocks and herds pending the development of a vaccine.

Anti-capitalist "Occupy London" protesters were on Feb. 28 evicted from the grounds of St Paul's Cathedral after an appeal court had on Feb. 22 upheld a high court ruling that they should be removed [see p. 50881]. Some of those ejected went to another protest site at Finsbury Square, vowing to continue their action.

Labour leader Ed Miliband on Feb. 29 denounced a call by the left-wing **leader of the Unite trade union, Len McCluskey**, for civil protests and strikes against government economic policies during the Olympic Games to be held in London in July-August. Unite was the UK's largest trade union, with 1.4 million members. [For election of McCluskey in November 2010 see p. 50147.]

The Liberal Democrat whip in the House of Lords (the upper chamber of Parliament) was on Feb. 29 withdrawn from **Baroness (Jenny) Tonge of Kew** after she had refused to withdraw an assertion at a conference on Feb. 23 that "Israel is not going to be there forever" because "one day the American people are going to say to the Israel lobby in the USA: enough is enough". Tonge had regularly made controversial remarks about the Arab-Israeli conflict, as when in 2004 she had expressed understanding of why Palestinians became suicide bombers [see p. 45800].

It was confirmed on Feb. 29 that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) was seeking the extradition from Russia of a second suspect in connection with the poisoning by a radioactive substance of **Russian émigré Aleksandr Litvinenko** in London in November 2006 [see p. 47592; for recent developments see pp. 50717; 50663; 50089; 49756-57]. The suspect was identified as Dmitry Kovtun, who had been with the first suspect, Andrei Lugovoi, when Litvinenko was poisoned. As with Lugovoi, however, there was no realistic prospect of the CPS securing Kovtun's extradition.

■ Last article pp. 50879-81.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Sentencing of dissident republican

Dissident republican Brian Shivers, who on Jan. 20 was convicted of killing two UK soldiers in March 2009 [see p. 50881; for murders see pp. 49103-05], was on Feb. 10 told that he must serve a minimum of 25 years in prison. Shivers, 46, from Magherafelt, Co. Londonderry, was suffering from cystic fibrosis and had an estimated four to five years to live.

An unnamed dissident republican appeared before magistrates in Enniskillen on Feb. 13 in connection with the discovery of a bomb found during searches of South Armagh and East Tyrone at Easter, 2011.

The 32-year-old was accused of possession of explosives with intent to endanger life.

End of "supergrass" trial

In a terrorism "supergrass" trial that ended on Feb. 22, Mark Haddock, a Belfast leader of the loyalist paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and eight others were found not guilty of the murder of Tommy English, a member of the rival Ulster Defence Association (UDA's) political wing, in October 2000 [see pp. 43819-20]. Three other men were acquitted of lesser charges. The judge ruled that the evidence of brothers David Stewart and Robert Stewart, both UVF members who were testifying against former comrades, was "infected with lies" [for opening of trial see p. 50664].

IN BRIEF

Rev. Ian Paisley (2007-08) was admitted to the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald with unspecified heart problems on Feb. 5. He was moved from intensive care into an ordinary ward on Feb. 16. Paisley, now Lord Bannside [for peerage see p. 49956], in November 2011 retired from the ministry of the Free Presbyterian Church of Northern Ireland [see p. 50780] after relinquishing his leadership of the church in 2008 [see p. 48370]. [For departure of Paisley from Northern Ireland politics see p. 50351; for resignation as first minister and leader of the hardline Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) see p. 48487.]

Thomas Haigh, 26, on Feb. 14 at Truro crown court, south-west England, was jailed for a minimum of 35 years for killing David Griffiths, 35, and Brett Flournoy, 31, on a farm near St Austell in Cornwall, England. Both victims worked for a gang linked to an **Irish Republican Army (IRA) drugs ring**. Haigh had killed them because they were demanding he go to Brazil for a second time and bring back cocaine.

The *Guardian* of Feb. 17 reported that Martin McGartland, **one of the most important agents to infiltrate the IRA**, was suing the UK's MI5 internal security service for failing to protect him from hitmen. McGartland, who escaped two IRA attempts on his life and was shot seven times, alleged that MI5 officers had compromised his security and left him open to another assassination attempt.

William Marks, 55, and John Symington, 56, two officials from the UK ministry of defence (MoD) in Northern Ireland, were among four defendants who on Feb. 21 admitted guilt in a £16 million (US\$1.00=0.6306 UK pounds as at Feb. 24, 2012) **bribery and corruption case** in a Belfast court. Marks took £66,500 from James McGeown, the owner of a security company, in return for awarding him contracts worth £16.2 million to supply CCTV services to the MoD. Symington received £18,000 from McGeown.

The IRA on Feb. 24 **apologised for the death of nine-year-old Gordon Gallagher in Londonderry (Derry)** who died after stumbling across an IRA bomb in his backyard in 1973, an explosion the IRA blamed on the UK army. The incident came to light

again after a report by the Historical Enquiries Team (HET), a unit set up by the police to re-examine all deaths attributed to the security situation in the province between 1968 and 1998.

■ Last article p. 50881.

IRELAND

Announcement of referendum on EU fiscal compact - Economic developments

Prime Minister Enda Kenny on Feb. 28 announced that Ireland would hold a referendum on the new EU fiscal compact providing for strict budget deficit rules intended to deal with the sovereign debt crises afflicting several euro zone states [see p. 50887 (EU)]. Under Irish law, any major amendment to an EU treaty entailed an amendment to the Irish constitution and thus required a referendum.

A no vote could rule out any further bailout for Ireland but would be unlikely to derail the fiscal compact which only needed to be ratified by 12 euro zone countries before it could be enacted. [For UK veto of treaty in December 2011 see p. 50838 (EU); for veto of treaty by Czech Republic in January see p. 50885 (Czech Republic)].

The IMF on Feb. 28 approved the disbursement of another €3.23 billion (US\$1.00=0.7428 euros as at Feb. 24, 2012) tranche of Ireland's €85 billion EU-IMF bailout of November 2010 [see p. 50144], saying that the country's authorities had "continued strong implementation of their programme despite deteriorating external conditions". After three years of contraction, Ireland's economy had grown an estimated 1 per cent in 2011 and "was able to meet its fiscal consolidation targets with room to spare".

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 23 reported that the government had agreed to sell up to €3 billion in state assets after a deal with the EU, IMF, and European Central Bank (ECB) that allowed it to use a third of the proceeds to invest in job creation projects, rather than simply pay down debt.

The Bank of Ireland, the only one of the country's six banks to escape nationalisation, on Feb. 20 said that it had returned to net profit in 2011 due to heavy debt restructuring after continued losses. After recording a net loss of €609 million in 2010, the bank netted €40 million in profit in 2011, due in part to a €230 million tax refund.

Xi Jinping, on a three-day visit to Ireland with his 150-member delegation, on Feb. 19 visited Prime Minister Kenny to sign a number of trade agreements. China was the country's major Asian export market. Combined trade in 2011 totalled some €4.5 billion.

Finance Minister Michael Noonan on Feb. 8 gave details of the Special Assignee Relief Programme,

under which key overseas workers assigned to work in Ireland for one, two, and five years would be allowed an exemption from income tax on 30 per cent of their salary from €75,000 to €500,000.

■ Last article p. 50881.

PORTUGAL

Fiscal crisis

The EU, IMF and the European Central Bank (ECB), the “troika” of international lenders funding Portugal’s €78 billion (US\$1.00=0.7428 euros as at Feb. 24, 2012) rescue [see p. 50473], on Feb. 28 said that its third quarterly review of the country’s economic performance had cleared the way for the disbursement of a €14.9 billion tranche of the bailout. Portugal was on track to meet the terms of its bailout programme and had achieved a “large fiscal correction in 2011”. “Provided the authorities persevere with strict programme implementation, the euro member states have declared they stand ready to support Portugal until market access is regained.”

The latter sentence was blamed for a surge in Portuguese 10-year bond yields to 13.75 per cent on Feb. 29. Traders said that it had sparked worries over a second bailout and default. Finance Minister Vitor Gaspar on Feb. 28 said that his country would not need a second rescue, but its economy would shrink by 3.3 per cent in 2012, rather than the previous forecast of 3 per cent.

Gaspar on Feb. 22 said that Portugal had reached 60 per cent of the privatisation target set out in its rescue programme through the sale of stakes in EDP Energias de Portugal and REN, the operator of the national electricity grid. The sale of 40 per cent of REN to China State Grid and Oman Oil was expected to raise €592 million.

Credit ratings agency Moody’s, in a downgrade of nine euro zone members on Feb. 13, cut Portugal’s sovereign debt from Ba2 to Ba3, with a negative outlook, citing its susceptibility to the growing financial and macroeconomic risks emanating from the euro zone debt crisis.

■ Last article p. 50881.

SPAIN

Economic developments

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 24 reported that advisers to Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy were pressing the European Commission (EC) to ease Spain’s strict budget deficit target for 2012, arguing that the nation’s contracting economy [see p. 50881] made the deficit target of 4.4 per cent of GDP unrealistic and even counterproductive.

Budget Minister Cristóbal Montoro Romero on

Feb. 27 revealed that the public sector deficit for fiscal 2011 had reached 8.51 per cent of GDP, well above the target of 6 per cent of GDP agreed with the EU, and higher than the government’s revised figure of 8 per cent of GDP [see p. 50833]. Most of the overshoot—1.64 percentage points of the total of 2.51—came from the country’s 17 regional governments.

Cabinet ministers on Feb. 2 approved a credit line to the cash-strapped regions of €15 billion (US\$1.00=0.7621 euros as at Feb. 3, 2012) to help them pay bills and meet debt repayments until June, but Catalan Finance Minister Andreu Mas-Colell on Feb. 8 said that further financial aid might be needed. Cuts in educational spending on Feb. 21 brought schoolchildren and students onto the streets of Valencia in a fifth day of protests against their regional government’s austerity measures.

The government on Feb. 10 approved changes to Spain’s rigid labour laws aimed at reducing the costs of dismissing staff and creating new incentives for companies to hire the young and previously jobless. Severance pay, previously set at 45 days for each year worked, was lowered to 33 days for new contracts. Maximum lay-off payments were reduced from 42 months’ to 12 months’ pay. Companies with a maximum of 50 employees would be allowed to claim a corporate tax break of €3,000 for each new employee under the age of 30.

Plans to cut some 150,000 public sector jobs, a quarter of the workforce of the country’s 4,000 state-run companies, were announced by the government on Feb. 17. The Bank of Spain (the central bank) estimated that the state-controlled corporate sector had added to the national debt by €57 billion. Basic annual salaries at state-owned firms were also capped at €105,000. Wage caps at smaller state-backed companies were set at €80,000 and €55,000, including perks.

Ratings agency Moody’s on Feb. 13 downgraded Spain’s debt from A1 to A3, with a negative outlook, citing the country’s susceptibility to the growing financial and macroeconomic risks emanating from the euro zone debt crisis.

Banking developments

New rules aimed at strengthening the financial system announced on Feb. 2 required banks to set aside an extra €50 billion in provisions against bad property loans by the end of 2012 or seek high-interest loans from the state. The funds to be set aside must be equivalent to 80 per cent of their property assets, compared with the current 31 per cent. An additional year would be granted for newly formed banking entities.

Economy Minister Luis de Guindos Jurado and Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría Antón on Feb. 3 unveiled new pay limits for executives and directors of banks supported or taken over by the state, cutting their income in some cases by three-quarters. The chairmen and chief executives of such banks would not be able to earn more than €600,000 a year, including pension benefits. Annual pay for non-executive directors was limited to €100,000, and bonuses suspended.

De Guindos on Feb. 22 said that the government would address the “human drama” of evictions by proposing a code of good practice for banks aimed at helping families stay in their homes and clear their debts. Under the proposal, cash-strapped homeowners would be able to clear their mortgage debts by handing over their homes to the lender, an option currently not available to them.

Verdicts in Garzón trials

The Supreme Court on Feb. 27 acquitted prominent high court judge Baltasar Garzón of abusing his magistrate’s powers by launching Spain’s first-ever investigation into atrocities committed during the Civil War of 1936-39 and the ensuing dictatorship of Gen. Francisco Franco y Bahamonde [for background see pp. 48855; 48908; 49803; 50882]. The court ruled that Garzón had misinterpreted Spanish law, but did not do so knowingly.

In a separate prosecution, the judge was on Feb. 9 convicted of overstepping his jurisdiction and authorising illegal recordings of conversations between defence lawyers and remand prisoners in a corruption investigation involving the ruling conservative Popular Party (PP) [see p. 49803], and banned from his profession for 11 years. A third case, for bribery [see p. 50882], was on Feb. 13 thrown out because the statute of limitations had expired.

IN BRIEF

The main opposition **Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE)** on Feb. 4 elected Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, a former interior minister, as its new leader. Rubalcaba, 60, defeated Carme Chacón, a former defence minister, by 487 votes to 465. Former Prime Minister and outgoing PSOE leader José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in April 2011 had announced his decision not to seek re-election [see p. 50408].

Iñaki Urdangarín, the Duke of Palma and son-in-law of King Juan Carlos, on Feb. 25 appeared in court on the Mediterranean island of Majorca to answer questions about suspected fraudulent deals during his time as head of the nonprofit Noós Institute [see p. 50833]. He had not been charged with a crime.

■ Last article pp. 50881-82.

ITALY

Economic developments

Celebrating 100 days in office, Prime Minister Mario Monti’s technocratic government on Feb. 24 announced some €43 million (US\$1.00=0.7428 euros as at Feb. 24, 2012) in savings since its appointment in November 2011 [see pp. 50775-76]. Ignazio Visco, governor of the Bank of Italy (the central bank), on Feb. 18 urged the government to implement planned reforms rapidly, and do more to support the country’s economy, which he expected to shrink by around 1.5 per cent in 2012.

Credit ratings agency Standard & Poor's (S&P) on Feb. 9 downgraded 34 Italian banks, citing concerns about their ability to obtain external financing. UniCredit, the country's largest bank, and Intesa Sanpaolo, the second largest, had their long-term ratings lowered from A to BBB+, with a negative outlook. [For S&P downgrade of Italy's debt in January see p. 50882.]

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 3 reported that Milan's chief prosecutor had asked for Alessandro Profumo, the former head of UniCredit, three Barclays Bank employees, and 16 others to stand trial for alleged fraud in tax declarations for 2007 and 2008.

Moody's on Feb. 13 downgraded Italy's debt by one notch, from A2 to A3, with a negative outlook, citing the euro zone debt crisis. Despite the downgrade, the country's borrowing costs fell on Feb. 14 when it sold €4 billion of benchmark securities due in November 2014 at a yield of 3.41 per cent, down from 4.83 per cent at the last auction of similar-maturity bonds in January.

The *International Herald Tribune* of Feb. 7 reported that the Guardia di Finanza (finance police) had staged a series of high-profile raids against tax evasion, descending on nightclubs and bars in Milan and shops in Rome (the capital), where fewer than half were issuing proper receipts. A swoop in the Alpine ski resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo caught numerous Ferrari owners who reported earning less than €30,000 a year.

The *Guardian* of Feb. 17 said that Prime Minister Monti had risked alienating voters by describing the culture of jobs for life so prized by Italians as "monotonous". Monti during a television interview earlier in the month had said that having a job for life in today's economy was no longer feasible for young people.

In a bid to improve transparency, the government on Feb. 21 published details of the income and wealth of all its ministers, topped by Justice Minister Paola Severino with earnings of over €7 million in 2010. Hours after the data were made public online, the government's website crashed under the weight of demand from interested Italians [for recent report on parliamentarians' salaries see p. 50882].

Developments concerning *Costa Concordia*

Divers searching the semi-submerged cruise liner *Costa Concordia*, which capsized off the Tuscan island of Giglio in January [see pp. 50882-83], on Feb. 22 found eight more bodies, bringing to 25 the total number of confirmed dead. Seven people remained unaccounted for.

Prosecutors on Feb. 22 widened their investigation to include seven more people, among them employees of the ship's operator, Costa Cruises. The liner's captain, Francesco Schettino, and first officer, Ciro Ambrosio, were already suspected of multiple counts of manslaughter. A preliminary investigation into the disaster was opened by the prosecutor's office in Paris (the capital of France) on Feb. 2, following a decision to group together complaints by French victims.

Salvage workers by Feb. 22 had extracted 1,300 cubic metres of fuel from six of the vessel's tanks, equivalent to two-thirds of the total on board.

Under pressure from environmentalists concerned over possible oil pollution from the ship, the government withdrew planned legislation that would have eased restrictions on offshore mineral exploration and production.

In a separate incident, the *Costa Concordia*'s sister ship, the 29,000-tonne *Costa Allegra*, was taken under tow by a French tuna vessel to the Seychelles after a fire in her engine room on Feb. 27 knocked out electricity and air conditioning, leaving her drifting and without power in the Indian Ocean.

IN BRIEF

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 7 reported that **Italy was experiencing "critical" shortages of Russian natural gas** as freezing temperatures forced Russian state-controlled gas monopoly Gazprom to divert some supplies destined for Europe to meet domestic demand.

