



Top Stories

NATO summit in Bucharest enters second day

One of the biggest gatherings of world leaders, the 20th annual NATO summit has begun yesterday in Bucharest, with 26 head of states meeting together to discuss matters such as new membership and international policies.



African nations gather to support a ban on cluster bombs

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Australian Defence Department funds controversial development training

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Wikinews interviews Jim Babka, chair of Libertarian organization Downsize DC

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Wikipedia Current Events

An Antonov An-28 operated by Blue Wing Airlines crashes upon landing in Benzdorp, Suriname. All nineteen on board are presumed dead.

- Zimbabwean presidential election, 2008: Police in riot gear surround a hotel in Harare housing foreign journalists. New York Times correspondent Barry Bearak and three others are arrested.
- MDC Secretary-General Tendai Biti reports that police have begun raiding opposition party offices in an apparent "crackdown".
- Jules Verne, the first European Automated Transfer Vehicle, successfully performs a fully

Wikipedia Current Events

- automated docking with the International Space Station.
- In a "procedural" decision, the European Court of Justice decides to remove the Kurdish rebel organization PKK from the EU's terrorist blacklist.
- Serbian Minister on Kosovo Slobodan Samardžić submits to UNMIK a plan suggesting Kosovo's division into cantons along ethnic lines.
- Greek and Turkish Cypriots open a crossing at Ledra Street, a main shopping street in Cyprus' divided capital Nicosia that has come to symbolize the island's ethnic partition.
- The Iraqi military says a suicide bomber has attacked a checkpoint near Mosul, killing 7 people and wounding 12.

African nations gather to support a ban on cluster bombs

A 39-nation coalition in Africa passed a declaration on Tuesday to ban cluster bombs in a nearly unanimous vote. The gathering in Lukasa, Zambia was the first meeting of the Cluster Munition Coalition (CMC) in Africa.

"Africa is ready for Dublin," summarised Zambian delegate Robert Mtonga, referring to the upcoming May 19-30 meeting in Ireland to discuss a global ban on the weapons. "Too often Africa's voice is pushed to the margins in international decision-making. But in banning cluster bombs

worldwide, a common African voice will speak volumes and win the day"

"Too often Africa's voice is pushed to the margins in international decision-making. But in banning cluster bombs worldwide, a common African voice will speak volumes and win the day."
—Robert Mtonga, Zambian delegate

Mtonga was critical of South Africa, the lone voice against Monday's decision and the continent's largest producer and stockpiler of cluster bombs, and called on the country to destroy its munitions and join the coalition to outlaw their use. Egypt, the only other African nation to produce the controversial weapons, voiced support for the ban.

"Strong political will" was credited with the resolution, by CMC co-ordinator Thomas Nash in recognising the drive "to stop the proliferation of this outdated weapon".

In a released statement the CMC said that 19 African countries, including South Africa, have endorsed the Wellington Declaration. The Wellington Declaration is the basis for the upcoming negotiations at the Dublin Diplomatic Conference in Ireland in May.

While countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom have tabled the idea of a "transition period" during which time cluster bombs would remain a legitimate weapon of war, the African delegation was resolutely against the idea, calling for an immediate ban.

Cluster munitions are dropped from aircraft, opening in mid-air

and releasing a large number of smaller explosives over a wide area. Writer Theodora Williams stated that their use usually results in "...the death and maiming of thousands of innocent civilians".

There are currently 13 African nations that possess cluster bombs although Uganda has recently announced they are destroying their stockpiles. The weapons have been used in eight African conflicts in the past 35 years. In addition to Ethiopia, Morocco, Nigeria and the Sudan, other nations known to have used the weapons are the former Yugoslavia, Eritrea, France, Israel, the Netherlands, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

According to the San Francisco Chronicle, the United States, China, Russia, and Israel have resisted any ban on cluster bombs, arguing that they can be used in self-defense. The San Francisco Chronicle reported that the United States has lobbied allies to create loopholes in the upcoming Oslo treaty, to allow for the use of cluster bombs. Reuters reported that a U.S. official had stated that cluster bombs should not be banned if they are used responsibly in state conflicts.

