

„Discovering International Relations and Contemporary Global Issues“

Cultural Relations Policy

News and Background

December 2012





About CRP News & Background

Cultural Relations Policy News & Background is a part of ICRP Monthly Review Series and an initiative of Institute for Cultural Relations Policy Budapest. Launched in 2012, its mission is to provide information and analysis on key international political events. Each issue covers up-to-date events and analysis of current concerns of international relations on a monthly basis.

As an initiative of ICRP, the content of this magazine is written and edited by student authors. The project, as part of the Institute's Internship Programme provides the opportunity to strengthen professional skills.



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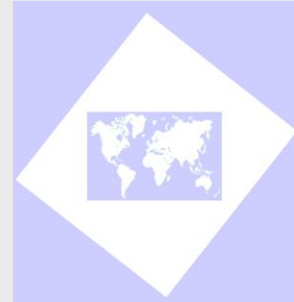
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Changing tides for women's rights in India - still a long way to go

The BRIC thesis posits India among today's fastest growing global economic powers, yet the ideology of women's rights still remains a far cry from its western counterparts. Considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world for a woman, for decades women in India have been trapped in a continuous struggle against inequality, discrimination and sexual violence rooted in its predominantly patriarchal societal setup and male mindset. Official data shows that India's rape figures have drastically increased from 2,487 in 1971, to more than 24,000 registered cases in 2011, with the capital city New Delhi alone recording 572 reported rape cases in 2011 and 600 the following year.

The pervasiveness of rape and sexual harassment in India, despite the creation of special legislatives by authorities, is just one of the many abuses endured by Indian women predating birth, on account of its culture that traditionally reveres sons over daughters.

The deep-rooted preference for males which results in a high incidence of female infanticide stems from several factors including practice of dowry, honor killings, and fear of abuse and exploitation, characteristic of traditional Indian society. Newly married women are also subjected to verbal and physical abuse from her both her husband and in-laws, not to mention



December 22, students protest the rising violence against women, Raisina Hill/ Rajpath; the morning saw as many women as men come out for this spontaneous march. Photo: Nilanjana Roy

the added terror of being burnt to death by them should her family be unable to pay the requisite dowry which in many cases is the tragic outcome. The spectrum of violence plaguing Indian women on a daily basis and the ever-increasing rape culture is no longer being quietly accepted, particularly in light of the recent brutal gang rape and subsequent death of a 23-year old female student in the capital city.

The incident which generated significant international coverage, occurred in the early evening of December 16, 2012 in southern Delhi. After watching a film, Jyoti Singh Pandey and her male companion boarded a private bus where she was beaten and gruesomely raped by the driver and five other men, while the 28-year-old male victim was beaten and knocked unconscious with an iron rod. Police arrived on the scene when their naked, unconscious bodies were

discovered on the road by a passerby nearly two hours later. According to medical reports the sexual assault resulted in severe damage to the female victim's abdomen and genitals, as well as only about 5 percent of her intestines remaining, which was later discovered to be partly caused by the penetration of a L-shaped, rusty iron rod. Although receiving emergency treatment and multiple surgeries, Jyoti Singh Pandey succumbed to her injuries two weeks later in a Singapore hospital. Police arrested and charged all six men, five of which face the death penalty if convicted, while the youngest attacker, will be tried separately as a minor.

The heinous crime has angered Indians like never before, sparking outrage in thousands of people including a significant number of young men who took to the streets in angry protests demanding women's rights and justice. The December protests turned violent as officers used water cannons, baton charges and teargas to disperse the crowds. Even though women have a degree of protection under the constitution, sexual harassment or as it's known by its popular local euphemism "eve-teasing", remains endemic in India. Women are frequently blamed for sexual assaults and appear to be treated as scapegoats in view of the numerous restrictions on women's activities and even their mode of dress which society and political leaders impose whenever a rape is reported. Investigations into the police service have revealed comparable attitudes of chagrin and nonchalance, as victim's are repeatedly ignored and in some instances further harassed. During the candlelight vigil held for the December 16th victim, officers were even observed to be laughing at demonstrators. In another

recent incident, police indifference resulted in a 17-year-old girl taking her own life after officers took 14 days before registering her complaint of gang rape.