A court in Turin on Feb. 13 sentenced Swiss tycoon Stephan Schmidheiny, 64, and Belgian baron Jean-Louis Marie Ghislaine de Cartier, 90, to 16 years' imprisonment for the **asbestos-related deaths of over 3,000 people**. Convicted of involuntary manslaughter, both were found guilty of failing to ensure adequate safety measures at four asbestos factories belonging to their company Eternit, which closed its operations in Italy in 1986.

Prosecutors in the southern city of Potenza on Feb. 17 said that eight people had been arrested across Italy on charges related to the **seizure in Switzerland in 2011 of US\$6 trillion in counterfeit US treasury bonds**, possibly part of a racket aimed at acquiring plutonium.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on Feb. 23 ordered **Italy to pay compensation of €15,000 each to 24 Somali and Eritrean migrants** who were returned to Libya, where they faced detention, after their boat was intercepted in the Mediterranean in 2009.

Citing the statute of limitations, judges in Milan on Feb. 25 threw out a **corruption case in which former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi** was accused of bribing his UK lawyer David Mills to provide evidence in two trials in which the former prime minister, or one of his companies, was accused of wrongdoing [see p. 49059]. Berlusconi was expected to face a new trial in March on charges of revealing confidential information concerning a failed bid by Italian insurer Unipol for the medium-sized Italian bank Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (BNL) in 2005. Separately, the *Financial Times* of Feb. 4 reported the former prime minister as saying that he had no intention of running for office again.

■ Last article pp. 50882-83.

SLOVENIA

New government

A new coalition government headed by Janez Jansa of the centre-right Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) was sworn in on Feb. 10, after his approval as prime minister by the National Assembly (the lower chamber of the bicameral

New cabinet of Slovenia

Janez Jansa (SDS) Prime Minister
Radovan Zerjav (SLS) Deputy Prime Minister; Economic Development and Technology
Karl Erjavec (DeSUS) Deputy Prime Minister; Foreign Affairs
Ljudmila Novak (f) (NSi-KLS) Deputy Prime Minister; Minister without Portfolio for Relations between the Republic of Slovenia and the Autochthonous Slovenian National Community in Neighbouring Countries, and between the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenians Abroad
Ales Hojs (NSi-KLS) Defence
Senko Plicanic (DLGV) Justice and Public Administration
Tomaz Gantar (DeSUS) Health
Janez Sustersic (DLGV) Finance
Vinko Gorenak (SDS) Interior
Andrej Vizjak (SDS) Labour, Family, and Social Affairs
Franc Bogovic (SLS) Agriculture and the Environment
Zvonko Cernac (SDS) Infrastructure and Spatial Planning
Ziga Turk (SDS) Education, Science, Culture, and Sport

(SDS) Slovenian Democratic Party.
 (SLS) Slovenian People's Party.
 (DeSUS) Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia.
 (NSi-KLS) New Slovenia-Christian People's Party.
 (DLGV) Gregor Virant Citizens' List.

All new appointments.
 Women are denoted by (f).

legislature) by 50-10 on Jan. 28 following early elections in December 2011 [see pp. 50885; 50835]. Commanding 50 of the 90 Assembly seats, the five-party coalition consisted of the SDS, the Gregor Virant Citizens' List (DLGV), the Slovenian People's Party (SLS), the Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS), and New Slovenia-Christian People's Party (NSi-KLS). Jansa had previously been prime minister in 2004-08.

Jansa said that "great and difficult challenges" lay ahead, as Slovenia faced the same problems as some other members of the euro zone [see pp. 50948-49 (EU)]. He said that his government's principal objectives were to consolidate the public finances, stimulate economic growth, and create new jobs.

■ Last article p. 50885.

HUNGARY

Economic developments

The European Commission (EC) on Feb. 22 warned Hungary that it would lose up to €495 million (US\$1.00=0.7428 euros as at Feb. 24, 2012) of EU funding if it failed to reduce pub-

lic spending in the coming months. Olli Rehn, EU commissioner for economic and monetary affairs, said that the country had failed to curb its deficit sufficiently to comply with new EU rules aimed at averting a repeat of the euro zone debt crisis. Although Hungary had formally met the EU's deficit target of 3 per cent of GDP in 2011, it had only done so with the help of one-time initiatives, said the EU.

Hungary's national airline, Malev, collapsed on Feb. 3 after the EC ordered it to repay some 38 billion forints (US\$1.00=221.201 forints as at Feb. 3, 2012) in illegal state aid received between 2007 and 2010. The unprofitable carrier employed 2,600 people, had a leased fleet of 22 passenger aircraft, and was responsible for almost half of the traffic at Liszt Ferenc airport serving Budapest (the capital).

Controversial law on churches

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 9 reported that some 300 religious denominations were in a legal no-man's land after the government stripped them of their official status in December 2011. The measure was part of controversial legislation that had prompted EU concern over Prime Minister Viktor Orban's respect for democracy [see p. 50884].

■ Last article pp. 50884-85.

AUSTRIA

Economic developments

The government on Feb. 10 announced a five-year austerity plan aimed at clawing back some €26.7 billion (US\$1.00=0.7582 euros as at Feb. 10, 2012) and putting Austria in line with EU rules on public deficits. The target would be achieved primarily through spending cuts, but a third would be raised by increased taxes, including a special tax on high earners. The country's regions would also be asked to reduce spending by €5.2 billion. A deficit of 3.3 per cent of GDP was expected for fiscal 2011, just above the EU ceiling of 3 per cent.

Credit ratings agency Moody's on Feb. 13 lowered its outlook on Austria's AAA debt rating to negative, citing uncertainty over the prospects for institutional reform in the euro zone. [For recent downgrade by Standard & Poor's see p. 50885.]

■ Last article p. 50885.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Suspension of ratification of Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement

Prime Minister Petr Necas on Feb. 6 said that his government was suspending ratification of

the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), an international copyright treaty that some internet users said could lead to online censorship. The government signed the treaty in January but it still had to be ratified by the legislature. Necas said that the government needed to analyse the treaty after street protests and attacks on government websites. Several countries, including the USA and Japan, argued that the treaty was needed to fight the global trade in counterfeited goods and pirated material.

Extension of lease of Swedish Gripen jet fighters

The government on Jan. 31 decided to extend the current 10-year lease of 14 Swedish Jas-39 Gripen jet fighters after its expiry in 2015. Defence Minister Alexandr Vondra was asked to negotiate a "bridging solution" with the Swedish authorities. Prime Minister Necas said the "bridge" period would be five years at most and that a final decision about the long-term outfitting of the country's air force would not be made until the economy improved.

■ Last article p. 50885.

POLAND

Death of Auschwitz museum founder

Kazimierz Smolen, co-founder and director of the State Museum at the former Nazi German extermination camp at Auschwitz (Oswiecim)-Birkenau in southern Poland from 1955 to 1990, died on Jan. 27, the 67th anniversary of the camp's liberation, aged 91. A Catholic, Smolen became a resistance fighter after the Nazi occupation of 1939. Arrested in 1940, he was incarcerated in Auschwitz until Jan. 18, 1945, when he was transported to Ebensee, the sub-camp of Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria.

After World War II, Smolen graduated as a lawyer and worked for the Main Commission for Investigation of Nazi Crimes, appearing as a witness and expert in many war criminal trials.

Death of Szyborska

Wisława Szyborska, a reclusive poet whose life spanned the history of Poland in the 20th century, died on Feb. 1 in Krakow, aged 88. Awarding her the 1996 Nobel Prize for Literature [see p. 41347 (Nobel Prizes)], the Swedish Academy compared her poetry to the music of Mozart with "something of the fury of Beethoven". With "ironic precision", it allowed "the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality".

Suspension of ratification of Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement

Prime Minister Donald Tusk on Feb. 3 said that he had suspended ratification of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), an international copyright treaty that some internet users said could lead to online censorship. A thorough analysis was needed before it became Polish law, said Tusk.

Deaths from cold weather

By Feb. 7, bitterly cold weather had killed another 33 people in eastern and central Europe, nine of them in Poland, bringing the total in that country to 62 since the end of January.

■ Last article p. 50885.

EUROPEAN UNION

Euro zone developments

The agreement reached in January by the leaders of 25 of the 27 EU member states on a stability, co-ordination, and governance pact for the euro zone, currently consisting of 17 members [see p. 50887], came under a degree of challenge in February but was still expected to be signed at a further EU summit in early March, with the immediate effect of easing the chronic sovereign debt crisis of Greece [see pp. 50938-39; 50883 (both Greece)]; for Ireland's decision to hold referendum see p. 50945 (Ireland)]. The continuing fragility of the euro zone was confirmed by European Commission (EC) figures showing that five members of the zone were in recession in the fourth quarter of 2011 and by its forecast that the zone's GDP would contract in 2012.

According to EC figures on Feb. 15, aggregate GDP in the euro zone contracted by 0.3 per cent in October-December 2011 compared with the previous quarter. The fall was the first in the zone since the second quarter of 2009 and meant that growth was only 0.7 per cent in 2011. Belgium, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal recorded their second successive quarter of contraction, thus meeting the accepted definition of being in recession, whilst Germany contracted by 0.2 per cent after a third-quarter increase. The overall euro zone position was partially rescued by an unexpected 0.2 per cent expansion in the GDP of France in the fourth quarter of 2011.

The EC on Feb. 23 revised its forecast for the euro zone as a whole in 2012 from growth of 0.5 per cent to contraction of 0.3 per cent. Acknowledging that 10 of the 17 euro zone countries were either in or about to fall into recession, Economic and Monetary Affairs Commissioner Olli Rehn said that "Europe has entered a mild and temporary recession", whilst insisting that "there are signs of recovery". A positive aspect cited by the EC was the expectation that

the euro zone inflation rate would fall from 2.7 per cent in 2011 to 2.1 per cent in 2012.

The European Parliament on Feb. 28 called for consideration to be given to the establishment of a "fully independent public European credit ratings agency" and for regulatory powers to be vested in the EU that would include the right to ban ratings of sovereign debt if the countries concerned did not want them. The proposals reflected strong criticism of the performance of the US-based ratings agencies in relation to the post-2008 world financial crisis.

Blocking of exchange merger

A proposed US\$9 billion merger between the Deutsche Börse stock exchange in Frankfurt and the US NYSE Euronext exchange was vetoed by the EC on Feb. 1 on the grounds that it would have resulted in a near-monopoly in European exchange-traded derivatives and would therefore have stifled competition. Press reports indicated that Deutsche Börse, which had spent €82.2 million (US\$1.00=0.7621 euros as at Feb. 3, 2012) so far on preparing the merger, might appeal against the decision. Expenditure to date by NYSE Euronext was put at US\$85 million.

A statement by Deutsche Börse described the EC's decision as "a black day for Europe and for its future competitiveness on global financial markets", contending that the decision "is based on an unrealistically narrow definition of the market that does no justice to the global nature of competition in the market for derivatives". The merger would have created the world's largest platform for company listings, the largest derivatives exchange, and a group with four times the revenues of the London Stock Exchange, which had opposed the merger.

IN BRIEF

An EC report on Feb. 8 recorded that Bulgaria and Romania had made progress towards meeting the requirements of membership of the **Schengen passport-free travel zone**, from which they had been barred so far, with Finland and the Netherlands to the fore in maintaining their exclusion [see p. 50666]. However, the Netherlands argued against their admission until the EC had produced a further positive report.

A joint statement issued on Feb. 8 by France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, and the USA declared their intention "to intensify their co-operation in combating international tax evasion". The agreement provided for **European co-operation with the US Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA)** of 2010 and the discovery by the US Internal Revenue Service of hidden accounts and other assets held by US nationals abroad. In return, the US authorities would "reciprocate in collecting and exchanging" information about US accounts held by residents of the five EU countries.

The **12th EU-India summit** held on Feb. 10 in New Delhi (the Indian capital) made progress on the conclusion of a free trade agreement between the two sides, which according to European Commission President José Manuel Barroso would be "the sin-

gle biggest trade agreement in the world, benefiting 1.7 billion people". An issue not resolved in New Delhi was an EU demand for greater protection for intellectual property, with particular reference to generic anti-AIDS drugs produced cheaply in large quantities in India.

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled on Feb. 16 that **social networking internet sites** such as *Facebook* and *YouTube* could not be compelled to install filters to block illegal trading in copyrighted music and films. In a judgment seen as a blow to content owners, the ECJ decided that compulsory filtering would not strike a fair balance between the right to enforce intellectual property ownership and the freedom to conduct business online.

The Canadian government welcomed the failure of a committee of EU technical experts on Feb. 23 to vote by the necessary three-quarters majority to classify **oil and gas derived from tar sands and shale rock** as substantially more polluting than conventional hydrocarbon production, as proposed by the EC in October 2011 [see p. 50716]. The deadlock meant that the issue would be referred by EU ministers to the European Parliament.

■ Last article p. 50887.

SWITZERLAND

Banking developments

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 6 reported that 11 Swiss banks had been named in the latest US probe of alleged tax evasion. One of the 11, Wegelin, the oldest private Swiss bank, was on Feb. 2 formally indicted by the USA in the first action of its kind. Wegelin a week before had broken itself up to protect other parts of its business. The list also included Credit Suisse, Zürcher Kantonalbank (ZKB), Julius Baer, Basler Kantonalbank (BKB), HSBC's Swiss subsidiary, and the Swiss subsidiaries of three Israeli banks.

After the indictment of Wegelin, Julius Baer on Feb. 6 said that it was prepared to pay a fine to escape an escalating US crackdown on offshore bank accounts. In 2009, UBS, Switzerland's largest bank, reached a settlement with the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in which it named some 4,450 of its US clients who were suspected of tax evasion [see p. 49373; for background see pp. 49048, 49108-09; 49229].

The *Wall Street Journal* of Feb. 16 reported that UBS had admitted manipulating interest rates in a probe by regulators in North America, Europe, and Japan into whether traders at big European and US banks had colluded to influence the London inter-bank offered rate (Libor) used to set lending rates around the world. One of a handful of institutions that had come forward with information about possible abuses of rate-setting processes, UBS had already suspended some of its most senior traders. No charges had been brought, but analysts suggested that UBS's admission was an attempt to insulate itself from the biggest possible fines.

It emerged on Feb. 7 that Carsten Kengeter, head of investment banking at UBS, would forego his bonus for 2011 after the bank lost more than US\$2 billion following alleged fraud by London rogue trader Kweku Adoboli [see p. 50667]. Kengeter in 2010 was paid SFr8.5 million (US\$1.00=0.9173 Swiss francs as at Feb. 10 2012) in bonuses as part of his total SFr9.3 million pay package.

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 3 reported a warning by Thomas Jordan, acting head of the Swiss National Bank (SNB—the central bank), that the bank's independence risked being compromised following the departure of Philipp Hildebrand as chairman in January [see p. 50894]. Jordan said that SNB had come under domestic political pressure over the potential cost of interventions, but insisted that its policy operations remained stable and that it was committed to defending the ceiling it had set for the franc in September 2011 [see p. 50667] by buying foreign currency "in unlimited quantities if necessary".

■ Last articles pp. 50894; 50827.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

New government

The House of Representatives of Bosnia-Herzegovina (the lower chamber of the bicameral state legislature) on Feb. 10 gave its approval by 26-7 with one abstention to the composition of a new council of ministers for the country as a whole under the premiership of Vjekoslav Bevanda of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), as agreed by the major parties in December 2011 after a lengthy po-

New cabinet of Bosnia-Herzegovina

- ***Vjekoslav Bevanda** (Croat, HDZ) Prime Minister; European Integration
- ***Nikola Spiric** (Serb, SNSD) Treasury and Finance
- Sadik Ahmetovic** (Bosniak, SDA) Security
- ***Damir Ljubic** (Croat, HDZ-1990) Human Rights and Refugees
- ***Zlatko Lagumdžija** (Bosniak, SDP) Foreign Affairs
- Sredoje Novic** (Serb, SNSD) Civil Affairs
- ***Damir Hadzic** (Bosniak, SDP) Transport and Communications
- Barisa Colak** (Croat, HDZ) Justice
- ***Muhamed Ibrahimovic** (Bosniak, SDA) Defence
- ***Mirko Sarovic** (Serb, SDS) Foreign Trade and Economic Relations

(HDZ) Croatian Democratic Union.
(SNSD) Alliance of Independent Social Democrats.
(SDA) Party of Democratic Action.
(HDZ-1990) Croatian Democratic Union 1990.
(SDP) Social Democratic Party.
(SDS) Serbian Democratic Party.

*New appointment.

litical deadlock following the legislative elections in October 2010 [see pp. 50888; 50828].

The new council of ministers on Feb. 13 approved a retrospective state budget for 2011 providing for expenditure of some €635 million (US\$1.00=0.7582 euros as at Feb. 10, 2012). A budget for 2012 would be drawn up after the 2011 text had received presidential and legislative approval.