In October 2007, Uganda became the first African country to state it would destroy its cluster bomb stockpiles. Uganda has announced a a pan-African meeting to take place after the Dublin meeting, which would seek to garner support for the signing of a treaty in Oslo set to take place in December 2008. The weapons have been used in eight African conflicts in the past 35 years.

The CMC is an international

network composed of over 250 civil society organizations in 60 countries, with the stated aim of protecting civilians from cluster munitions. Members of the CMC have been working to complete an international treaty to ban cluster munitions by 2008.

At the February CMC committee meeting in New Zealand, only 82 of the 122 nations present endorsed a draft ban on the production, usage or storage of cluster bombs.

China lifts ban on non-Chinese versions of Wikipedia

Hefei – Direct Internet connection to Wikipedia has been restored in China since this morning with the exception of the Chinese version, which is still unavailable and whose domain name (zh.wikipedia.org) is still a filtered keyword. This comes one week after the similar removal of restrictions on connections to all non-Chinese content of BBC News website, and the unblocking of Google's Blogspot. It is still unclear how long the ease of restrictions will last.

In an April 3 commentary, BBC's Asia bureau chief Paul Danahar, who is based in Beijing, confirmed that "Wikipedia has now been partially unblocked by the Chinese".

The International Olympic Committee recently warned China that it wanted the internet freely accessible for the entire duration of the Olympic Summer Games. Unrestricted access is guaranteed to the 30,000 reporters and media staff expected for the Olympics under Beijing's 'host city contract'.

In 2006, China lifted and then reinstated the ban on Wikipedia. The operation of the so-called

Great Firewall is still shrouded in secrecy. Chinese Wikipedians have pleaded to the government in the past for the unblocking of Wikipedia, but to no avail.

Wikinews interviews Jim Babka, chair of Libertarian organization Downsize DC

A reporter from Wikinews recently interviewed Jim Babka, chair of Libertarian organization Downsize DC. The organization claims to have arranged for 22,158 people to send a message regarding the "American Freedom Agenda Act" proposed by Ron Paul, in addition to supporting many other laws. The full text of the interview can be found below.

Interview

Wikinews What is Downsize DC?

Jim Babka: DownsizeDC.org is an organization that makes it easy for every day citizens, with jobs and busy lives, to express their wishes to their two Senators and Representative. It's free and quite easy to use. The DownsizeDC.org system combines education, recruitment, and activism into one simple, seamless process. And once someone sends a message, they begin receiving our free email newsletter, or as we prefer to describe it, they become part of the Downsize DC Army. Voltaire said, "God tends to be on the side of the bigger battalions." And we're looking to build the Downsize DC Army so large that Congress cannot afford to ignore us – so big that we can get our message of small, Constitutionally-limited government out everywhere

WN: Why do you believe the federal government has grown too large?

JB: Big government at all levels steals about half of everything Americans earn. We don't believe

politicians know best how to spend your money or run your life. We want you to be able to keep what you earn; to spend, to save, to invest, and to give away as you see fit.

We recognize that big government really doesn't work well. Big government has damaged education and health care. It has made us more vulnerable to terrorism while trading away our liberty. It has served the interests of large corporate conglomerates at the expense of individuals. We want to make better education and health care more readily available to you. We want you to live in safety and keep your civil liberties. We want to put an end to corporate welfare.

The Constitution is our guide, and it limits the powers of the federal government. We want the Constitution restored. We believe that we must Downsize DC so that we can have greater peace and human progress.

WN: If you could change one aspect of government what would it be and why?

JB: What a terrible question to ask someone like me! It would've been much easier to ask me what parts of government I would like to keep.

But seriously, if you're going to put a gun to my head like that I would say real legislative reform. Each year and every crisis, government will grow. The legislative rules are written so that the results are virtually guaranteed – more expensive and intrusive government. The incentives in the current legislative environment are all wrong.

One way we can really address this is through a series of laws, and perhaps, one day, constitutional amendments, which would truly limit Congress in their ability to spend, create and

maintain programs, and pass new laws and regulations.

Congress doesn't read their bills and they frequently pass these long un-read bills with little or no time to review them. We have proposed the Read the Bills Act to remedy that problem. The Read the Bills Act has the added benefit of requiring Congress to post their bills online for reporters, watchdog groups, and every day citizens to be able to read for seven days before the final vote.