December 22, students protest the rising violence against women. Photo: Nilanjana Roy

Many believe that Jyoti Singh Pandey's death has signaled a turning point in India's attitude and treatment of women. Since the attack, amid the flurry of protests, there have been noticeable changes in the nation's approach to sexual assault. Instead of small articles hidden in the back pages of newspapers, rape is being given its due importance and has become front page news. The government who have pledged action against the injustices surrounding women, has set up two committees to recommend measures to combat abuses against women including a greater number of female police officers and reformation of the way sexual violence is handled by the criminal justice system. Similarly, political leaders are calling for more stringent laws for rapists such as chemical castration and an internet register of sex offenders. Also seeking change in India, the UN and other human rights activists lay in hope that 2013 will be the year when tides turn on violence against women and the year when women in India can feel free to walk the streets devoid of fear. Whether India's protest

actions will have an overhauling effect on its treatment of women is yet indeterminable, however even its global neighbors can ascertain that the people of India demand urgent societal transformation of its discriminatory culture to one that respects women not only in law, but in practice. The women's rights situation in India may be at a turning point, but the inherent prejudices and the psychology of its patriarchal society will take decades to overcome.



December 22, students protest the rising violence against women.
Photo: Nilanjana Roy

Despite protection law Afghan women continue to suffer abuses

Despite the enactment of a law in 2009 to eliminate violence against women, Afghan women still continue to endure violent abuses on a daily basis. According to a UN report released on December 11, 2012, the law which prohibits abuses such as domestic violence, selling and buying of women, forced marriages and rape is being applied by courts with a substantial degree of success in prosecutions, yet there is still a long way to go before it can effectively protect Afghan women. Even though reported cases and convictions are increasing, a pertinent factor affecting the efficacy of the law is that a significant number of incidents remain unreported because of discrimination, cultural restraints and threats which discourage women from pursuing prosecutions. From March 2012 to October 2012, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission recorded more than 4,000 incidents of violence against women, the majority of which were not reported to the police. Though Afghan women continue to suffer in light of the law's limits, Afghanistan itself appears to be gradually changing its perception towards women's rights, at least in the capital Kabul, where dozens of women and men took the streets on July 2012 in protest against the public killing of a woman. Accused of adultery, the victim was shot multiple times amid the cheering and ridicule of spectators.

Obama signs Magnitsky Act

- a legislation denying Russian human rights violators entry into US

After a long abstention from Russian trade, a bill was passed and approved by the US legislature on December 6, 2012. The foremost purpose of the legislation is to punish Russian administrators connected with human rights violations, and also to normalize trade with the Russian Federation. President Barack Obama signed the Magnitsky Act into law on December 14, 2012 affirming that "The legislation will ensure that American businesses and workers are able to take full advantage of the WTO rules and market access commitments that the United States worked so hard to negotiate". The Act formally known as the Russia and Moldova Jackson-Vanik Repeal and Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012, was named after attorney and accountant Sergei Magnitsky, who passed away three years ago in a Moscow prison where he was believed to have been tortured while awaiting trial. He was taken into custody after revealing his investigative findings to the public about the illegal undertakings and scams of Russian tax administrators. The new law will improve the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of 1974, which prohibited trade with non-market economies, specifically targeted at the members of the former Communist bloc. The amendment was said to have been

created in response to the "diploma taxes" imposed by the Soviet Union on Soviet Jews who were attempting to emigrate. Some observers see the passing of the new bill as a response to Russia's hindrances regarding NATO enlargement in the former soviet region, which was the case with the integration of Ukraine and Georgia's into the Western coalition.



Under the new legislation Russian bureaucrats accused of human rights mistreatments will be denied visas to the United States and their assets frozen. Furthermore, the US will publicly release the identities of the suspect Russian officials and prohibit them access to their finances. Democratic Senator Carl Levin who voted against the bill explained that Magnitsky sanctions are only applicable to Russia, further asserting that the original proposal

applied to the global community in its entirety. While many Russian officials refused to comment on the matter, the Russian foreign ministry could not be silenced, calling the law “a performance in the theatre of the absurd”.



Following Russia's joining of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in August 2012, the former communist country was obligated to open its market to the West and reduce tariffs. Nonetheless, because of the trade limitations imposed by the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, the US was the only WTO member that could not benefit from Russia's increased market involvement, until now with the passing of the Magnitsky legislation.