IN BRIEF

Entrenched inter-ethnic hostilities were apparent in the reaction of Bosnian Serbs in mid-February to an award-winning film directed by US actress **Angelina Jolie** about the post-Yugoslavia Bosnian conflict of 1992-95. Entitled *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, the film told the story of a love affair between a Serb police officer and a Bosniak Muslim artist and showed summary executions and systematic rape of Muslim and Croat women by Serb soldiers. Jolie and members of the cast received threats from ethnic Serbs, who declared a boycott of the film.

It was reported on Feb. 24 that Mevlid Jasarevic, the presumed perpetrator of an **attack on the US embassy in Sarajevo (the capital) in October 2011** [see pp. 50828; 50785; 50731], would be indicted in March together with three associates, Munib Ahmetpashic, Emrah Fojnica, and Dino Pecenkovic. All four were suspected of being members of the Wahhabi Islamist movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina [see p. 50888].

■ Last article p. 50888.

SERBIA

EU candidate status

EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels on Feb. 28 agreed that Serbia should become an official candidate for EU membership, as long desired by the Serbian government. The granting of candidate status, which had been postponed by the EU summit in December 2011 [see p. 50828], was made possible for the foreign ministers by the progress achieved on Feb. 24 towards the normalisation by Serbia of relations with its breakaway province of Kosovo [see below].

Serbia's EU application featured in a controversy involving the German ambassador to Serbia, Wolfgang Maas, who on Feb. 13 criticised former Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica for arguing that Serbia was not benefiting from its association agreement with the EU. Contending that Kostunica had a "partiality for Russia", Maas said that his views on Serbia's EU agreement were either ignorant or those of a liar. Kostunica demanded an apology, asserting that, if Maas was allowed to get away with such "abuse", he would become "even more arrogant on behalf of his country".

IN BRIEF

The government on Feb. 5 declared a state of emergency after Serbia had experienced the **heavy snow-**

fall and freezing conditions affecting central and eastern Europe, in which at least 20 Serbs died and many thousands were cut off in upland villages. Serbia was also damaged by the freezing over of the River Danube, a major transport artery passing through Belgrade (the capital).

At least one of the men convicted in absentia in Belgrade in May 2007 of **assassinating Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic** in 2003 [see p. 47948] was believed to be among four Serbian nationals arrested by the Spanish police in Valencia on Feb. 9 in an operation co-ordinated with the Serbian authorities.

■ Last article p. 50888.

KOSOVO

Referendum among Serbs

In a local referendum held on Feb. 14-15, mainly Christian Orthodox ethnic Serbs in four northern municipalities voted almost unanimously against accepting the institutions of the Republic of Kosovo declared by mainly Muslim ethnic Albanians in February 2008 when the province of Kosovo broke away from Serbia [see pp. 48421-23 (Serbia)]. The holding of the referendum was opposed by the Serbian government, which saw it as likely to damage Serbia's efforts to obtain candidate status for EU membership [see below].

Some 35,000 eligible voters in the four municipalities included a small number of ethnic Albanians, who in the event opted not to take part in the referendum. Polling took place on Feb. 14 and 15 in the municipalities of Kosovska Mitrovica, Zubin Poto, and Zvečan, whereas the municipality of Leposavić voted only on Feb. 15, the national independence day of Serbia.

Agreement with Serbia

EU-sponsored talks in Brussels between Kosovo and Serbia on practical issues arising from Kosovo's declaration of independence [see pp. 50888-89; 50829] yielded an agreement on Feb. 24 outlining the conditions under which Kosovo could be represented at international

meetings and also laying down the technical parameters for control of the Kosovo-Serbia border. Although there was no change in Serbia's refusal to recognise Kosovo, the agreement enabled EU foreign ministers on Feb. 28 to grant Serbia the status of an official candidate for EU membership [see above].

The agreement specified that the designation "Republic" would not appear next to "Kosovo" in the documentation of international conferences. Instead, Kosovo would be listed as "Kosovo*", with the asterisk referring to a footnote that would cite UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999), which had authorised NATO-led military intervention in Kosovo but had not mentioned independence [see pp. 43010-13 (Yugoslavia)], as well as the ruling by the International Court of Justice in July 2010 that Kosovo's declaration of independence had not violated international law [see p. 49952].

Kosovo's chief negotiator in Brussels, Deputy Prime Minister Edita Tahiri, claimed that the agreement enshrined de facto recognition of Kosovo by Serbia. She also noted that the European Commission would carry out a feasibility study for a stabilisation and association agreement with Kosovo as the first step towards eventual EU membership. The opposition Self-Determination (VV) movement contended that Kosovo's identity as a republic had been surrendered in exchange for a footnote.

IN BRIEF

Seven people were killed and three were missing as a result of an **avalanche** that struck the southern mountain village of Restelica on Feb. 12, as Kosovo experienced the very heavy snowfall affecting central and eastern Europe.

■ Last article pp. 50888-89.

ALBANIA

Opposition developments

The People's Assembly (the unicameral legislature), in a secret vote on Feb. 2, lifted the parliamentary immunity from prosecution of three deputies of the opposition Socialist Party of Albania (PSS), as requested by the state prosecutor in January [see p. 50889]. They were Tom Doshi, Taulant Balla, and Benik Baraj, who were accused of inciting violence in anti-government demonstrations in Tirana (the capital) in January 2011 [see pp. 50305; 50243]. The ruling Democratic Party of Albania (PDS) continued to represent the demonstrations as an attempted coup by the PSS.

It emerged on Feb. 18 that seven men had been arrested on charges of bombing two high-voltage electricity pylons in Kallmet, in the north-western district of Lezhë, on Dec. 31, 2011. The seven included a businessman who was said by investigators to have paid the other six to plant the explosives, with the aim of plunging half of Albania into darkness on New Year's Eve. Some of those arrested

Result of referendum in northern Serbia

Question: Do you accept the institutions of the so-called Republic of Kosovo?

	Votes	% of votes
No votes	26,524	99.24
Yes votes	69	0.26
Valid votes	26,593	99.50
Invalid or blank votes	134	0.50
Total votes	26,727	100.00

Turnout: 75 per cent.

(Source: Local Referendum Commissioner.)

were reported to have participated in the January 2011 violence as recruits of the PSS.

Decision by former premier

Former Prime Minister (1999-2002) Ilir Meta, who had been deputy prime minister and economy, trade, and energy minister until resigning in January 2011 [see p. 50243], announced on Feb. 7 that he would not join the government in an impending reshuffle. Instead, he would remain a member of the Assembly as leader of the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), which had launched in 2004 as a moderate breakaway faction of the PSS [see pp. 46217-18]. On Jan. 16 the Albanian Supreme Court had decided unanimously to acquit Meta of the corruption charges which had caused his departure from the government.

■ Last article p. 50889.

MACEDONIA

Name dispute with Greece

Visiting Skopje (the capital) on Feb. 20, UN mediator Matthew Nimetz held talks with President Gjorgje Ivanov on Macedonia's unresolved dispute with Greece over its name, involving the latter's refusal to recognise its northern neighbour as the Republic of Macedonia because the name was seen as implying a territorial claim to the northern Greek region of Macedonia [see pp. 50889; 50829]. Unable to report any substantive movement in the Greek position, Nimetz called for accelerated negotiations between the two sides, whilst the Macedonian government again accused Greece of illegally blocking Macedonia's admission to NATO.

In campaigning to be admitted to NATO as the Republic of Macedonia at the organisation's summit to be held in May in Chicago, USA, the Macedonian government claimed to have the support of 27 of the 28 NATO member states, the exception being Greece. At a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on Feb. 14, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski secured a specific declaration of support from her for Macedonia's admission to NATO. At a joint press conference with Gruevski, she used the name "Republic of Macedonia" rather than "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)", the appellation devised by the UN in 1993 to accommodate Greek concerns.

Inter-ethnic tensions

President Ivanov had talks in Skopje on Feb. 9 with the high commissioner on national minorities of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Knut Vollebæk, focusing on the upsurge in tensions between Christian Macedonians and Muslim

ethnic Albanians in January [see p. 50889]. They reaffirmed the importance of continuing the implementation of the 2001 Ohrid agreement which had ended an ethnic Albanian uprising [see pp. 44305-07], whilst Ivanov declared publicly that "isolated incidents cannot in any way jeopardise Macedonia's stable model of multiethnic democracy".

Nevertheless, concerns about the attitudes of ethnic Albanians, forming about 25 per cent of the population, remained strong in Macedonian ruling circles, compounded by what was seen by many as the aspiration of independent Kosovo to extend its borders into Albanian-populated north-western Macedonia. Such concerns were not eased by the spectacle of the Macedonian flag being burnt and anti-Macedonian slogans being chanted by Albanian Kosovars on Feb. 16 at a handball match in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. On Feb. 17 the Macedonian foreign ministry strongly condemned the episode.

■ Last article p. 50889.

TURKEY

Kurdish issues

Hakan Fidan, head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MIT), was on Feb. 9 asked to give evidence in court over government contacts with the outlawed separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The request came after an internet leak in 2011 of a tape of secret talks in Oslo (the capital of Norway) between a team led by Fidan and PKK representatives. Government officials were said to be astonished at the court summons.

Yavuz Baydar, a Turkish columnist, suggested that nationalist state officials were seeking to prevent any resumption of stalled negotiations with the PKK. The case gave "a very clear message to the government and the bureaucracy not to continue with the peace opening," said Baydar [for government's "Kurdish initiative" aimed at ending the PKK's armed struggle for an independent Kurdistan see p. 49374].

Turkish fighter aircraft on the night of Feb. 11-12 carried out air strikes on suspected PKK hideouts in the Zab and Hakurk areas of northern Iraq, from where the PKK was staging cross-border attacks on south-eastern Turkey. Security forces on Feb. 9 killed nine PKK rebels and captured three others in the eastern province of Bingöl. Another 25 died in two separate clashes with Turkish troops, 10 near the Uludere district of the south-eastern province of Sirnak on Feb. 13, and 15 in the Sirnak-Bestler region on Feb. 14.

The police, in a nationwide crackdown on the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), the urban wing of the PKK, on Feb. 13 detained up to 109 people in simultaneous raids in 30 cities.

New row over press freedom

Prominent US novelist Paul Auster sparked a dispute over press freedom, when, in an interview with Turkey's *Hürriyet* newspaper on Jan.

30, he declared that he would not visit Turkey or China in protest against their treatment of journalists. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Feb. 1 retorted: "As if we need you! Who cares if you come or not?"

An estimated 100 journalists were in prison in Turkey, accused of links with the PKK, or of involvement in the illegal ultra-nationalist Ergenekon organisation which was accused of seeking to overthrow the Islamist government. [For recent detentions of journalists see pp. 50829; 50358-59; 50302-03; for OSCE concern over press freedom in Turkey see pp. 50418-19; for background on Ergenekon see pp. 49328; 48843; 48701; 49428; 48374; 50302-03; 50889.]

Security developments

The provincial offices of the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the eastern province of Diyarbakir were on Feb. 5 attacked with Molotov cocktails. Some damage was caused to the buildings but there were no reports of any injuries.

Two 16-year-old schoolgirls were killed on Feb. 22 when a gunman shot at a school bus in the Kadirli district of the southern province of Osmaniye. Another was injured. The attacker had reportedly been rejected by one of the girls and shot at the bus in a revenge attack.

A court in Istanbul on Feb. 17 convicted 24 members of the extremist Islamist group Hezbollah of terrorism charges. Hezbollah was believed to have killed and tortured dozens of people that it deemed sympathetic to the PKK. Eight suspects, including Hezbollah's alleged military leader Hadi Inan, received a life sentence without parole. Others received lesser sentences.

Armenian genocide controversy

Turkey on Feb. 28 welcomed a decision by the French Constitutional Court to strike down new legislation that made it a crime to deny that the killing of some 1.5 million Armenians in Ottoman Turkey between 1915 and 1923 was genocide [see p. 50942 (France)]. Approved in January [see pp. 50833-34 (France)], the bill had strained relations between the two countries [see p. 50830]. The Turkish authorities considered the Armenian victims casualties of war. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who considered genocide denial "intolerable", on Feb. 29 ordered his government to prepare a new draft.

Separately, Swiss prosecutors on Feb. 6 began an investigation into alleged denial of the Armenian genocide by Turkish EU Affairs Minister Egemen Bagis during a recent visit to the Swiss city of Zurich. Denying genocide was a crime under Swiss anti-racism legislation. Switzerland in March 2007 convicted Turkish politician Dogu Perincek, head of the banned leftist-nationalist Turkish Workers' Party (TKP), of racism for denying that the killings amounted to genocide [see p. 47828 (Switzerland)].

IN BRIEF

The *Guardian* of Feb. 14 reported **anger among market traders in Istanbul** over a new law that stopped them shouting about their wares. Introduced in January, the legislation was designed to stop traders pestering and harassing shoppers. Offenders faced fines and even the closure of their pitches.

On Feb. 21, **China and Turkey signed a three-year currency swap deal worth US\$1.6 billion** to enable bilateral trade in local currencies. Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping, who with Turkish President Abdullah Gul oversaw the signing of the agreement, was on a visit to Turkey to discuss bilateral, regional and international issues.

■ Last article pp. 50889-90.

AZERBAIJAN**Opposition developments**

Parties of the opposition Public Chamber grouping, including the New Equality Party (Musavat) and the Popular Front, warned from Feb. 7 that they would stage demonstrations before and during the Eurovision song contest to be held in May in Baku (the capital) calling for the release of political prisoners detained in recent political disturbances. Azerbaijan was hosting the 2012 Eurovision contest because it won the 2011 competition in Düsseldorf, Germany, to great national rejoicing. [For recent background see pp. 50890; 50830; 50733.]

Calling on Feb. 14 for "mass protests", Popular Front leader Ali Karimli specifically rejected an assertion by President Ilham Aliyev that Azerbaijan was not suited to opposition movements of the sort that had swept away the regimes of Egypt and other "Arab Spring" countries. In an internet posting, Karimli wrote: "The fall of regimes that lose legitimacy is inevitable, including the defeat of the dynastic rule in Azerbaijan. The only way to ensure peaceful change in Azerbaijan is to start democratic reforms."

A spokesman for the banned Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (AIP) declared on Feb. 27 that 40 "believers" had been arrested in a new clamp-down by the authorities, many of them in the traditionally devout municipality of Nardaran near Baku. The spokesman said that it was "unfair to arrest people based on speculations that some country [i.e. Iran] is plotting a terror act".

IN BRIEF

President Aliyev was among an estimated 60,000 people who took part in a march in Baku on Feb. 26 to mark the **20th anniversary of the mass killing of Azerbaijanis** in the village of Khodzhal (Xocali) during the war with Armenia over the Armenian-populated enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh [see p. 38774 (Azerbaijan/Armenia); for recent background see pp. 50733; 50529; 49487; 48899].

■ Last article p. 50890.

GEORGIA**South Ossetia drama**

Former minister Alla Dzhioyeva was hospitalised in disputed circumstances on Feb. 9, the day before she had been due to stage her own inauguration as president of the breakaway Georgian republic of South Ossetia on the basis that she had won the second round of presidential elections in November 2011 [see pp. 50890; 50830; 50786]. Her supporters claimed that she had been badly beaten by security police in her office in Tskhinvali (the capital of South Ossetia), whereas the authorities maintained that she had suffered a heart attack or stroke in an altercation with officials.

The South Ossetia electoral commission announced on Feb. 27 that it had registered South Ossetia's ambassador to Russia, Dmitry Medoyev, as a candidate for the repeat presidential elections to be held on March 25. Other registered candidates included security chief Leonid Tibilov and human rights ombudsman David Sanakoyev.

Attack on Abkhazian president

President Aleksandr Ankvab of the breakaway Georgian republic of Abkhazia on Feb. 22 escaped unharmed when five men armed with automatic rifles and grenade launchers detonated a massive roadside bomb and then attacked his convoy near the village of Druzhiba in Gudauta district outside Sukhumi (the capital of Abkhazia). Three presidential bodyguards were injured in the attack, one of whom died later in hospital. It was reported to have been the sixth attempt on Ankvab's life in less than a decade.

New political party

Billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili on Feb. 21 announced the formation of a new political alliance called Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia, as foreshadowed by him in October 2011 [see p. 50733]. The new party would contest the next parliamentary elections on a list headed by Ivanishvili if he recovered his Georgian citizenship, which he lost in October 2011 [ibid.], failing which his wife would be the top candidate.

Small opposition parties included in the new alliance were named as the Republican Party led by Davit Usupashvili, the Free Democrats led by Irakli Alasania, and the National Forum led by Kakhaber Shartava.

IN BRIEF

The Georgian foreign ministry on Feb. 15 condemned the reported **creation of an "Ossetian battalion"** by Russian military forces stationed in the Tskhinvali region, to which local residents would be

recruited with a promise of pay commensurate with that of Russian soldiers.

■ Last article p. 50890.