Because we realized that to get around the Read the Bills Act, Congress might cheat, abbreviate their proposals, and just delegate the nitty-gritty details into the hands of unelected bureaucrats who aren't accountable to the people, we proposed the Write the Laws Act. An elected Congress should sweat the details and then be accountable to their constituents.

Congress also violates the rules of your high school government class, where you were told it took a majority to pass a law. Congress simply combines bad proposals that wouldn't stand on their own, like the Real ID Act (which should be repealed), into bills that are certain to pass, such as a troop appropriation bill. To deal with that problem we presented the One Subject at a Time Act.

And in the future, we'll call for government to follow it's own accounting and reporting rules for the private sector, ala Sarbanes-Oxley, and a sunset provision requiring all taxes and programs to come up for a vote for re-authorization, with the requirement that they too be read, in full.

And it's funny because once I get away from the professional, political culture – "the beltway crowd" – and being talking to the Americans that pay the bills – the people in "flyover country" – I find

that it doesn't matter what political party people come from. Nearly everyone I meet thinks Congress should be required to read their bills and post them online for seven days, pass bills one subject at a time, and be required to conduct periodic review so that some government programs that don't work get shut down. These proposals are... transpartisan.

WN: Many people consider organizations like yours to be ultra conservative. Would you agree with this judgement. If not, why not?

JB: I don't even know what that means. It sounds a bit pejorative. I wouldn't agree with that judgment, but I'd want to know what the definition of conservative is.

In our era, those wearing the appellation "conservative" have, by their actions, if not their rhetoric, defined conservative as... large deficit spending; "monopoly money" policies; corporate welfare alliances; first amendment restrictions; greatly diminished civil liberties in the face of a boogey-man threat; an unconstitutional, unified executive theory; the leap into unconstitutional, pre-emptive wars, also based on boogey-man threats; and an empire. I could go on and on. But if that's all "conservative," then we'd want nothing to do with it.

In addition, we've had some very successful alliances with groups who would never describe themselves as conservative. Take, for example, the ACLU. We've worked with them on three issues in just the last 16 months. But we've worked with, quite literally, dozens of liberal or progressive groups, on a variety of issues. We've opposed: The War in Iraq; the potential attack of Iran; the Patriot Act; the attempts to get

around FISA Courts and spy on Americans; tribunals, secret evidence, and the death of habeas corpus; FCC censorship; the Real ID Act; and the Patriot Act. We've supported improved whistleblower protections, greater government transparency, 9/11 accountability, closing the Drug Czar's office, and ending the war on medical marijuana users. And we've done all of this with groups who weren't the least bit conservative.

NATO summit in Bucharest enters second day

One of the biggest gatherings of world leaders, the 20th annual NATO summit which began on Wednesday continued today in Bucharest.

NATO leaders begin negotiations in earnest over Afghanistan Thursday, after the opening day of their summit in Bucharest saw a successful French offer of more troops, but a public disagreement over the alliance's enlargement.

In the morning, the heads of the 26-strong alliance will hold their first formal working session, picking up on the themes of Wednesday's dinner - enlargement, Kosovo and Afghanistan, plus other issues.

The conflict of interests involves a delicate diplomatic brinkmanship between NATO's historic open-door policy and Russia's feeling that the alliances' borders are growing too close for comfort.

At the Bucharest summit, Albania and Croatia too will begin the formal process of their membership.

NATO's backing of a United States missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic has been harshly condemned by Vladimir

Putin, who will be making his first appearance at this year's summit to express his fears of a new arms race.

The leaders of Albania and Croatia will get their first taste of NATO's highest body, when they sit with their counterparts, alongside Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, in a special session.

The ambitions of Macedonia, the southernmost of the former Yugoslav republics -- have been challenged by neighbour Greece in a dispute over its official name.

Greece refuses to recognise the former Yugoslav republic's name because it is the same as that of the northern Greek province of Macedonia and Athens worries that this could imply a claim on its territory.

Australian Defence Department funds controversial development training

Australia's Department of Defence spent thousands of dollars on controversial development seminars, Australian media reported Wednesday. The seminars are run by a San Francisco, California-based training company called Landmark Education. The company evolved from Erhard Seminars Training "est", and has faced criticism regarding its techniques and its use of unpaid labor.