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his confusion over the passing of the bill by the US Congress conceding that the move will only serve to “poison” the relationship between the two nations. In retaliation over the US Magnitsky act, Moscow has banned the adoption of Russian children by US citizens and is also threatening to enact a bill akin to the Magnitsky Act that will deny entry to Americans guilty of human rights abuses. The youth wing of the governing

United Russia party carried out protest action in front of the US embassy in Moscow the day after the bill was passed on December 7, 2012, following orders from the Kremlin. During the demonstration, the Youth Guard referred to America as a police state and questioned whether the United States was worthy to house the Statue of Liberty.



Photo: The Presidential Press and Information Office [kremlin.ru]

Russian opponent blogger, Alexei Navalny commended the US “black list” proposition saying that “The Magnitsky Act is totally pro-Russian. It aims to punish the scum who stole 5.4bn rubles (£108m; \$175m) from Russian taxpayers, transferred the money abroad and then tortured and killed a Russian citizen.” Similarly, the son of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was named the richest man in Russia in 2004, congratulated the US on the passing of the “Magnitsky” bill declaring it a vital step towards liberating his father who was charged in Moscow with embezzlement and money laundering in 2005. However according to Amnesty International, he was a ‘prisoner of conscience’ because the trial lacked due process and reeked of political motivation.

A poll issued on December 7, 2012 showed that 39% of Russians were in favor of the US law, while 14% were opposed to it. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, the "Magnitsky Act" is yet another indication of the corrosion of the relations

between Washington and Moscow. Expressing abhorrence and cynicism, a spokesperson from the Ministry even referred to the situation as "nothing but a vindictive desire to counter Russia in world affairs".

Putin bans US adoption of Russian children

Amid ongoing debates between Russia and the US over whose human rights abuses are greater, the State Duma voted on December 19, 2012 to ban the adoption of Russian children by Americans in retaliation for the passing of the December 6, "Magnitsky act". The bill's off-the-record title of Dmitri Yakovlev or Chase Harrison was named after a Russian infant that died of heatstroke owing to the negligence of his adoptive American father in 2008. The passing of bill was arguably fueled by similar reports of negligence such as the case of a Tennessee woman who placed her adopted seven-year-old Russian-born child unaccompanied on an airplane back to Russia. Many senior bureaucrats expressed their displeasure concerning the ban, as well as foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov,

who is known for his aggressive opinions regarding the United States. On the other hand, the bill gained huge support from Russian President Vladimir Putin who, while signing the new law stated "There are probably many places in the world where living standards are better than ours, so what? Shall we send all children there, or move there ourselves?" Across the Atlantic, US officials are discussing how best to respond to the former communist nation's move, and the possible consequences to the future relations between the two countries. Seemingly, there is an equal divide on the subject matter in the US, split between those proponents who assert that there are more than enough American children in need of adoption, while at the other end of the spectrum its opponents are arguing that the orphans will suffer the most from the Russian legislative.

Egypt protests continue following Morsi's win in referendum vote

Political unrest continues to rock Cairo following release of the draft constitution referendum results on December 25, 2012, with nearly two-thirds of the voters supporting the new constitution. Scores of anti-constitution demonstrators blocked one of the main bridges in Cairo and proceeded to burn tyres and obstruct traffic, shortly after the referendum results were declared. In response to the on-going protest action, Prime Minister Hisham Qandil told demonstrators that there are "no losers" and urged Egyptians to cooperate with the government in order for the economy to be restored. The election commission announced live on government-managed Nile News TV that 63.8 percent of the voters (10,693,911 votes) casted "yes" ballots in the elections which took place in two phases on 15 and 22 December, 2012. Although the majority of Egyptians voted in favor of the constitution, the commission recorded a low voter turnout of 32.9 percent (17,058,317 votes including 303,395 that were declared invalid). Consequently the referendum result means that parliamentary elections will be carried out within two months. At a glance, the new constitution affirms Sharia as the principal source of legislation, while Judaism and

Christianity legislatives will primarily govern Jews and Christians, it also limits the presidency to two four-year terms. In a national broadcast, President Morsi told the 36.2 percent (6,061,101 people) of Egyptians who voted against the constitutional referendum, that they were doing so within their rights, "Egypt's people and its elected president can never feel annoyed by the active patriotic opposition. We don't want to go back to the era of the one opinion and fabricated fake majorities."