RUSSIA**Presidential election campaign**

There were further anti-government protests in February as the presidential election campaign intensified. Vladimir Putin, the prime minister, who had announced in September that he intended to stand for election and retake the post of president that he had held in 1999-2008, campaigned vigorously [see p. 50670]. The opposition to Putin, galvanised by the large protests in December 2011 against the flawed elections that month to the State Duma (the lower chamber of the bicameral legislature), remained vocal but was concentrated mainly in Moscow [see pp. 50824-26]. Opinion polls in February suggested that support for Putin was rising after a slump caused by the December protests, and that he could expect to win around 60 per cent of the vote, giving him outright victory in the first round of the presidential elections due to be held on March 4.

On Feb. 4 there were two rallies in Moscow. An opposition demonstration was staged on Bolotnaya square, the location of the first major anti-government protest on Dec. 10, 2011 [see p. 50825]. This drew an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people. The same day, a rally in support of Putin's election was staged at Poklonnaya Gora, on the other side of Moscow, which was attended by up to 140,000 people according to police figures (and as few as 15,000 people, according to journalists present). Participants in both rallies braved intense cold, with temperatures as low as -18C. Similar demonstrations—both for and against the government—were held in other major cities. That the opposition rally still managed to attract a large crowd in Moscow, despite the cold and the six-week hiatus since the last demonstration, suggested that the protest movement had the potential to put pressure on the government. Moreover, there was evidence that many of the participants in the pro-Putin rally were public sector employees who had been paid to attend or been coerced into doing so by their employers, under the threat of disciplinary action.

Another opposition protest was staged in Moscow on Feb. 26 (a Sunday) when an estimated 30,000 people linked hands to form a 16 km human chain around the city's Garden Ring road. The demonstration—the Great White Circle—was organised through social media after the city authorities had refused permission for the opposition to hold a rally with speakers.

The Putin campaign, meanwhile, gathered pace. In a meeting with election monitors on

Feb. 1, the prime minister admitted that he might fail to win more than 50 per cent of the vote in the March 4 election, which would necessitate the holding of a second round against his closest challenger. This might bring, he said, "a certain destabilisation". However, as the month progressed, the growing confidence of the Putin campaign—the theme of which was stability—seemed to indicate a first-round victory for the prime minister. The last time a presidential election had gone to a second round was in 1996, when President Boris Yeltsin had defeated Communist Party challenger, Gennady Zyuganov [see p. 41196].

Rallies across Russia in support of Putin and "stability" were held on Feb. 18. These were organised by trade unions (which were state-run rather than independent) and by the All-Russian Popular Front, an organisation formed in May 2011 to support Putin [see p. 50466]. Some reports claimed that rally-goers were attracted by inducements such as free food or concerts. Police figures suggested that between 5,000 and 10,000 people attended the rallies in regional centres, with the rally in St Petersburg, Russia's second city, attracting 60,000 people. A major pro-Putin demonstration was organised at the Luzhniki sports stadium in Moscow on Feb. 23, "Defender of the Fatherland Day", a public holiday devoted to the Russian army. As at the Feb. 4 rally, many of those present appeared to have been encouraged by their employers to attend. The rally was preceded by a march along the Moscow embankment in which 30,000 people participated, according to interior ministry sources. Addressing the estimated 90,000-strong crowd in the stadium, Putin used nationalist rhetoric, calling on people not to accept foreign interference in Russia's affairs. Summoning support, he said: "We still have to do a great deal for our Russia. And we will do it, relying on the talent of our people and our great history, written with the blood and sweat of our ancestors."

In addition to the mass rallies that were meant to demonstrate support for his theme of "stability", Putin also offered concessions to the dissatisfied middle class, which formed the core of the anti-government protest movement. In an article for *Kommersant* newspaper on Feb. 6, he acknowledged that people had become more wealthy, better educated, and therefore "more demanding", and admitted that "the quality of our state lags behind the readiness of civil society to take part in it...We need to renew the mechanisms of our democracy: they need to catch up with growing public activity." Further campaign promises focused on the widespread anger at the wealth of oligarchs—Russia's tycoons. At a meeting of the business lobby organisation, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSP), on Feb. 9, Putin spoke of "dealing with the problems of the 1990s, of what, frankly speaking, was dishonest privatisation". He suggested the payment of a one-time windfall tax by tycoons to legitimise their "dishonest" fortunes, but gave no details of how or when this could be paid. He also suggested a tax on luxury items, which "should not be levied on the middle-class". Subsequently, on Feb. 13, Putin promised to raise salaries for state-employed professionals, including doctors and teachers in tertiary education, to 200 per cent of the regional average wage by 2018. He also said he was opposed to increasing the retirement age; demanded the forma-

tion of a "workers' aristocracy" with better professional training and broader public ownership of the largest companies; and promised improved housing and higher child-support payments.

On Feb. 20, in another newspaper article, Putin promised a huge increase in spending over 10 years on modern equipment for the armed forces at a cost of R23,000 billion (US\$1.00=29.1350 roubles as at Feb. 24, 2012), a R4,000 billion increase over spending plans announced in 2008. Russia would develop, he said, an "effective and asymmetrical" response to the anti-missile system for Europe being developed by the USA and NATO. In addition, the Russian army would be expanded to 1 million men by 2017, with 70 per cent of them being professionals rather than the current majority-conscript army. These spending plans would, he wrote, enable Russia to strengthen its defences in the face of "attempts to provoke conflicts in the immediate vicinity of the borders of Russia and our allies". The defensive theme was taken up in an article published on Feb. 27, in which Putin criticised US foreign policy. "The Americans," he wrote, "have become obsessed with the idea of becoming absolutely invulnerable". He raised warnings against a military strike on Iran [see p. 50956 (Israel)], against a US-led "Libyan scenario" in Syria [see pp. 50957-59 (Syria)], and against interference in foreign elections. Repeating earlier accusations that Russia's political opposition was funded by the West, Putin claimed that Russian-US relations were marred by US attempts at "political engineering" in election campaigns in Russia and in regions that are traditionally important to us".

North Caucasus developments

A series of co-ordinated attacks by militants in Chechnya and Dagestan, beginning on Feb. 13, inflicted serious casualties on security forces in Chechnya. The Chechen interior ministry admitted on Feb. 18 that 17 officers had been killed and 24 wounded in the fighting. Russian security forces in the region claimed, meanwhile, to have captured 25 militants and killed seven. Among them was Ibragimkhalil Daudov, a senior leader of the rebel group, Caucasus Emirate, whose body was found in woods on Feb. 14. He was believed to have escaped, after being wounded when security forces stormed the house in Dagestan where he was hiding. The clashes on the Chechen-Dagestan border, in mountainous territory, followed similar attacks in early January, in which between four and 14 members of the security forces had been killed.

The Caucasus Emirate, responsible for recent terrorist attacks in Russia, was led by Doku Umarov, who announced on Feb. 3 in a video message that the group would cease all attacks on civilian targets in Russia. He linked the decision to the anti-government protests, which showed, he said, that "the population of Russia does not support Putin".

On Feb. 27 Russian television aired a claim that the intelligence services of Russia and Ukraine had foiled a Chechen-directed plot to assassinate Putin. The plot was allegedly discovered on Feb. 4 in a joint operation. The television coverage showed two men saying separately that they had been ordered by Doku Umarov to kill Putin. Both men were

Russians, who had been detained in the Ukrainian city of Odessa after an accidental bomb explosion there in an apartment on Jan. 4. A third man, also allegedly involved in the plot, had died in the blast. The existence of the plot was confirmed by Putin's spokesman, Russia's domestic intelligence agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). Opponents of the prime minister cast doubt on the claims, suggesting that the plot was a fabrication to boost Putin's election chances.

IN BRIEF

Lt-Col Vladimir Nesterets was stripped of his rank and sentenced to 13 years in prison by a military court on Feb. 10 for **espionage**. Nesterets had pleaded guilty to "delivering classified information to the CIA in the United States about tests relating to Russia's newest strategic military rocket complexes", according to a statement on the website of the FSB. Nesterets worked at the Plesetsk space centre, a military facility near Arkhangelsk, which was used for testing intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The radio station, **Ekho Moskvy**, which had frequently aired criticism of the government, came under pressure when its majority owner, Gazprom-Media (a subsidiary of Gazprom), called on Feb. 14 for its board to resign. The dissolution of the board would see Ekho Moskvy's editor, Aleksei Venediktov, lose his seat (although he would remain the station's editor), and the election of a new board in March was expected to weaken the broadcaster's independence. Venediktov, a respected journalist, said that he did not believe the order had come directly from Putin, but that recent criticism of the radio station by Putin may have prompted the station's owners to make the change.

Russia exported US\$13.2 billion-worth of arms in 2011, according to Mikhail Dmitriyev, head of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Co-operation, speaking on Feb. 15, a significant increase on the US\$10.4 billion-worth of **arms exports** in 2010.

Among Russia's main clients were Algeria, India, and Venezuela, whilst arms' sales to Syria were worth around US\$5 billion. On Feb. 16 the European Parliament called on Russia to stop selling military equipment to Syria. On Feb. 4, Russia and China had blocked a UN Security Council resolution against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad [see p. 50957 (Syria)].

Sergei Darkin, the governor of the far-eastern region of Primorsky krai (territory) resigned on Feb. 28. He had governed the region since being elected in June 2001 [see p. 44236]. His forced resignation came about amidst long-standing claims of corruption and low personal popularity [see p. 49692]. The poor regional results for United Russia in December 2011's State Duma elections were also believed to be a contributory factor. The chancellor of the regional university, Vladimir Miklushevsky, was appointed acting governor.

Measures proposed by President Dmitry Medvedev to **liberalise the political system** [see p. 50892] began their progress through the Duma, with a first reading on Feb. 28. Deputies voted by 424 votes to four to approve the package of bills, which in-

cluded reinstating direct elections for regional governors, abolished in 2004 by then-President Putin. The measures also included a bill reducing the minimum number of members needed to register a political party from 40,000 to 500. A third bill abolished the requirement that political parties collect signatures in support of candidates for legislative elections and cut the number of signatures required for candidates in Russian presidential elections from 2 million to 100,000.

■ Last article pp. 50891-93.

BELARUS

Diplomatic dispute with EU

The EU announced on Feb. 29 that it was to recall all its ambassadors to Belarus. The organisation took this unusual step the day after Belarus had expelled the ambassadors of Poland and the EU in retaliation for an EU decision to expand the list of Belarusian officials subject to sanctions.

On Feb. 27, the EU had agreed to add the names of 21 people, mostly police officers and judges, to the list of 210 Belarusian officials who were subject by the EU to an entry visa ban and asset freeze. The individuals were described by the EU as "responsible for the repression of civil society and the democratic opposition in Belarus". The Belarusian opposition had been under increasing pressure since the crackdown on protests against the flawed re-election of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in December 2010 [see p. 50202; for EU sanctions see p. 50240]. There were fears, however, that the diplomatic isolation of Belarus that would result from the EU's decision could push it towards closer ties with Russia.

On Feb. 16, the European Parliament (EP) passed a resolution urging President Lukashenka to pardon the two young men sentenced on Nov. 30, 2011, to death for having allegedly carried out the bombing in the Minsk metro in April that killed 15 people [see pp. 50417; 50788]. The EP also called on Belarus to introduce a moratorium on the death penalty. Belarus was the only country in Europe to retain capital punishment. The Belarusian foreign ministry denounced the resolution as "flagrantly interfering with the administration of justice in a sovereign state".

Sentencing of activists over toy protest

Pavel Vinahradaw, an activist in the opposition Zmena (Change) youth movement was sentenced on Feb. 22 to 10 days in prison for having organised an unsanctioned protest in central Minsk (the capital) on Feb. 10. Later that day, Alyaksandr Artybashau also received a 10-day prison sentence for the same offence. The protest had involved nine soft toys holding miniature signs demanding press freedom and

the release of political prisoners, which had been set up in Minsk's Independence Square.

In May, Vinahradaw had been among several activists sentenced to prison terms in connection with the opposition protests of December 2010. He had received a four-year sentence, but had been among the 11 activists released through a presidential pardon on Sept. 14, 2011 [see pp. 50467-68; 50671]. Arrangements of soft toys and figurines had been staged in Russian cities in January, as a protest against the flawed legislative elections of December 2011 [see p. 50892 (Russia)].

■ Last article p. 50891.

UKRAINE

Ministerial appointments - New armed forces chief

President Viktor Yanukovich made several changes to senior personnel in government and the security services. On Feb. 14, Andry Klyuyev was appointed secretary of the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC). On Feb. 22, Valery Khoroshkovsky was promoted from finance minister (a post that he had held only since January [see p. 50891]) to the post vacated by Klyuyev of first deputy prime minister and minister of economic development and trade. On Feb. 28 the post of finance minister was given to Yuri Kolobov, a senior figure at the National Bank of Ukraine (the central bank).

The outgoing secretary of the NSDC, Raisa Bohatryova, on Feb. 14 was made deputy prime minister and minister of health. The health minister, Oleksandr Anishchenko, was dismissed [for appointment see p. 50648; for previous cabinet list see p. 50203; for subsequent government changes see p. 50788].

On Feb. 18, President Yanukovich dismissed Grigory Pedchenko as chief of the general staff and commander in chief of the armed forces of Ukraine. His replacement was Lt-Gen. Volodymyr Zamana, previously first deputy to Pedchenko. The change of leadership came in the context of plans to reform Ukraine's military command structures and arms industry, which were discussed at a meeting on Feb. 18 between Yanukovich and the leadership of the NSDC, the defence ministry and the general staff.

Sentencing of former minister

Yuri Lutsenko, the interior minister in the government of Yuliya Tymoshenko, on Feb. 27 received a four-year prison sentence with confiscation of property for embezzlement and abuse of office. Lutsenko had been arrested in December 2010 and had been held in custody since then. His trial opened in May [see pp. 50241; 50468].

Lutsenko was convicted of unlawfully employing his driver and providing him with a pension and housing; he was also convicted of having misspent budget money to celebrate Police Day (a professional holiday) in 2008 and 2009. He was ordered to reimburse the interior ministry 643,000 hryvnas for the festivities and 293,000 hryvnas for unlawfully employing his driver (US\$1.00=8.0055 hryvnas as at Feb. 24, 2012). EU officials and foreign ministers condemned the conviction.

Meanwhile, there was independent confirmation that Yuliya Tymoshenko, who had been in prison since August 2011 and was now serving a seven-year prison sentence [see p. 50729], was ill and not receiving proper medical attention. Tymoshenko's daughter, Yevgeniya Tymoshenko, had repeatedly claimed that her mother's health was deteriorating and that she had not been permitted to see doctors of her choice [see p. 50672]. Ukrainian officials had denied this. Under an arrangement negotiated through the embassies of Canada and Germany, three Canadian and two German doctors were permitted to visit Tymoshenko in prison on Feb. 15. They stated afterwards that she was "ill, in constant pain, and requires toxicology and other laboratory testing". However, the prosecutor general of Ukraine, Viktor Pshonka, on Feb. 17 denied that Tymoshenko needed hospital treatment.

■ Last article p. 50891.

ICELAND

EU accession developments

The ministry of economic affairs on Feb. 2 said that it had submitted to the EU Iceland's pre-accession economic programme. Part of the country's EU accession process, the four-chapter report set out the government's main economic priorities until 2014. The first chapter detailed the main policy priorities; the second the macro-economic outlook and economic policy going forward; the third dealt with government finances and the medium-term fiscal programme; and the fourth covered recently adopted and foreseen structural changes in main policy areas. [For opening of EU accession negotiations see p. 49953; for recent EU accession developments see p. 50830.]

Banking and economic developments

Hreidar Mar Sigurdsson, former chief executive of Iceland's largest bank, Kaupthing, now rebranded as Arion Bank [see p. 49537], and Sigurdur Einarsson, Kaupthing's former chairman, were indicted by a prosecutor on Feb. 22 on charges of fraud and market manipulation. Both were expected to stand trial at the beginning of March. The indictments were the latest move by Iceland's special prosecutor to investigate the executives behind the collapse of Kaupthing in 2008 [see p. 48842; for recent developments concerning Kaupthing see pp. 50830; 49811; 49649; 49591].

Iceland's Financial Supervisory Authority (FME) on Feb. 18 said that it had dismissed its chief executive, Gunnar Andersen, following an internal inquiry into his prior involvement with offshore holding companies owned by Landsbanki.

Credit ratings agency Fitch on Feb. 17 upgraded Iceland's long-term foreign currency issues default rating by one notch from BB+ to BBB-, the first step of investment grade. The agency said that the move reflected the progress that had been made in "restoring macro-economic stability, pushing ahead with structural reforms and rebuilding creditworthiness since the 2008 banking and currency crisis". [For collapse of banking system see p. 48842.]

Population statistics

Figures reported by *Iceland Review* on Feb. 14 showed that the population of Iceland on Jan. 1, 2012, stood at 319,575, an increase of 1,123, or 0.4 per cent, on the same date in 2011.

■ Last article p. 50893.