Australia's Defence Minister Warren Snowdon said that the government is in the process of reviewing Defence Department expenditures on career development. "We're in the process now of doing an audit, completely unrelated with anything to do with Landmark, which is being undertaken into learning and development to make sure that

they meet our needs. ... We have to be very sure that the courses that people do undertake are relevant, appropriate and indeed in line with what community expectations might be," said Snowdon in an appearance on ABC Radio.

"We're in the process now of doing an audit, completely unrelated with anything to do with Landmark, which is being undertaken into learning and development to make sure that they meet our needs."
—Australia Defence Minister Warren Snowdon

The Australian and Australia's ABC News reported that Landmark Education had been listed in France as a "possible cult" in the mid 1990s. When asked about this on ABC Radio, a spokeswoman for the company in the United States, Deborah Beronet, responded: "What happened in France was that a commission established by the French parliament issued a report in which they listed almost 200 organisations as being possible cults ... We were never contacted. We were inappropriately included in that list".

In a program which aired Wednesday, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio program AM reported that Australia's Defence Department spent at least AUD12,270 of taxpayer funds to send government employees to Landmark Education courses. According to AM, the Defence Department said it does not appear that further funds have been sent to Landmark Education since 2004.

In a statement released by the Defence Department, the

government stated: "A search of Defence records does not indicate exactly how many individuals attended courses with this training provider, however it is believed it was a small number of individuals. ... Defence has been unable to determine individual reasons for why groups within Defence choose this training provider."

AM also reported that the use of unpaid labor by Landmark Education "has attracted the attention of the US and French governments," and that some individuals in the mental health field have accused the company of brainwashing. When asked about the allegations by mental health experts that Landmark Education's techniques amounted to brainwashing, Deborah Beronet responded: "Well, there is absolutely no credence to that whatsoever."

"Decisions on the appropriateness of staff attending courses by Landmark Education are made by individual managers who remain best-placed to assess the development needs of their staff."
—Bob Cameron, Police and Emergency Services Minister, Victoria, Australia

In a March 9 article in the Herald Sun, Peter Rolfe reported that taxpayer money was used to send at least 37 police and government staff from Victoria, Australia to seminars run by Landmark Education. Police and Emergency Services Minister Bob Cameron said that "Decisions on the appropriateness of staff attending courses by Landmark Education are made by individual managers who remain best-placed to assess the development needs of their staff," but State Liberal MP Murray Thompson told the Herald Sun that the funds should have been put

towards fighting crime. Apple Inc., Reebok and Mercedes-Benz have sent employees to Landmark Education seminars, according to a spokeswoman for Landmark.

In October 2006, Landmark Education took legal action against Google, YouTube, the Internet Archive and a website owner in Queensland, Australia in attempts to remove criticism of its products from the Internet. The company sought a subpoena under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act in an attempt to discover the identity of an anonymous critic who uploaded a 2004 French documentary of the Landmark Forum to the Internet. "Voyage au pays des nouveaux gourous" (Voyage to the Land of the New Gurus) was produced by Pièces à Conviction, a French investigative journalism news program. The Electronic Frontier Foundation represented the anonymous critic and the Internet Archive, and Landmark withdrew its subpoena in November 2006 in exchange for a promise from the anonymous critic not to repost the video.

Landmark Education is descended from Erhard Seminars Training, also called "est", which was founded by Werner Erhard. est began in 1971, and Erhard's company Werner Erhard and Associates repackaged the course as "The Forum" in 1985. Associates of Erhard bought the license to his "technology" and incorporated Landmark Education in California in 1991.

Bristol campaigners: words by council are 'weasel words'

Campaigners in Bristol, United Kingdom have said that the pledges of Bristol City Council regarding the plans to turn part of the Bristol and Bath cycle path into

as bus route were just "weasel words." This comes after the council refused to confirm that they would halt the development of the plan.

A petition was recently formed regarding the claims. One of the signatories of the petition, David Qualtrough, from Bedminster said when signing the petition that the suggestion was "quite honestly one of the most ludicrous ideas I've ever heard." The text of the petition read "We, the undersigned, petition Bristol City Council to reject plans to install a rapid transit bus route along any section of the Bristol to Bath Railway Path "Greenway" and wildlife corridor. The Bristol to Bath Railway Path is the most popular route in the UK on the National Cycle Network with 2.4 million sustainable journeys in the last year."