Anti-Morsi protest in December 2012. Photo: Japhet Weeks [VOA]

Addressing the media at a news conference in Cairo, Samir Abul Maati President of the Election Commission responded to the numerous complaints of voting fraud made by the opposition including rejection of allegations that fake judges oversaw some of the polls. The Judges' Club, a body which represents

judges from all over Egypt, refused to supervise the referendum because they were being prevented from giving a verdict on the integrity of the body that formed the constitution. This decision was not overwhelmingly accepted by Morsi's Islamist supporters resulting in confrontation amongst Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court and those in favor of Morsi ruling. On December 17, Egypt's chief prosecutor, selected by the Morsi himself withdrew his resignation days after submitting it, and later explained that he was "under pressure" from fellow prosecutors sitting in front of his work place. It was alleged that he pressured the sitting judge into not releasing 130 anti-Morsi demonstrators who were taken into custody in early December.



Mohamed Morsi. Photo: Jonathan Rashad [Flickr]

Large demonstrations both from anti-Morsi critics and those advocating his rule erupted all over Egypt's major cities following the President's November 22nd decree immunizing his actions from judicial challenge, as well as his decision to hold a referendum for a draft constitution his opponents said did not reflect the interest of many Egyptian sects. In Cairo, opponent protests estimated to be over 200,000 on some days, were organized by various groups and individuals, mainly pro-democratic liberals, secularists and Christians. The on-going demonstrations occasionally turned violent as was the case on December 5, when 300 anti-Morsi protestors were attacked during a sit-in by Muslim Brotherhood members armed with Molotov cocktails, resulting in the deaths of four people and 271 others being injured. Yet again, violence escalated the following day outside the Presidential Palace in Cairo, when overnight clashes between supporters and opponents on December 6, left seven dead and 650 injured, forcing the army to toss teargas at the thousands gathered for what organizers dubbed "last warning protests".

On December 8, one week prior to the referendum vote, President Morsi rescinded the controversial decree he issued in November granting him near absolute powers, nevertheless opposition leaders called for further protest action in light of the President's refusal to cancel the December 15th constitutional referendum. The modified declaration, although voiding the contentious article which placed Morsi's actions beyond judicial oversight, contains an article giving him the right to

make new decrees, free from judicial review. Although many opponents expressed relief over the December 8th concession, believing it to be a favorable development, others such as Khaled Dawood of the National Salvation Front, one of Egypt's largest opposition parties, had called the move "relatively meaningless" since only half the demands were met.

Responding to Morsi's win in the referendum election, many opponents could not silence their disappointment saying that the result is a betrayal of the revolution that ousted Hosni Mubarak from power in February, 2011 after almost 30 years of authoritarian governance. The President's largely Islamist following is stressing that he is Egypt's first freely chosen leader and are advocating that the new constitution will safeguard democracy and stabilize Egypt. At the other end of the spectrum, anti-government activists fear that the new constitution might give Morsi



Protest near the Cairo Presidential Palace on 7 December 2012. Photo: Gigi Ibrahim [Flickr]

enough power to become a new dictator. They also accuse the President, who belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood, of forcing through a document that primarily supports Islamists and which substantially lacks protection of the rights of the 10 percent of Christians and women that make up the population. Nonetheless, even though the majority has spoken in Morsi's favor, Egypt continues to be deeply split and faces its parliamentary elections amid ongoing protest action and violent clashes.

“WE DON'T WANT TO GO BACK TO THE ERA OF THE ONE OPINION AND FABRICATED FAKE MAJORITIES”

First big step to EU banking Union

In a landmark decision on December 13, 2012, the 27 member bloc of the European Union (EU) after months of agonizing negotiations the European Central Bank (ECB) was granted the authority to oversee all the banks the euro zone. This groundbreaking deal constitutes the first major step to full banking union in the EU, and is also part of a master plan to bolster the structural design of the euro zone particularly in light of the euro crisis that threatened the demise of the currency. Carded to be fully operational from March 2014, the new surveillance system will give the ECB the power to police large banks with assets of 30 million euro or those with assets greater than one-fifth of their output, in conjunction with the authority to intervene in the difficulties of smaller banks. The ECB is expected to directly watchdog some 150 banks mostly state-aided financial institutions and cross-border systemic lenders as well as the monitoring and regulation of up to 6,000 banks in the euro zone. Financial markets showed an immediate increase in activity with the euro rising to a high of 1.3080 against the U.S. dollar in Tokyo upon news of the clinched banking deal. Successful completion of the process would be regarded as the EU's biggest achievements since the overhauling of the debt crisis which began

in 2007 with the near collapse of German lender IKB. It would also play a role in severing the "doom-loop" formed between destabilized governments and banks in significant debt.