VATICAN

End of tax breaks on properties

Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti on Feb. 15 informed EU Competition Commissioner Joaquín Almunia that he was planning to end tax relief on 100,000 Italian properties enjoyed by the Roman Catholic Church since 2005. After Italy's Radical Party (PR), a left-wing civil and human rights grouping, in August 2011 tabled a parliamentary proposal to repeal the exemption, Almunia had responded by launching infringement procedures against Italy. The European Commission (EC) in 2010 said that the exemption could amount to state aid that was in breach of EU legislation [see p. 50103].

The Vatican was currently exempt from property tax where buildings also performed a religious function, such as hospitals that contained a chapel. The new proposal would tax all properties with a commercial function. Estimates of the Vatican's annual savings from avoiding the levy ranged widely from €600 million (US\$1.00=0.7597 euros as at Feb. 17, 2012) to €2.2 billion. The Church said that the tax exemption was worth only €100 million a year.

Developments concerning sexual abuse of children by clergy

It was confirmed on Feb. 12 that Father David Pearce, a monk at Ealing Abbey, West London, for 35 years, and headmaster of the neighbouring private Roman Catholic St Benedict's

School, had been expelled from the priesthood for sexually abusing boys over three decades. Pearce, 69, was jailed for five years in October 2009 after admitting sexually abusing five boys at the school [for background on child abuse by clergy see pp. 50673; 50244; 50049; 49916; 49864; 49806; 49760].

Alleged plot against pope

The Italian daily *Il Fatto Quotidiano* on Feb. 10 published a letter in German detailing an alleged death plot against Pope Benedict XVI. Dated Dec. 30, 2011, the anonymous letter quoted Cardinal Paolo Romeo, Archbishop of Palermo, as predicting during a trip to China in 2011 that the pope would die within 12 months and be replaced by Angelo Scola, Archbishop of Milan. The Vatican ridiculed the letter as "ramblings that should not be taken seriously". Observers described it as an attempt to cause political mischief.

Elevation of 22 new cardinals

The pontiff on Feb. 18 formally elevated 22 new cardinals, bringing to 125 the number of cardinals under 80 and thus eligible to vote for the next pope.

■ Last articles pp. 50894; 50673; 50480; 50421.

IN BRIEF

ARMENIA: It was confirmed on Feb. 16 that Vartan Oskanyan, who had been minister of foreign affairs in 1998-2008, had had been accepted as a member of the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP), a junior member of the ruling coalition. Having headed the Civiltas Foundation since 2008, Oskanyan said that he had decided to join the PAP because he believed that, together with other parties, it "can ensure free and fair elections and consequently a new legislature with a new arrangement of political forces".

ESTONIA: Security police official Aleksei Dressen and his wife, Viktoria Dressen, were arrested in the airport of Tallinn (the capital) shortly before she had been due to catch a flight to Moscow. A state prosecution spokeswoman said that he was believed to have brought a folder containing classified information to the airport for his wife to deliver to the Russian security service. [For Estonian-Russian relations see pp. 50673; 50200.]

LITHUANIA: The authorities in Vilnius on Feb. 13 demolished part of a Roma (Gypsy) village on the outskirts of the capital. Mayor Arturas Zuokas rejected criticism of the action by Roma rights spokespersons in the EU, saying that it had been necessary because of illegal construction and use of the village for drug trafficking. [For EU-Roma issues see pp. 50301; 49806; 48803 (all EU); for expulsions of Roma from France [see pp. 50091; 50043; 49990-91 (all France).]

MALTA: Credit ratings agency Moody's on Feb. 13 downgraded Malta's debt from A3 to A2 with a negative outlook, citing uncertainty over the prospects for the institutional reform of the euro zone's fiscal and economic framework, and the resources necessary to tackle the region's debt crisis. Downward pressure on the rating could develop if the country's economic growth prospects deteriorated significantly, obstructing fiscal consolidation. The Maltese finance ministry said that the slowdown in economic growth strengthened the government's decision to rein in spending and focus on those economic sectors which created the most jobs.

MOLDOVA: The new president of Moldova's separatist Dniester region, Yevgeny Shevchuk, who had been elected in December 2011 on an anti-corruption platform [see p. 50826-27], told a meeting of the Supreme Council (legislature) on Feb. 1 that it had been discovered that 90 per cent of Dniester's hard currency reserves had been "transferred to other accounts" under the administration of his predecessor, Igor Smirnov. The head of the Dniester Republican Bank (the central bank), Oksana Ionova, resigned when it was discovered that the funds were missing. She was replaced by Eduard Kosovsky on Feb. 2. On Feb. 29, the year's first round of Moldova-Dniester settlement talks ended in Dublin, Ireland.

MONACO: The grand chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled on Feb. 7 that the right to privacy of Princess Caroline of Monaco and her husband had not been breached by the publication by two German magazines without their consent of a photograph of them on a skiing holiday in 2002 while her father, Prince Rainier III, was seriously ill. [For death of Rainier in 2005 see pp. 46588-89.] Whereas the ECHR had in 2004 ruled in favour of Caroline in an earlier suit about the publication of unauthorised photographs [see p. 46077 (Germany)], in the latest case it decided that the German courts, in rejecting her complaint, had carefully balanced the right of the publishing companies to freedom of expression against the right of the applicants to respect for their private life and had taken into account the 2004 ruling by the ECHR.

NORWAY: Iraqi Kurd, Mullah Krekar, also known as Najm al-Din Faraj Ahmed, pleaded not guilty in a court on Feb. 15 to charges of making death threats against politicians and encouraging suicide bombings. The cleric and alleged founder of the Iraq-based radical Islamist Ansar al-Islam organisation was in 2005 ordered to be deported from Norway, where he had lived since 1991, but the move was postponed amid concerns that he might face execution and torture in Iraq. Krekar told reporters in 2010 that if he were deported and killed, Norwegian officials would "pay with their lives".

SLOVAKIA: Credit ratings agency Moody's on Feb. 13 downgraded Slovakia's debt from A1 to A2 with a negative outlook, saying that "increased susceptibility to financial and political event risk" presented considerable challenges to achieving the government's fiscal consolidation target. The country's general government debt-to-GDP ratio had climbed from 28 per cent in 2008 to over 44 per cent in 2011, and would not stabilise in 2012-13 as had been initially expected. Moody's also cited uncertainty over the prospects for institutional reform in the euro zone area and "the weak macroeconomic outlook across the region".

MIDDLE EAST - ARAB WORLD

ISRAEL

Growing momentum for air strike on Iran

The 12th annual conference of Israel's security establishment held in the central coastal city of Herzliya between Jan. 30-Feb. 2 provided a platform for the country's military and intelligence elite to air their concerns about Iran's nuclear programme. Israel's apprehension over Iran's nuclear aspirations had intensified since November 2011 when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had published a report which suggested that the Islamic Republic had sought to make an atomic weapon [see pp. 50790-91 (Iran)]. While the West had responded by imposing tougher sanctions on Iran [see pp. 50840-41; 50900-01; 50959-60 (all Iran)], numerous reports suggested that Israel was preparing to counter with an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Ehud Barak, the deputy prime minister and minister of defence, told the Herzliya conference: "The world today has no doubt that the Iranian military nuclear programme is slowly but surely reaching the final stages, and will enter the immunity stage from which point the Iranian regime will be able to complete the programme without any effective intervention and at its convenience". Barak's remarks highlighted a growing Israeli concern: that Iran was moving essential uranium-enriching centrifuges to the Fordow underground facility which had been buried so deeply underground they would be increasingly hard to destroy in conventional air attacks. Barak did not indicate how close Iran was to reaching the "immunity stage", but appealed for urgency: "Dealing with a nuclearised Iran will be far more complex, far more dangerous and far more costly in blood and money than stopping it today. In other words, those who say 'later' may find that later is too late".

The *Washington Post* of Feb. 2 reported that US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, whilst travelling with journalists to a meeting with his NATO counterparts in Brussels, had said that there was "a strong likelihood that Israel will strike Iran in April, May or June". Panetta and the US defence department both declined to comment on the report.

In an interview with the US television station CNN on Feb. 19, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, said that Israel recognised US "concerns" about unilateral military action against Iran, but "I wouldn't suggest, sitting here today, that we've persuaded them that our view is the correct view". Dempsey said that sanctions and diplomacy were both "having an effect" on Iran and that a military strike would be "premature". Asked about the mindset of Iran's leadership, he said: "We are of the opinion that the Iranian regime is a rational actor. And it's for that reason...that we think the current path we're on is the most prudent path at this point."

The *Independent* of Feb. 29, citing an anonymous US intelligence source, reported that Israeli officials had said that they would not give the USA any advance warning of a decision to strike Iran's nuclear facilities. The report said that the message had been conveyed during recent high-level talks between Israeli and US defence officials and was apparently aimed at absolving the USA of blame for failing to prevent an Israeli attack on Iran.

Attacks on Israeli targets abroad

On Feb. 13 bombers targeted Israeli embassy personnel in New Delhi (the capital of India) and Tbilisi (the capital of Georgia); Israel accused Iran of being behind the attacks. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said: "Iran is behind these attacks and it is the largest terror exporter in the world". He vowed to "act with a strong hand against international terror". However, there was no claim of responsibility and Iran denied involvement, accusing Israel of being behind the incidents and using the attacks to smear the Iranian government. The *Financial Times* of Feb. 14 noted that the attacks occurred just one day before the fourth anniversary of the death of Imad Mughniyah, a senior Hezbollah commander killed in a car bombing in Damascus (the capital of Syria) on Feb. 12, 2008 [see p. 48438 (Lebanon)]. The Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement had blamed Mughniyah's killing on Israel and had threatened to avenge his death.

The wife of an Israeli defence envoy to New Delhi was wounded when her car was destroyed by an explosive device placed on it by a motorcyclist. The attack took place close to the compound housing the Indian prime minister's residence. India's Minister for External Affairs S.M. Krishna said that an investigation was under way and that he was in contact with the Israeli government. A second device was found on an Israeli embassy car in Tbilisi. It was defused by local police before it could explode.

Israel again accused Iran of sponsoring terrorism after an Iranian man, Saeid Moradi, injured himself on Feb. 14 in an explosion in Bangkok (the capital of Thailand). Defence Minister Barak said that the "attempted terrorist attack" in Bangkok "proves once again that Iran and its proxies continue to perpetrate terror". Thailand's police chief, Gen. Prewpan Dhamapong, said on Feb. 16 that Moradi and two other Iranians arrested after the explosion had been plotting to attack Israeli diplomatic staff in Bangkok. [For full details of the incident see p. 50935 (Thailand).]

The Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* had reported on Feb. 3 that Yoram Cohen, head of the domestic intelligence agency Shin Bet, had recently told a closed meeting in Tel Aviv that Iran was seeking to strike Israeli targets around the world to stem the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists. Cohen said that Iran believed Israel was behind recent at-

tacks on its scientists [for details and background see p. 50901 (Iran)] and added: "It doesn't matter if it's true or not that Israel took out the nuclear scientists. A major, serious country like Iran cannot let this go on. They want to deter Israel and extract a price so that decision makers in Israel think twice before they order an attack on an Iranian scientist." Cohen cited "three serious [Iranian] attacks" since mid-2011 that had been thwarted as they were "on the verge of being carried out," against the Israeli consul general in Istanbul, Turkey, in Baku, Azerbaijan, and, most recently, in Thailand.

Economic developments

The Histadrut, the main labour organisation in Israel, declared a general strike on Feb. 8 after talks with the government failed to produce an agreement that improved conditions for non-unionised contract workers used by government agencies. The strike ended on Feb. 12 after the finance ministry agreed to raise the minimum wage for contract workers and also to provide improved social benefits. In return, Histadrut agreed to hold off industrial action for three years on issues pertaining to contract workers.

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 20 reported that Israel was to set up a sovereign wealth fund to manage the expected flood of money from large deposits of natural gas discovered off its coast [see p. 50257]. The fund was expected to have at least US\$80 billion under management by 2040.

IN BRIEF

The Supreme Court on Feb. 21 invalidated the so-called Tal Law which had **exempted from military service ultra-Orthodox Jews** engaged in religious studies. The decision, by a margin of six to three, enjoined the Knesset (the unicameral legislature) to substitute a "proportional, egalitarian and constitutional" measure when the decade-old law expired in July.

■ Last article pp. 50896-97.

PALESTINE

Fatah-Hamas agreement on unity government

Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestine National Authority (PNA) and leader of the Western-backed Fatah movement based in the West Bank, and Khaled Meshal, the leader of the Islamist Hamas movement based in the Gaza Strip, met in Doha (the capital of Qatar) on Feb. 5-6 and signed an agreement (the "Doha Declaration") which provided for the

creation of a “national reconciliation government of independent technocrats” under President Abbas which would be in charge of facilitating presidential and legislative elections and “starting the reconstruction of Gaza”. Fatah and Hamas had signed a reconciliation agreement in May 2011 [see p. 50480] but the two sides had subsequently failed to reach agreement on the establishment of a new consensus government. [For meeting of Abbas and Meshal in Egypt in November 2011 see p. 50795.]

Analysts noted that the “Doha Declaration” lacked crucial details, including the date at which the new government would take over and the composition of the cabinet. Speaking in Qatar on Feb. 6, President Abbas promised to implement the agreement “as fast as possible”.

IN BRIEF

Seven Palestinian schoolchildren and a teacher were killed on Feb. 16 when a truck lost control in rainy weather in the central West Bank and crashed into a school bus.

Khader Adnan, a member of Islamic Jihad, ended his **66-day hunger strike** on Feb. 21 after the Israeli justice ministry agreed to release him from administrative detention. The agreement was reached less than an hour before Israel's Supreme Court had been scheduled to meet in emergency session to discuss the validity of Adnan's detention. Adnan had started his hunger strike in mid-December 2011, after he was arrested by Israeli security forces in the West Bank village of Arraba.

■ Last article p. 50897.

LEBANON

Syrian-inspired violence in Tripoli

The Times of Feb. 13 reported that violence in neighbouring Syria had recently spilled over into the northern city of Tripoli where fighting between Lebanese Sunni Muslims, hostile to Syria's regime, and Alawites who supported it, had left three people dead and 23 injured.

The report said that violence had erupted in Tripoli when Sunnis had erected a poster of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria (an Alawite), his face crossed through with red paint and the word “murderer” added. Alawites responded immediately by launching attacks on Sunni neighbourhoods and the violence quickly escalated, despite the intervention of some 8,000 Lebanese troops. As in previous clashes in Tripoli in June 2011 [see p. 50434], the fighting pitted gunmen from the Alawite hilltop stronghold of Jabal Mohsen—where huge posters of Assad stood alongside the flags of Syria, Russia, and the Shia militia Hezbollah—against those from the mainly Sunni Bab al-Tabaneh district

■ Last articles pp. 50798; 50681; 50623.

SYRIA

Veto of UN Security Council resolution by China and Russia

The UN Security Council on Feb. 4 voted by 13 to 2 in favour of a Moroccan-drafted resolution which demanded that the government of President Bashar al-Assad abide by the Arab League “plan of action” of Nov. 2, 2011 [see p. 50793], and the League's decision of Jan. 22 [see p. 50898]. However, passage of the resolution was blocked by China and Russia—two of the five permanent members of the Security Council with the power of veto. A European-sponsored resolution had similarly been vetoed by China and Russia in October 2011 [see p. 50739; see also p. 50536]. The Security Council had started discussion on a new draft resolution on Jan. 27 [see p. 50898].

China and Russia said that they had vetoed the latest resolution because it unfairly blamed only the Syrian government for the violence which had beset the country since March 2011. Russia's permanent representative at the UN, Vitaly Churkin, called it an “unbalanced message”, while China's permanent representative, Li Baodong, said the resolution, in trying to predetermine the outcome of dialogue between the government and the opposition, “might further complicate the situation”. Speaking at NATO's security conference in Munich, Germany, on Feb. 4, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said that adopting the resolution would risk “taking sides in a civil war”. On Feb. 5, during a visit to Sofia (the capital of Bulgaria), US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the double veto “a travesty” and warned that chances for “a brutal civil war” would increase as Syrians under attack from their government moved to defend themselves. UN General-Secretary Ban Ki Moon, who rarely commented on Security Council decisions, called the vote “a great disappointment”.

The 13 countries which voted in support of the resolution were: Azerbaijan, Colombia, France, Germany, Guatemala, India, Morocco, Pakistan, Portugal, South Africa, Togo, UK, and the USA.

Siege of Homs - Other security and diplomatic developments

The collapse of diplomatic efforts to mediate Syria's uprising [see above] appeared to embolden the regime of President Assad, which on the evening of Feb. 3 started shelling parts of the central city of Homs. The Syrian government denied attacking civilians in Homs, which had been at the forefront of the anti-Assad uprising. It said that its use of force was justified by the presence in the city of members of the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA), made up of security forces' defectors. However, opposition activists claimed that large numbers of civilians were killed during the first two days of shelling,

which targeted the neighbourhoods of Bab Amr and Khalidiya.