Bristol City Council's Executive Member for Access and Environment, Mark Bradshaw, commented on the issue in a video released late last month. He said that "no decisions have been made" regarding the use of the cycle path. He also said that Bristol City Council was "committed to a full public consultation". Mr. Bradshaw also said that he would not engage in party political rows regarding these issues.

In an open letter written earlier this year, John Grimshaw, chair of Sustrans commented on the planned route. He said "The proposed route, the Bristol and Bath [cycle] Path, is one of the best used sections of the National Cycle Network. When Sustrans last surveyed this section of Network it was carrying 2.4 million trips a year. This usage is increasing at 10% a year. This amounts to over

6,500 trips each day, with 56% of these journeys being for work. 58% of users surveyed could have used a car for their journey but chose not to. A BRT route on this section will, we believe, reduce current levels of walking and cycling and may well actually encourage people to return to their cars."

Some people did, however, support the plans. One of these people told the Bristol Evening Post that "The path is a public resource; its current use should not be artificially cast in stone forevermore; its application should be put to whatever use best serves the half million bristolians the council acts for and if that means turning this path into a bus route or railway or even road, this year or next; as part of relieving bristols overall transport problems then so be it. the council done right."

Some of the people in opposition to the plans suggested that the the train line accompanying the cycle path should be restored. They claimed that this would be a sensible alternative to having a bus on the cycle path.

Laurent Robert joins Toronto FC

Toronto FC signed midfielder Laurent Robert after Derby County freed him of his contractual obligations. details of the contract were not released per team and league policy.

"We are thrilled to have Laurent join Toronto FC and become part of our club. He's a tremendous player with a lot of talent and we expect him to come in and make an impact with our team straight away. He's played at every level, and is a true professional in every respect."– Mo Johnston, General

Manager

Laurent Robert has been capped by France and have been with number of Europe's biggest clubs in England, Portugal, and his native France.

"I've spent a lot of time with him, and I know a lot about his game. He'll be a big asset to the team, he's got pace, his ability on free kicks is top class and he's a great finisher." – John Carver, Head Coach

Laurent Robert is no stranger to Toronto FC head coach John Carver. He played for Carver while he was with Newcastle United.

Robert will be available the game on Saturday against D.C. United, pending the completion of his International Transfer Certificate.

California offers rebates for alternative fuel vehicles

California, the most populous state in the United States, is offering rebates of up to US\$5000 to residents who purchase alternative fuel vehicles. \$1.62 million in rebates are scheduled to be granted statewide by California Center for Sustainable Energy, an independent nonprofit organization based in San Diego.

Owners of Vectrix electric motorcycles may qualify for up to \$1,500 and Global Electric Motorcars owners may receive \$950 and \$1,300. The largest rebates will go to owners of full-sized zero-emission cars, which have not yet been approved by the state. Compressed-gas vehicles also qualify, but the agency has already awarded its budgeted allotment for this type of vehicle.

The eligible period for purchases and leases is May 24, 2007 to

March 31, 2009. Applications will be accepted on a first come, first served basis. A complete list of qualifying vehicles can be seen at the California Center for Sustainable Energy's website.

The program is part of \$25 million authorized in 2007 by California Assembly Bill 1811 to promote alternative fuel infrastructure and vehicles. According to the California Air Resources Board, about 25,000 dedicated alternative fuel vehicles are in use in California.

Today in History

1660 – Charles II of England issued the Declaration of Breda, describing his conditions for the Restoration of the crown of England.

1721 – Robert Walpole took office as First Lord of the Treasury, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons, becoming the first British Prime Minister, though the term "Prime Minister" was not used at the time.
1949 – Twelve nations signed the North Atlantic Treaty, creating NATO.

1968 – American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

1969 – Surgeons Denton Cooley and Domingo Liotta implanted the first total artificial heart.

1976 – Norodom Sihanouk abdicated from the role of leader of Cambodia and was arrested by the Khmer Rouge.

April 04 is Qingming Festival in the Chinese calendar (2008); Children's Day in Taiwan

Quote of the Day

All we are saying is give peace a chance. ~ John Lennon

Word of the Day

apiary n

1. A place where bees are kept.

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