Notwithstanding the EU's hectic yearlong management of the Greece crisis, similarly 2013 promises a fourth consecutive year of turbulence for the bloc with a possible bailout lying in the wings for Spain, Germany's general election in September and the likelihood of Silvio Berlusconi contesting the Italian 2013 general election, not to mention the current woes surrounding Ireland, Portugal and Greece. Following the crucial phase of banking supervision, full EU banking union also envisions the creation of a resolution authority, a fund for failing banks and establishing deposit guarantee schemes to obviate bank runs and present a tenable solution to the financial crisis afflicting the EU. In contrast to those member states that welcome the euro union and support closer integration, Eurosceptic states such as Sweden and Britain who opted to not join the banking union, believe it's a move in the wrong direction. Sweden's finance minister adamantly expressed his cynicism to reporters regarding the extent of support for the project, stating that apart from Eurocrats, Europeans in general are against

such developments. The ECB's supervisory status was similarly hindered by Britain who required the fulfillment of several concessions in light of concerns that the ECB would underpin its authority in London, the financial capital of Europe. For instance Britain requested changes to the voting system concerning the application of EU law in defining capital banking reserves by regulators who meet as part of the European Banking Authority. Consequently, EU ministers have decided to have a double-vote when deciding EU regulations, one for banking union members and the other for non-euro states.



The European Central Bank. Photo: Eric Chan [Flickr]