The USA reacted to the escalating violence on Feb. 6 by closing its embassy in Damascus (the capital), while the UK recalled its ambassador for consultations. In a statement to the House of Commons (the lower chamber of Parliament, the bicameral British legislature), William Hague, the foreign and Commonwealth secretary, said that President Assad had no option but to surrender power. “This is a doomed regime as well as a murdering regime”, Hague told the Commons. Several European countries, including France and Italy, announced on Feb. 7 that they were withdrawing their ambassadors from Damascus. At the same time, the six-nation Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC)—comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—announced that it was withdrawing its ambassadors from Damascus and expelling Syrian envoys because the Syrian government had rejected Arab attempts to “solve this crisis and prevent the bloodshed of the Syrian people”. (The Sunni monarchies of the GCC countries had long been apprehensive of Syria's “strategic alliance” with Shia Iran.)

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Damascus on Feb. 7 and, after meeting with Assad, said that the president had pledged political reform and would soon announce a date for a new constitution. Lavrov also confirmed that Assad had expressed his readiness to enter into dialogue with the opposition who “so far are refusing to talk”. On Feb. 8 Lavrov announced that Syrian Vice President Farouk al-Shara would seek to open talks with opposition forces. Earlier, on Feb. 7, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan—a former ally of President Assad—announced that Turkey intended to launch “a new initiative with countries that stand by the Syrian people instead of the regime”. Turkey had a central role in the Syrian conflict as the host of the leaders of the FSA and the main opposition umbrella group, the Syria National Council (SNC).

In a report published on Feb. 9, the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) claimed that more than 300 people had been killed and hundreds others, including women and children, wounded since Feb. 3 by the government's shelling of residential neighbourhoods in Homs. Videos and photos of the attacks, reviewed by HRW arms experts, and accounts from international journalists on the ground, confirmed that government forces had launched long-range indirect fire attacks into densely populated areas. No adequate medical assistance was available to the victims due to a blockade of the city by government forces and fear of arrest if treated at government-controlled hospitals. Other reports claimed that electricity and water supplies had been cut off.

Explosions struck two targets associated with the military and the police in the commercial capital, Aleppo, on Feb. 10, killing at least 28 people and wounding over 200. Aleppo had generally been calm during the uprising, although violence had erupted in the city in late January [see p. 50898]. State media claimed that the blasts were the work of “terrorists”. (It was reported on Feb. 17 that US intelligence officials had concluded that recent bomb-

ings and attacks against the Assad regime in the country's main cities appeared to be the work of an al-Qaida affiliate that had infiltrated the opposition.) Activists claimed that seven people had been killed in Aleppo when troops opened fire on demonstrators who had taken to the streets after Friday prayers to protest at Russia's support of President Assad.

Arab League foreign ministers met in Cairo (the capital of Egypt) on Feb. 12 and called on the UN Security Council to pass a resolution on sending a joint UN-Arab League peacekeeping force to Syria to "supervise the execution of a ceasefire". The League had deployed its own observer mission to Syria in late December 2011 [see p. 50843], but it suspended operations in late January during an upsurge in violence [see pp. 50897-98]. The League called on all Arab League members to "halt all forms of diplomatic co-operation" with representatives of the Syrian government, whilst supporting "opening channels of communication with the Syrian opposition and providing all forms of political and financial support to it". It appealed to the opposition to "unify its ranks" ahead of a proposed meeting of a "Friends of Syria" group in Tunisia on Feb. 24 [see below].

In a powerful rebuke to the Syrian government, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly on Feb. 16 to approve a resolution that condemned President Assad's crackdown on the 11-month-old uprising and called for his resignation under the Arab League's Jan. 22 reform proposals [see p. 50898]. The 137-12 vote, with 17 abstentions, was a non-binding action with no power of enforcement, and it was denounced by Bashar Ja'afari, Syria's permanent representative to the UN, as a politically motivated scheme to intervene in Syria by the Western powers and others who "would like to settle accounts with Syria." A handful of the other countries that opposed the resolution, notably Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela and North Korea, condemned it as an unwarranted interference in Syria's internal politics.

Earlier on Feb. 16, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon sharply criticised Syria while on a visit to Vienna (the capital of Austria). "On Syria, I continue to be gravely concerned at the level of violence and mounting loss of life," he said. He went on: "We see neighbourhoods shelled indiscriminately. Hospitals used as torture centres. Children as young as 10 years old jailed and abused. We see almost certain crimes against humanity."

Protesters turned out in force in the Damascus suburb of Mezzeh—a middle class area close to the heart of the city—on Feb. 18 to attend the funeral of Samer al-Khatib, a young protester allegedly shot dead by the security forces earlier in the day. Mezzeh housed a number of important government and private offices, including the Ministry of Information and the Iranian embassy.

Security forces shelled Homs on Feb. 22, the 19th consecutive day of bombardment. Among the many people that activists said were killed on Feb. 22, two were Western journalists: the veteran US war correspondent Marie Colvin, who had been working for *The Sunday Times*, and a young French photographer, Rémi

Ochlik. The two had been working in a makeshift news media centre in Bab Amr that was destroyed in the assault, raising suspicions that security forces might have identified its location by tracing satellite signals.

Officials from the Syrian Red Crescent and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were allowed to enter Bab Amr on Feb. 24 "to evacuate all persons in need of help without exception". The officials were allowed entry to Bab Amr after they had negotiated with the government and the opposition.

Regime forces closed in on Bab Amr on Feb. 29 as part of a wider operation that saw attacks reported on opposition areas elsewhere, notably in the northern province of Idlib. The *Financial Times* of March 1 reported that activists in Bab Amr had "made their wills" and "recorded their last wishes" after warning of a possible massacre by the security forces.

"Friends of Syria" conference in Tunisia

Representatives of more than 70 countries and international organisations gathered for a "Friends of Syria" conference in Tunis, (the capital of Tunisia), on Feb. 24. The conference agreed to tighten sanctions and travel bans against President Assad and his senior aides and pledged to provide food and medicine for displaced Syrians to be distributed from border areas in Turkey, Jordan, and, possibly, Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar pushed for more forceful intervention against the Assad regime, with Prince Saud al-Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz, the Saudi foreign minister, saying he supported the arming of opposition fighters. Shaikh Hamad Bin Jassem Bin Jabr al-Thani, the prime minister and foreign minister of Qatar, tried, but failed, to get the conference to agree to send an Arab peacekeeping force to Syria to open "humanitarian corridors".

Moncef Marzouki, the Tunisian interim president, backed calls for an Arab peacekeeping force, and urged President Assad to step aside in exchange for immunity from prosecution for his alleged crimes. Before the conference, the main opposition SNC outlined its vision for a post-Assad era, proposing an interim presidential council of national leaders and a truth and reconciliation committee.

Political reforms - Referendum on new constitution

President Assad announced a timetable for political reform on Feb. 15, even as his forces continued to bombard the city of Homs with rocket and tank shells. The official SANA news agency reported that a referendum on long-promised constitutional amendments allowing for a multiparty system would take place on Feb. 26, and that legislative elections would be held 90 days afterwards, if the new constitution was approved. [For previous elections to the People's Assembly (the unicameral legislature) held in April 2007 see p. 47897.]

Whilst Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov welcomed the announcement as "a step forward", White House press secretary Jay Carney said that it made "a mockery of the Syrian revolution".

A national referendum on a new constitution was held on Feb. 26. Notably, the new constitution set a limit of two seven-year terms for future presidents and also removed article eight of the previous 1973 constitution [see p. 25911] which had stated that the ruling Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party "leads the state and society". Maj.-Gen. Mohammed Ibrahim al-Sha'ar, the minister of the interior, on Feb. 27 announced the results of the referendum on the new constitution, with almost 90 per cent of voters agreeing to it.

In a press conference, Sha'ar said that that 8,376,447 citizens voted in the referendum, which constituted 57.4 per cent of the 14,589,954 eligible voters, with 7,490,319 (89.4 per cent of voters) agreeing to it while 753,208 (9 per cent of voters) did not agree. He said that there were 132,920 invalid ballots, which made up 1.6 per cent of votes. The new constitution came into effect on Feb. 27.

IN BRIEF

Activists poured pools of red paint on to the roads of Hama on Feb. 2 to commemorate the **30th anniversary of a bloody government assault on besieged militants of the Muslim Brotherhood** in the city. The onslaught was led by President Assad's uncle, Rifaat al-Assad. As many as 20,000 people were killed and much of the city destroyed [see pp. 31623-24]. It was the first time that Syrians had commemorated the event publicly in their country.

Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri posted a video on the internet on Feb. 12 entitled *Onwards, Lions of Syria* in which he urged Syrians not to rely on the West or Arab governments in their uprising. He urged Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan to come to the aid of Syrian rebels confronting the forces of "the butcher" Assad. Zawahiri had posted a video message in support of the anti-Assad protests in July 2011 [see p. 50624].

A **UN commission of inquiry** into the Syrian uprising chaired by Paulo Pinheiro of Brazil delivered a 72-page report to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on Feb. 23 which concluded that "gross human rights violations" had been ordered by the Syrian authorities as state policy at "the highest levels of the armed forces and the government", amounting to crimes against humanity. The report said that the FSA had also committed abuses, but those were "not comparable in scale and organisation to those carried out by the state".

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon on Feb. 24 appointed his predecessor, Kofi Annan, as **international (UN-Arab League) special envoy to Syria**. Annan, whose term of office as the seventh UN Secretary-general ended in December 2006 [see p. 47665 (UN)], would "provide good offices aimed at bringing an end to all violence and human rights violations, and promoting a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis".

■ Last article pp. 50897-98.

IRAQ

Bomb attacks

A suicide bomber blew up his car outside a police academy in north-eastern Baghdad (the capital) on Feb. 19, killing some 19 police officers and cadets. The attack was the deadliest since Jan. 27 when a suicide-bomber attacked a funeral procession in a Shia district of south-eastern Baghdad, killing at least 32 people [see p. 50899].

Insurgents unleashed a barrage of co-ordinated car bombings and small arms attacks across Iraq on Feb. 23, killing at least 55 people and wounding 220 others. The worst of the violence was concentrated in Baghdad, where more than 30 people were killed in explosions and gunfire in mainly Shia neighbourhoods. There were no immediate claims of responsibility, but the interior ministry blamed the Iraqi branch of the Sunni jihadist al-Qaida, which it claimed was engaged in a "frantic race" against the government.

Ending of Sunni boycott of cabinet

The secular-Sunni Iraqi National List (INL—Iraqiyyah) announced on Feb. 7 that it was ending its boycott of the cabinet. Iraqiyyah had on Jan. 29 announced that it was ending its boycott of the Council of Representatives (the unicameral legislature) [see p. 50899].

A spokeswoman for the bloc, Maysoun al-Damlouji, said on Feb. 7 that the decision to attend cabinet meetings was Iraqiyyah's "second good will gesture" in efforts to ease sectarian tensions which had erupted in mid-December 2011, when the government of Nouri al-Maliki had issued an arrest warrant for Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a leading Sunni and a member of Iraqiyyah, on terrorism charges [see p. 50840]. The supreme judicial council issued a report on Feb. 16 which said that Hashemi and his employees had operated death squads that had killed security officials and Shia pilgrims. Hashemi remained in the northern Kurdish city of Irbil and refused to return to Baghdad.

IN BRIEF

It was reported on Feb. 8 that the US state department was looking at ways to **reduce the size and scope of the US embassy in Baghdad**, currently the largest diplomatic mission in the world, with 2,000 staff and 14,000 contractors.

The US-based organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on Feb. 9 that since the beginning of 2012, **Iraq had executed at least 65 prisoners**, 51 of them in January, and 14 more on Feb. 8, for various offences. The report said that the Iraqi government seemed to have given state executioners "the green light to execute at will". It called on the government to declare an immediate moratorium on all executions and "begin an overhaul of its flawed criminal justice system".

The *International Herald Tribune* of Feb. 13 reported that a group of political dissidents had announced the formation of a **new political party**, the Union of Patriotic Figures. The new party was described as "secular".

Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari announced on Feb. 21 that **Saudi Arabia had named an ambassador to Baghdad** for the first time in more than two decades. The Saudis did not, however, indicate that they intended to re-open an embassy in the city. The *Financial Times* of Feb. 22 reported that the Saudi ambassador to Jordan, Fahd al-Zaid, would also serve as ambassador to Iraq, but would continue to reside in Amman (the capital of Jordan).

■ Last article pp. 50898-99.

KUWAIT

Assembly elections - New government

Early elections on Feb. 2 to the National Assembly (the unicameral legislature), called in December 2011 by the amir of Kuwait, Shaikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir al-Sabah [see pp. 50900; 50840], resulted in the Islamist-led opposition making sweeping gains, although

New cabinet of Kuwait

- Shaikh Jabir Mubarak al-Hamad al-Sabah** Prime Minister
- +Shaikh Ahmad Hamoud al-Jaber al-Sabah** First Deputy Prime Minister; Interior
- *Shaikh Ahmad Khaled al-Hamad al-Sabah** Deputy Prime Minister; Defence
- Shaikh Sabah Khaled al-Hamad al-Sabah** Deputy Prime Minister; Foreign Affairs; Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs
- +Mustafa Jasim al-Shimali** Deputy Prime Minister; Finance
- *Anas Khalid al-Saleh** Trade and Industry
- *Hani Abdulaziz Hussein** Oil
- *Ahmad Abdulatif al-Rujeib** Labour and Social Affairs
- *Jamal Ahmad al-Shihab** Justice; Awqaf and Islamic Affairs
- +Salem Muthayab Ahmed al-Othaina** Communications
- *Shueib Shabbab al-Muweizri** Minister of State for Housing; Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs
- *Ali Saad al-Obeidi** Health
- *Abdulaziz Abdulatif al-Ibrahim** Electricity and Water; Minister of State for Municipal Affairs
- +Fadil Safar Ali Safar** Public Works; Minister of State for Development and Planning
- *Shaikh Mohammed Abdullah al-Mubarak al-Sabah** Information
- *Nayef Falah al-Hajraf** Education and Higher Education
-
- *New appointment.**
- +Altered responsibilities.**

there continued to be no formal political parties. On Feb. 5 Prime Minister Shaikh Jabir Mubarak al-Hamad al-Sabah and his cabinet resigned in accordance with the constitution. He was reappointed at the head of a substantially changed cabinet that was sworn in on Feb. 14. [For 2009 elections see p. 49230; for previous cabinet list see p. 50840.]

The new appointments included Shueib Shabbab al-Muweizri, from the opposition, as minister of state for housing and National Assembly affairs. On Feb. 13 Shaikh Salem Abdulaziz al-Sabah resigned as governor of the central bank after 25 years in office, criticising an increase in government expenditure to "unprecedented levels".

■ Last article p. 50900.

IRAN

Nuclear developments

Herman Nackaerts, deputy director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), announced on Feb. 1 that a team of IAEA experts had conducted a "good trip" to Iran for discussions on the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme [for arrival of delegation in Iran on Jan. 29 see p. 50901]. Nackaerts said that the IAEA and Iran were both committed to resolving "outstanding issues" and the Agency had planned another trip "in the very near future" [see below]. In November 2011, the IAEA had issued a report which suggested, for the first time, that Iran had sought to make a nuclear weapon [see pp. 50790-91], a move which had led the West to tighten sanctions on Iran [see pp. 50900-01] and had also increased speculation that Israel was preparing to attack Iran's nuclear facilities [see p. 50956 (Israel)].

In a televised speech at Friday prayers in Tehran (the capital) on Feb. 3, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, vowed that Iran would be able to withstand the effects of new international sanctions and warned that any attack on Iran "would be 10 times worse for the interests of the United States". "Sanctions will not have any impact on our determination to continue our nuclear course," Khamenei said. "Such sanctions will benefit us. They will make us more self-reliant.... We would not achieve military progress if sanctions were not imposed on Iran's military sector."

It was reported on Feb. 15 that Saeed Jalili, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, had written to Baroness (Catherine) Ashton of Upholland, the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security, expressing a readiness to resume negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme with the six world powers (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—and Germany, the so-called "P5+1" group). The two sides had last met in Geneva, Switzerland, in December 2010 [see p. 50208]. Ashton had

raised the possibility of new talks in a letter sent to Jalili in October 2011.

In his letter, Jalili said that Iran was "ready for dialogue" and called for "fundamental steps for sustained co-operation". Baroness Ashton responded on Feb. 17, saying that she was "cautious" but "optimistic" about Jalili's letter, which, she said, "demonstrates the importance of the twin track approach".

IAEA deputy director general Nackaerts led another team of experts on a visit to Iran on Feb. 20. The visit ended in apparent failure on Feb. 22 when Nackaerts announced that his team "could not find a way forward". The IAEA drew particular attention to Iran's refusal to grant access to the military site at Parchin. In his eighth report on Iran's nuclear programme circulated to the IAEA board of governors in November 2011 [see pp. 50790-91], director general Yukiya Amano contended that Iran had conducted "high explosive testing, possibly in association with nuclear materials, at the Parchin military complex".

In a televised address on Feb. 22 that made no mention of the IAEA visit, Ayatollah Khamenei denied that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons, which he described as "useless, harmful and dangerous". Nonetheless, he insisted that "pressure, sanctions, terrors and threats" would not force Iran to abandon its peaceful nuclear programme.

Amano circulated his ninth report on Iran's nuclear programme to the IAEA board of governors in Vienna (the capital of Austria) on Feb. 24. The report said that Iran had significantly increased its production of higher-grade uranium over the past six months and had failed to dispel concerns that it was pursuing atomic weapons.

According to Amano's latest report, Iran had produced 73.7 kg of uranium enriched to a concentration of 20 per cent—a level close to that needed for a nuclear weapon—in the 18 months leading up to September 2011. In the six months since then, it had produced an additional 35 kg of uranium at its two enrichment plants at Natanz and Fordow—the latter, recently developed site situated underneath a mountain near Qom. (Iran claimed that it was producing fuel enriched to 20 per cent purity in order to replenish a small nuclear reactor in Tehran that was used to produce medical isotopes.) The report said that the IAEA had become "increasingly concerned about the possible existence in Iran of undisclosed nuclear related activities involving military related organisations, including activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile".

IN BRIEF

US President Barack Obama signed an executive order on Feb. 5 imposing new, stricter **sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran (CBI)** and other Iranian banks, saying a broader asset freeze was necessary because Iranian banks were concealing transactions. Obama said that the additional sanctions were warranted "in light of the deceptive practices" of the CBI and other Iranian banks. [For

previous US sanctions imposed in late December 2011 see p. 50900.]

President Ahmadi-Nejad on Feb. 7 became the **first president since the 1979 Islamic Revolution to be summoned before the Majlis** (the unicameral legislature) for questioning. More than the statutory quarter of the Majlis's 290 MPs signed the motion to summon the president, saying they were unhappy with previous appearances by his ministers. The president could be impeached if he refused to appear within a month, or if his answers were deemed unsatisfactory. The move was instigated by hardline conservatives ahead of Majlis elections scheduled for March 2.

The *Financial Times* of Feb. 13 reported that the Council of Guardians, the constitutional watchdog, had approved **amendments to the country's penal code** which abolished the sentence of death by stoning and the death penalty for juvenile offenders.

A court in Tehran began hearing the trial of 32 defendants on Feb. 18 in a **US\$2.8 billion bank fraud case**, described as the biggest embezzlement case Iran had ever seen. The alleged perpetrators of the fraud were political allies of President Ahmadi-Nejad and a number of analysts regarded the trial as an attempt by the president's opponents to weaken him ahead of the forthcoming Majlis elections. [For background see pp. 50740; 50677.]

The *International Herald Tribune* of Feb. 18 reported that the Belgium-based **Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (Swift)** had announced its readiness to implement sanctions against Iranian financial institutions. The report described the move as "a potentially crippling sanction" that could effectively choke off Iran's entire banking system by denying it the main conduit for exchanging information with banks in most countries.

The Iranian oil ministry on Feb. 19 ordered an **immediate halt to oil exports to France and the UK**, an apparent riposte to the decision of EU foreign ministers on Jan. 23 to ban oil imports from Iran from July 1 [see pp. 50900-01]. Both countries had already all but stopped buying Iranian crude, suggesting that the action was largely symbolic. An oil ministry spokesman said that Iran had replaced companies from France and the UK with "new customers", but gave no further details. However, the *Financial Times* of Feb. 20 reported that Iran was "struggling" to find a buyer for nearly a quarter of its annual oil exports.

■ Last article pp. 50900-01.

BAHRAIN

Anniversary of uprising

The first anniversary on Feb. 13-14 of the start of protests by the majority Shia Muslim community against the minority Sunni regime headed by Shaikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa [see p. 50314] was the occasion of renewed anti-government protests by Shias, who came into violent confrontation in Manama, the capital, with riot police firing tear gas shells. The government continued to be

backed by some 1,500 troops and police from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), first deployed in March 2011 [see pp. 50371-72], although they remained in encampments around the capital and were not involved in law enforcement operations on the streets.

Security forces were deployed in large numbers in Manama and other locations in a pre-emptive move to prevent the demonstrations from developing into a threat to government buildings and in particular to deny protesters access to Lulu (Pearl) Square, a roundabout near the centre of the capital which had been the focal point of earlier demonstrations. The government accused the opposition Al Wefaq National Islamic Society of being responsible for the violence by failing to control demonstrators and not keeping them to a pre-authorised route, saying that a legal suit would be filed against Al Wefaq.

Prior to the anniversary, imprisoned Shia activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja on Feb. 9 went on a further hunger strike in support of his demand for the release of himself and 13 other detained Shia leaders. He had been arrested in April 2011, following which his daughter, Zainab al-Khawaja, had staged a hunger strike that encompassed her husband, uncle, and brother-in-law, who had also been arrested [see p. 50426].

New independent grouping

The Patriotic Independent Gathering was launched on Feb. 6 with the declared aim of fostering reconciliation in Bahrain and breaking the country's political deadlock. A leading light was Ali Fakhro, a former health and education minister, who said that the group would seek to draw up an action plan with a wide spectrum of political forces covering a parliament with full authority, representative government, fair voting districts, combating corruption, a review of naturalisation, reform of state property, and addressing sectarian tension.

IN BRIEF

It was confirmed on Feb. 14 that **John Yates**, who had been forced to resign as an assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in London in July 2011 because of the phone hacking scandal [see pp. 50567-68 (UK)], had become an adviser to the Bahraini government on police reform. He was charged in particular with ensuring that Bahrain met international human rights standards in dealing with pro-democracy demonstrations.

The head of **Formula One motor racing**, Bernie Ecclestone, announced on Feb. 14 that he expected the Bahrain leg of the 2012 championship to take place in April. The 2011 race had been called off because of the domestic unrest, ultimately because of opposition to holding it from the racing teams [see pp. 50538; 50314].

■ Last article p. 50900.

SAUDI ARABIA

Shia protests in Al-Qatif

Two men were killed and several wounded when police open fire on Shia Muslim demonstrators in the coastal town of Al-Qatif in the oil-rich Eastern Province on Feb. 9-10. The ongoing protests by Shias, making up about 10 per cent of Saudi Arabia's population, focused on their grievances over being politically and economically marginalised. The Saudi authorities contended that unrest among Shias was fomented and financed by Iran. [For Shia unrest see pp. 50899; 50792; 50741; 50372.]

Trials of al-Qaida suspects

The trial continued in February before a special court in Riyadh (the capital) of 11 suspected members of the Saudi Arabian branch of al-Qaida charged in connection with the attack in Yanbu in 2004 [see p. 50899]. In the same court, a trial which had begun on Jan. 8 continued of 16 suspected al-Qaida activists charged with involvement in the murder of a policeman and plotting attacks of government and military targets.

Women's rights issues

A group of women on Feb. 5 filed a lawsuit against the traffic department for its refusal to issue driving licences to women, making Saudi Arabia the only country in the world to maintain such a ban. Including Manal al-Sharaf, who had driven a car in protest against the ban in 2011 [see pp. 50537; 50484; see also p. 50678], the women pointed out that there was no basis in Saudi Arabian law for the ban.

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on Feb. 15 that Saudi Arabia was one of only three countries to have competed in the Olympic Games without ever sending a female athlete. The HRW called on the International Olympic Committee to put pressure on Saudi Arabia to end its "systematic discrimination" against women in sport.

IN BRIEF

According to a report on Feb. 10 in *The Times*, citing official Saudi Arabian sources, the **production by Iran of nuclear weapons** would trigger the acquisition of nuclear capability by Saudi Arabia "within weeks". Nuclear warheads would be purchased "off the shelf" from abroad and work would begin immediately on a ballistic missile platform. [For issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions see pp. 50959-60; 50900-01; 50840-41 (all Iran).]

Police fired shots into the air and made four arrests on Feb. 15 when they were called to the **27th annual Janadriya cultural festival** north of Riyadh to prevent disruption by some 50 men who were try-

ing to enforce Islamic law at the event. [For disruption of book fair by Islamists see p. 50372.]

■ Last article p. 50899.

YEMEN

Presidential election

A presidential election was held on Feb. 21 in which the long-serving vice president, Gen. Abd al-Rab Mansur Hadi, 66, was elected unopposed to succeed Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had finally vacated power in January under an agreement signed in November 2011 in Riyadh (the capital of Saudi Arabia) [see pp. 50899; 50841-42; 50793]. Hadi was credited with receiving 99.8 per cent of the vote in a turnout of 65 per cent. He was sworn in on Feb. 25 before the House of Representatives (the lower chamber of the bicameral legislature) and on Feb. 27 formally received a transfer of authority from Saleh.

The election was boycotted by Shia Huthi dissidents in northern Yemen and also by the secessionist Southern Movement (AA) based in the southern port of Aden. Pre-election violence included a major clash on Feb. 7 between Huthi militia and Islamist Salafists in Hajjah province, in which over 50 fighters were reported to have been killed, and the killing by security forces of 12 fighters of Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the southern coastal town of Zinjibar on Feb. 14. At least four deaths were reported during the voting process, as well as attacks on polling stations. On the day of Hadi's swearing-in on Feb. 25, at least 25 members of the Republican Guard were killed in a suicide car bombing in the southern port city of Al-Mukalla.

Having flown to the USA for medical treatment in late January [see p. 50899], Saleh returned to Yemen before the presidential election, still holding the title "honorary president" under the Riyadh agreement. In a statement on Feb. 13 he urged Yemenis to participate in the election, whilst in a "farewell message" read out by a weeping female presenter on state television on Feb. 20 he said that "I remain with you, a citizen loyal to his homeland, his people, and his nation as you have known me through thick and thin".

According to his aides as reported on Feb. 27, Saleh intended to seek exile in Ethiopia. However, a spokesman for the General People's Congress (GPC), Saleh's political party, declared on Feb. 29 that he intended to stay in Yemen to lead the GPC. Observers noted that under the Riyadh agreement Saleh and his associates enjoyed full immunity from prosecution for their actions during his presidency and that relatives of Saleh retained high positions in the security forces.

IN BRIEF

It was reported on Feb. 17 that Kaid al-Dhahab had emerged as the **new leader of AQAP in Yemen**, succeeding his brother Tariq al-Dhahab, who had been killed in an internal conflict between AQAP tribal factions. On Feb. 19 the security forces an-

nounced the arrest in Al-Bayda governorate of senior al-Qaida leader Abdallah Busal, who was said to have assassinated the local electoral committee head and four others on Feb. 15.

■ Last article p. 50899.

WESTERN SAHARA

SADR elections

The Sahara Press Service (SPS) reported that elections to the National Council (legislature) of the self-proclaimed Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) were held on Feb. 18-20 in "liberated" parts of Western Sahara and in Saharan refugee camps in western Algeria, with 158 candidates contesting the 52 seats. Meeting in the "liberated" town of Tifariti on Feb. 27 (the 36th anniversary of the proclamation of the SADR in 1976—see pp. 27747-48), the new Council re-elected Khatri Adduh of the national secretariat of the pro-independence Polisario Front as its speaker. [For recent background see pp. 50901; 50845; 50742; 50681.]

Polisario leader and SADR President Mohamed Abdelaziz warned on Feb. 5 that Polisario could resume armed struggle against Morocco, which exercised de facto power in most of Western Sahara, if UN-sponsored settlement talks in Manhasset, New York, failed to make progress. Speaking in Valencia, Spain, Abdelaziz said that Polisario would participate in a further round of talks in Manhasset in March in its quest to secure self-determination; but if Morocco continued to procrastinate "the Western Saharans' armed struggle would then become legitimate".

■ Last articles pp. 50901; 50845.

ALGERIA

Party developments

The national council of the mainly Berber Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), a secular opposition party, decided on Feb. 17 that the party would boycott elections to the National Assembly (the lower house of the bicameral legislature) scheduled to be held on May 10. Describing the decision as a "public cleansing", RCD chairman Said Sadi said that "the vulgarity" of the political process in recent months ensured that the role of the new legislature would be "one of political prostitution". He added that "the democratic revolution will be achieved in Algeria sooner than some might think".

Three of the four Islamist-oriented parties which had in January announced a joint list for the elections [see p. 50896] proceeded on Feb. 25 to the establishment of a formal alliance. They were the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), which had

withdrawn its political support for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in January, although four MSP ministers remained in the council of minister [ibid.], the Ennahda Movement (also referred to as Al-Nahda), and the National Reform Movement (Islah).

Leaders of several parties were critical in February of a decision by President Bouteflika to increase the size of the Assembly from 389 to 462 members. For example, Algerian National Front (FNA) leader Moussa Touati on Feb. 8 opined that the reason for the increase was to create a parliamentary "mosaic" that would make it difficult for a strong opposition bloc to be established.

IN BRIEF

The Russian business newspaper *Vedomosti* reported on Feb. 12 that an **agreement to sell 120 advanced T-90 Russian tanks to Algeria** had been signed by the Rosoboronexport arms exporting corporation.

President Bouteflika on Feb. 13 signed an ordinance strengthening procedures for **combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism**. It expanded the responsibilities of banks and financial institutions to this end and established higher penalties for involvement in such practices.

In successes against **Al-Qaida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM)**: (i) security forces on Feb. 14 arrested prominent Islamist activist Ali Belhaj at a roadblock near the northern coastal city of Tizi Ouzou; and (ii) nine AQLIM fighters were killed and a quantity of arms was seized in an operation by security forces near Boumerdes on the northern coast on Feb. 20-21.

■ Last article p. 50896.

LIBYA

Anniversary of uprising

The ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) headed by Mustafa Mohammed Abdal Jalil declared Feb. 18 a national holiday to mark the first anniversary of the start of the uprising which had eventually deposed Col Moamer al-Kadhafi [see pp. 50309-10]. Jalil and other government members called for a popular commitment to building democracy and stability and for support for the country's new institutions. However, there was no improvement in the deteriorating security situation that had been apparent in many cities in January as a result of the activities of uncontrolled militia groups [see p. 50895].

A particular scene of conflict in February was the Al-Kufrah district in south-eastern Libya, where tribally-based militia groups fought for control against one another and with government forces. There were also major clashes in Tripoli (the capital), in the coastal city of Sirte, and on the Egyptian border. On Feb. 22 two UK journalists working for an Iranian state television channel, Gareth Montgomery-Johnson and Nicholas Davies, and two Libyan helpers were detained by a militia group in the western port of Misrata and taken to Tripoli.

Focus on Kadhafi's sons - Search for Kadhafi assets

NTC chairman Jalil declared on Feb. 14 that the trial would begin in Tripoli within two months of Sayf al-Islam al-Kadhafi, the second son of the former dictator, who had been held by local militiamen in the southern mountain town of Zintan since November 2011 [see pp. 50895; 50844; 50796]. On the same day, Internal Affairs Minister Fawzi Abdelali announced that his ministry and the attorney general's office had prepared arrest warrants for Kadhafi's sons and their associates who had fled abroad.

The authorities in neighbouring Niger on Feb. 11 announced that Saadi al-Kadhafi, another son of the former dictator, who had taken refuge there after his father's fall, had been placed under house arrest and deprived of all means of communication. This action followed a television interview by Saadi al-Kadhafi in which he apparently breached the terms of his residency in Niger by declaring his wish to return to Libya and saying that he was "in regular contact with armed groups" opposed to the NTC.

Sayf al-Islam al-Kadhafi indicated in a newspaper interview published on Feb. 19 that he believed that another brother, Khamis al-Kadhafi, had been killed in a NATO air strike in late August 2011. However, Jalil said on Feb. 25 that there was no confirmation of the death of Khamis al-Kadhafi, who was reported by a television programme to be in touch with anti-NTC elements in Tripoli and to have had a leg amputated as a result of the NATO raid.

The Libyan authorities in early February launched a legal bid to recover property and assets in London and elsewhere believed to be owned by members of Kadhafi's family, including a house in London with an estimated value of £12 million (US\$1.00=0.6329 UK pounds as at Feb. 3, 2012). A lawyer charged with the task said that assets might be held in "mysterious investment funds or under assumed names".

New political parties

The formation was announced on Feb. 22 of the Alliance of National Forces (ANF) by Mahmoud Jibril, who had stood down as interim prime minister in October 2011 [see p. 50734]. It was stated that the new alliance embraced a wide spectrum of political parties, non-governmental organisations, and civil society groups. Also launched in February were the National Rally for Democracy and Development (NRDD), the Party of United Libya (PUL), and a party called Summit.

IN BRIEF

Two **Libyan air force colonels** on Feb. 21 flew their Mirage jets back to Libya from Malta, a year after they had defected rather than carry out orders to bomb civilians [see p. 50309]. Maltese Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi paid tribute to the courage of the pilots.

The council of ministers on Feb. 28 approved the **state budget** for 2012 providing for expenditure of LD 68.5 billion (US\$1.00=1.2348 Libyan dinars as at Feb. 24, 2012). Revenue was expected to include some US\$50 billion from oil and gas production.

■ Last article p. 50895.

EGYPT

Football match deaths

A total of 74 people were killed and hundreds injured at a football match in Port Said on Feb. 1 when supporters of local team Al-Masry attacked those of top Egyptian side Al-Ahly from Cairo (the capital). Popular complaints that the local authorities had failed to prevent the disaster were voiced in subsequent demonstrations against the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Cairo and Suez, where there were several deaths in clashes with the security forces on Feb. 2-3. These followed relatively peaceful anti-SCAF rallies in January to mark the first anniversary of the start of the uprising which had overthrown President Mohammed Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 [see p. 50894].

Shown on national television, the violence in Port Said occurred when Al-Masry fans invaded the pitch to celebrate their team's victory and drove Al-Ahly supporters into a confined area, where many were beaten and stabbed. Responding to charges that there had been a wilful security lapse, the government dismissed the governor of Port Said and ordered the arrest of two senior officials. Al-Ahly supporters who joined anti-SCAF demonstrations in Cairo contended that the Port Said deaths had been a reprisal for their role in the overthrow of Mubarak.

Upper house elections

Voting for the 180 elective seats in the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura), which had begun on Jan. 29-30, were completed on Feb. 22 and resulted in Islamist parties obtaining the same ascendancy as in elections to the People's Assembly in December-January [see pp. 50894-95]. A further 90 members of the Council would be appointed by the head of state. Whereas Egypt had previously been described as having a unicameral legislature, the newly elected Consultative Council was generally identified by the Egyptian media as an upper chamber, alongside the Assembly as the lower chamber.

In low turnouts in the two rounds of voting and run-off balloting, the Democratic Alliance headed by the moderate Islamist Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, won 105 of the 180 elective seats, the militant Salafist Islamic Bloc headed by the Al-Nour party 45, the secular New Wafd Party 14, the leftist Egyptian Bloc eight, and other parties and inde-

pendents eight. At its inaugural session on Feb. 28, the Council elected Ahmed Fahmy (FJP) as its speaker.

Constitutional timetable

The SCAF on Feb. 26 invited the People's Assembly and the Consultative Council to convene in joint session on March 3 to elect a 100-member Constituent Assembly that would draft a new constitution. On Feb. 29 the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court announced the timetable for presidential elections, under which first-round voting would take place on May 23-24 and run-off voting between the two leading candidates on June 16-17 if no candidate won an overall majority in the first round.

Trial of NGO employees

The trial opened in Cairo on Feb. 26, and was immediately adjourned, of 43 people who worked for pro-democracy non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Egypt on charges of illegal use of foreign funds to finance their activities. The defendants included 16 US nationals, with the result that the trial generated the most serious crisis in Egyptian-US relations for 30 years, threatening the US\$1.5 billion provided annually by the USA in aid to Egypt. The 24 Chinese workers and a translator abducted by an armed group near El Arish in the northern Sinai Peninsula on Jan. 30 [see p. 50895] were released on Feb. 3 after the Egyptian government had reportedly agreed to retry five Islamist militants who had been imprisoned for bombing Egyptian tourist resorts in 2004-06. Another group of Chinese workers had been released on Feb. 1, only a day after being taken hostage.

Exports of Egyptian natural gas to Israel and Jordan were again halted on Feb. 5 by the bombing of the trans-Sinai pipeline. Attributed to Islamists and/or "criminal elements" in the local Bedouin population, it was the 12th attack on the pipeline since the ousting of Mubarak in February 2011. [For previous bombings see pp. 50796; 50621; 50582-83; 50426.]

IN BRIEF

Nermeen Gomaa Khalil, an Egyptian woman who was a **UN freelance medical consultant**, was fatally shot by an unknown assailant on Feb. 12 while driving in broad daylight on a busy street in the Mohandiseen neighbourhood of Cairo.

■ Last article pp. 50843-44.

IN BRIEF

TUNISIA: It was reported on Feb. 4 that the police had seized substantial further quantities of the assets and possessions of former president Zine al-Abidine

Ben Ali, his family, and associates, notwithstanding condemnation by his lawyer in January of such "illegal actions of the Tunisian authorities" [see p. 50895]. The latest confiscated items included 48 yachts, 34 cars, shares in 117 companies, and 233

property deeds—which supplemented previous seizures of more than 200 companies, including banks, insurance companies, and car dealerships. The value of Ben Ali's assets was conservatively estimated at some US\$7.5 billion.

INTERNATIONAL

WHO

Meeting on research into avian influenza virus

Two studies (both funded by the US government) that had produced a genetically modified form of the H5N1 avian influenza virus (bird flu) that was potentially easily transmittable between humans [see pp. 50846; 50903 (both Scientific Research)], would be published only after experts had fully assessed the risks, World Health Organisation (WHO) officials announced on Feb. 17.

The WHO had called a high-level meeting of influenza experts and US security officials in Geneva in an attempt to break a deadlock between scientists who had studied the mutations needed to make H5N1 bird flu transmit between mammals, and the US National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB), which wanted the work censored before it was published in scientific journals. At the end of the meeting, Keiji Fukuda, the WHO's assistant director general for health security and environment, said: "There is a preference from a public health perspective for full disclosure of the information in these two studies. However there are significant public concerns surrounding this research that should first be addressed."

Biosecurity experts feared that mutated forms of the virus that research teams in The Netherlands and the USA had independently created could escape or fall into the wrong hands and be used to spark a pandemic worse than the 1918-19 outbreak of Spanish flu that killed up to 40 million people.

Challenge to WHO malaria mortality rates

A study published on Feb. 4 in the journal *The Lancet* suggested that 1.24 million people died from malaria in 2010. This compared to a WHO estimate for 2010 of 655,000 deaths. The research was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and used new data and new computer modelling to build a historical database for malaria between 1980 and 2010. However, both the new study and the WHO indicated that global death rates were now falling.

The study in *The Lancet* concluded that worldwide deaths had risen from 995,000 in 1980 to a peak of 1.82 million in 2004, before falling to 1.24 million

in 2010. The rise in malaria deaths up to 2004 was attributed to a growth in populations at risk of malaria, while the decline since 2004 was attributed to "a rapid scaling up of malaria control in Africa", supported by international donors.

■ Last articles pp. 50489; 50111; 50007; 49817; 49765-66.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Findings of US research into antimatter

The BBC reported on Feb. 29 that the findings from scientists who had worked at the Collider Detector at Fermilab (CDF)—one of two multi-purpose experiments at the now-defunct Tevatron particle accelerator at Fermilab, near Chicago (USA)—had provided new evidence for a subtle difference in the properties of matter and antimatter that may explain how the early universe survived.

The latest results supported findings from the Large Hadron Collider beauty (LHCb) experiment at the European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN)'s Large Hadron Collider (LHC) near Geneva, which had been announced in November 2011. Both CDF and LHCb had been looking at the process by which sub-atomic particles called D-mesons decayed—or transformed—into other ones. For example, D mesons were made up of particles known as charm quarks, and could decay into kaons and pions. The best understanding of physics to date, known as the Standard Model, suggested that the complicated cascades of decay of D-mesons into other particles should be very nearly the same - within less than 0.1 per cent - as a similar chain of antimatter decays. However, the LHCb team reported a difference of about 0.8 per cent, and the team from CDF presented data showing a difference of 0.62 per cent.

CDF spokesperson Giovanni Punzi said that it was a "very unusual result" and "very interesting." Punzi explained that when the results from CDF and LHCb were combined, the statistical significance almost reached the four sigma level of certainty, which equated to roughly a one in 16,000 chance that the observation was down to some statistical quirk in the data.

Death of Nobel laureate

Renato Dulbecco, an Italian-born US virologist who was jointly awarded the 1975 Nobel

Prize for Medicine, died on Feb. 19, aged 97. Dulbecco, David Baltimore and Howard Martin Temin were recognised for their discoveries concerning "the interaction between tumour viruses and the genetic material of the cell" [see p. 27443 (Nobel Prizes)].

■ Last article p. 50903.

SPACE

Maiden flight of new ESA launch vehicle

Vega, the European Space Agency (ESA)'s new launch vehicle, carried out a "flawless qualification flight" on Feb. 13 from the Agency's spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana.

Vega's light launch capacity accommodated a wide range of satellites—from 300 kg to 2,500 kg—into a wide variety of orbits, from equatorial to Sun-synchronous. Vega thus added to Europe's set of launch services next to the Ariane 5 heavy-lifter and the Soyuz medium-class launcher already in service.

Withdrawal of NASA from ESA-led Mars missions

Whilst US President Barack Obama's US\$3,800 billion budget request for fiscal 2013 unveiled on Feb. 13 [see pp. 50918-19 (USA)] did not reduce funding for the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), it sought to shift expenditure away from planetary science funding and towards human exploration and space technology. Accordingly, NASA announced that it was compelled to drop out of the ESA-led ExoMars missions, which aimed to launch an orbiter and a drill-toting rover to Mars in 2016 and 2018, respectively. NASA had been due to provide rockets and various instrumentation for the two missions.

■ Last article p. 50903.

ENVIRONMENT

Study recording ice loss

A study published in the journal *Nature* on Feb. 9 used data from the US Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) satellites to calculate the quantity of ice lost to the polar regions, other icecaps and glaciers through warming of the Earth's climate. The study, by researchers at the University of Colorado, Boulder, USA, found that ice caps and glaciers, excluding the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets, lost about 148 billion tonnes of ice a year between 2003 and 2010. This contributed about 1.4 mm a year to an annual rise

in global sea levels of 4 mm, the remainder being caused by thermal expansion or melted ice from the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets (about 1 mm).

The two GRACE satellites launched in 2002, a joint venture of the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the German Aerospace Centre (DLR) in Germany, mapped the Earth's gravity fields and detected regional shifts of mass caused by the distribution of ice and water.

Opposition to EU aviation emissions charge

Some 23 states, including Russia, China and the USA on Feb. 20-22 held a meeting in Moscow to co-ordinate their opposition to a new EU law requiring airlines using EU airspace to pay a charge to offset their greenhouse gas emissions through the EU carbon trading scheme. The participants signed a declaration outlining some eight possible measures that could be adopted in retaliation, such as passing domestic laws banning airlines from taking part in the scheme and limiting market access to EU airlines. The declaration also said that the regulation of international aviation emissions should be in the hands of the UN International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

The position of the EU was that it would abandon the new law only if a global agreement were reached on limiting aviation emissions.

Meeting on illegal tiger trade

Customs and police chiefs from 13 countries with populations of wild tigers met on Feb. 14-15 in a seminar on combating the illegal trade in tigers and tiger parts organised by Interpol and hosted by the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC). Representatives of conservation groups and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) also attended the meeting. The participants agreed on closer collaboration at a high level between different countries, the training of more enforcement officers with the necessary skills, and the effort to produce the political will to tackle the illegal tiger trade. [For details of tiger summit in November 2010 see p. 50166.]

The population of wild tigers had declined some 40 per cent over the past decade.

IN BRIEF

A paper published on Feb. 20, commissioned by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and written by 20 past winners of the Blue Planet Prize (widely regarded as the equivalent of a Nobel Prize for environmental issues), said that civilisation faced a "perfect storm of ecological and social problems" caused by pursuit of the myth of perpetual indis-

criminate economic growth. The paper made a series of recommendations on integrating economic, social and environmental policies, replacing GDP as a yardstick of wealth, empowering marginal groups, limiting consumption and valuing biodiversity. The authors of the *Blue Planet Synthesis Paper for UNEP* included climate scientists Bob Watson and James Hansen.

The inaugural **World Oceans Summit** was held on Feb. 22-24 in Singapore, attended by some 200 delegates from 27 countries, international organisations including the World Bank, marine science and business. The conference, which was organised by *The Economist*, discussed measures to restore depleted fish stocks and develop sustainable fisheries policies.

■ Last article pp. 50902-03.

G-20

Meeting of finance ministers and central bankers

Finance ministers and central bankers of the G-20 (Group of 20) advanced and major developing economies held a meeting in Mexico City (the capital of Mexico) on Feb. 26. [For previous meeting of finance ministers and central bankers in Washington DC in September 2011 see pp. 50682-83; for summit meeting in Cannes, France, in November 2011 see pp. 50799-800.]

In a final communiqué, the ministers and bankers welcomed "the important progress made by Europe in recent months to strengthen their fiscal positions, adopt measures to reduce financial stress, build stronger institutions, implement growth enhancing structural reforms and to put Greece on a sustainable path". Nevertheless, growth expectations for 2012 were "moderate" and downside risks continued to be "high".

At the Mexico meeting, German officials had reportedly urged other G-20 nations to find fresh money for the IMF that could be channelled to defuse the euro zone crisis. Christine Lagarde, managing director of the IMF, who attended the meeting, said that she wanted to raise the Fund's lending capacity by US\$500 billion to fend off "further shocks" to the global economy. However, the ministers and bankers concluded that a European review of its financial firewall in March was "essential" before any consideration could be made to boost resources for the IMF. Progress would be assessed in April, when officials gathered in Washington DC for the IMF and World Bank's spring meetings [for 2011 spring meetings see p. 50429 (IMF/World Bank)].

In a speech delivered in Mexico City on Feb. 25, US Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner said that Europe needed to make their crisis-fighting commitments "credible". The same day, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble insisted that the recent deal struck by euro zone finance ministers for a second EU-IMF bailout package for debt-stricken Greece [see pp. 50938-39 (Greece)] showed that "Europe has done its homework." According to

many analysts, the exchange between Geithner and Schäuble underscored deep divisions within the G-20 as Japan, Brazil, Russia and the UK joined with the USA and Canada in urging the euro zone to boost its crisis defences.

■ Last article pp. 50799-800.

NATO

Extension of Baltic air policing mission

NATO agreed on Feb. 8 to extend its air policing mission over its Baltic member states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) until 2018. "This mission continues to demonstrate the alliance's commitment to collective defence and solidarity for all its members," NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in a statement.

The Baltic air policing mission was first launched in 2004, when the three former Soviet states joined NATO [see p. 45985]. It was renewed in 2010 for another four years, but the Baltic nations wanted the operation to become a permanent NATO mission. The mission was based at the Lithuanian first air base in Zokniai.

Israeli offer to contribute to Mediterranean patrols

NATO announced on Feb. 10 that it was considering an Israeli offer to contribute a warship to the alliance's naval patrol in the Mediterranean, despite Turkey's opposition. In the past, Israeli warships and air force jets had joined in some NATO exercises, but Israel's participation in the naval operation would be

the first time its armed forces had taken part in one of the alliance's military operations.

Israel was a member of the Mediterranean Dialogue, an outreach programme initiated in 1994 involving seven non-NATO countries of the Mediterranean region: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

■ Last article p. 50165.

UNITED NATIONS

UNICEF report

The annual report of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), *The State of the World's Children 2012*, published on Feb. 28, focused on the plight of children in an urban world. [For *The State of the World's Children 2011* see p. 50317.]

The report said that almost half the world's children lived in urban areas, and it called for greater emphasis on identifying and meeting their needs. Children growing up in slums such as Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, and the favelas of Brazil were forced to endure violence, exploitation and lack of basics such as clean water and education. They were likely not to have been registered at birth and their families often lacked a formal rental agreement or other such protection from arbitrary eviction.

The report contested the notion that all children who lived in cities were necessarily better off than those in rural communities. It showed that, although disadvantaged children may live minutes away from schools and clinics, for example, they were often cut off from them by poverty and discrimination. It also called attention to the lack of data on conditions in slums, particularly as it related to children, and it called for a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding poverty and

inequality in cities and increased political will to improve the lives of the most marginalised.

■ Last article p. 50902.

IN BRIEF

WAR CRIMES: The International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague in the Netherlands on Feb. 3 ruled by 12-3 in a case between Germany and Italy, with Greece intervening, that modern-day Germany possessed sovereign immunity from being sued in foreign courts by persons claiming to have been the victims of Nazi atrocities committed during World War II. The suit had been lodged by Germany in light of a ruling in October 2008 by the Italian Court of Cassation (the highest appeal court) ordering the German authorities to pay compensation of €1 million (US\$1.00=0.7621 euros as at Feb. 3, 2012) to nine relatives of two victims of German war crimes committed after Italy had switched sides to the Allies in 1943, thus opening the way for many compensation claims in respect of other victims of Nazi occupation [see p. 48863; see also p. 48918]. The ICJ ruling upheld Germany's contention that all compensation issues had been settled by a treaty of 1961.

WORLD BANK: Robert Zoellick announced on Feb. 15 that he would step down as president of the World Bank in June. Zoellick, a former US deputy secretary of state, had been approved as the 11th president in June 2007 [see p. 48020]. By tradition a US citizen was head of the institution. However, the US government had reportedly indicated that it would open the process to competition, marking the first time it had shown willingness to loosen its grip on the world's top development lender. Officials from China and other large emerging economies such as Brazil had reportedly made it known that they wanted the selection process for Zoellick's successor to be based on qualifications and not nationality.

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