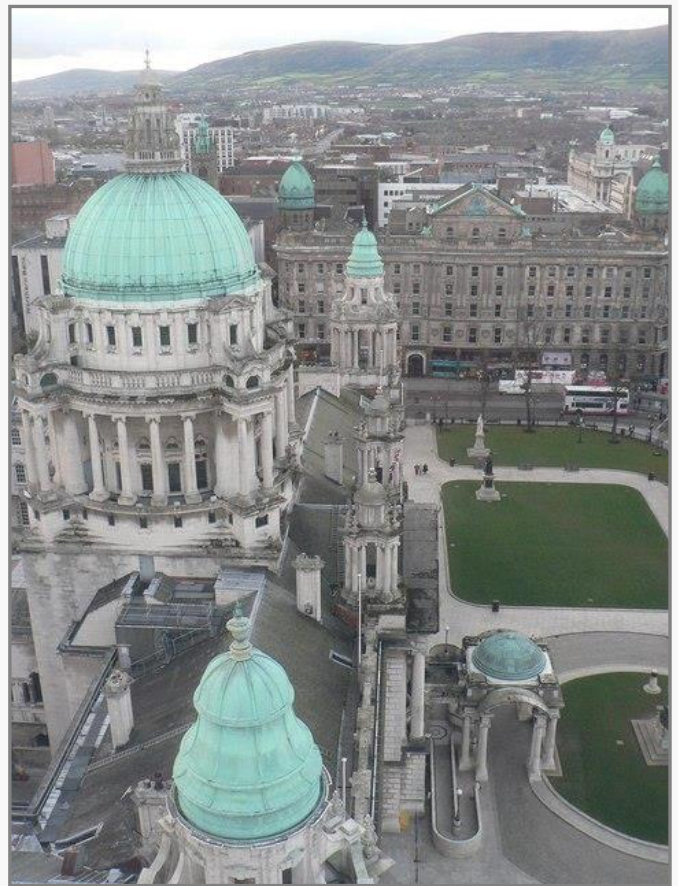
Greece €49 Billion Bailout

After months of talks with Greece, Eurozone finance ministers finally authorized a €49.1 billion bailout for the debt-laden country in Brussels on December 13, 2012. Antonis Samaras, the Prime Minister of Greece expressing his jubilation to the media, stated that “solidarity” was alive in the European Union (EU), while economic minister Olli Rehn articulating his delight commented that the move signified the end of an “odyssey” for Greece. The decision comes on the heel of a successful debt buy-back endeavor by Greece in which the Greek government bought back government bonds totaling €31.9 billion at just over one-third of their indicated worth. The European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) which is subsidizing the payment will disburse the funds in several tranches, with an initial €34.3 billion paid out to Athens in the days to follow, and the remaining released within the first quarter of 2013. After recording some 13 percent budget deficit in 2009, Greece in 2010 was compelled to seek emergency funding and received a total of over €150 billion both from numerous bilateral loan agreements made with EU member states and Troika, the colloquial name for the three organizations with the most power over Greece's financial future within the EU which comprises the European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. An additional 90 billion has also been promised as further reinforcement.

Violence breaks out in Belfast after Union flag vote

Five police officers were among those injured in Belfast on December 3, 2012 when hundreds of loyalist protesters tried to storm the City Hall within minutes of a Council vote to change the union flag policy. The council voted that the flag that was traditionally displayed all year round, will now be flown only on 15 designated days for the year in alignment with Stormont and other government buildings. The mob gathered outside had their faces covered with scarves and was armed with bottles, metal barriers and golf balls to fend off the police who in turn used batons and canines to push the demonstrators out of the courtyard after they tried to kick down the doors of the City Hall. It is understood that the officers were injured when protestors launched fireworks, bricks, bottles and other weaponry. An associated press photographer who was covering the disorder also received head injuries. Sinn Féin's Jim McVeigh referring to the individuals who broke the gates as "thugs", told the media that they assaulted employees and damaged property including the smashing of car windows belonging to the councilors. Extra forces had to be deployed as violence spread to east and central Belfast where reports say there was an attempted bus hijacking and

the attack of a Catholic church. According to Alliance Party member Maire Hendron, social media sites were used to orchestrate the violence.



Belfast City Hall. Photo: Chris Downer [Geograph]

The Council vote was called by nationalist members who argued that the Union flag should be completely removed in order to create a more neutrally equal environment within Belfast's divided society. However,

the Alliance party's proposal of displaying the flag on 15 designated days was accepted 29 votes to 21. In a historical first, both Sinn Féin and the SDLP voted in



Belfast mural. Photo: Zubro [Wikimedia Commons]

support of retaining the union flag, claimed by some to be evidence of their joint recognition of Northern Ireland's constitutional position. It was also the first time in over a century that the flag was taken down from the Edwardian building. Prior to the vote in excess of 1,000 loyalists, mainly working-class Protestants came out in protest over the motion to remove the flag. For many loyalists, flying of the union flag is non-negotiable and its removal would symbolize the first steps in the collapse of the union. A further amendment to fly the flag on the west side of City Hall in the Garden of Remembrance for all 365 days of the year is scheduled to be considered in January, 2013.

**“IN A HISTORICAL FIRST, BOTH SINN FEIN AND THE SDLP
VOTED IN SUPPORT OF RETAINING THE UNION FLAG”**

Madrid vows to block Catalanian separatists' referendum

Although they stand at opposite ends of the political spectrum, Catalonia's two biggest separatists parties the Convergence and Union alliance (CiU) and the Republican Left (ERC) signed an agreement on December 19, 2012 in Barcelona, joining forces to push for a referendum to secede from Spain in 2014. Republican left leader Oriol Junqueras pledged to support his conservative counterpart Artur Mas's budget within the confines of their previous agreement to not impose greater spending cuts. The pact poses greater repercussions for Spain who are currently pushing to regain control over its mounting debt crisis amid struggles to avoid an international bailout. The exact legal procedure of the vote remains uncertain, nonetheless Vice President Soraya Saenz de Santamaria, responding to Catalonia's defiance announced that

Madrid will attempt to block the referendum when it reaches the courts. Spain has further stated that the central government has no intention of changing its position on Catalonia's secession regardless of whether the referendum's status is binding.



Three flags – three levels of sovereignty. Photo: Jaume Fabras [Wikimedia Commons]

In a move to gain the Republican Party's support, Mas conceded to the implementation of bank deposit taxes targeting those with high income brackets. Correspondingly ERC also displayed their willingness to make concessions and consented to the coalition serving until the details of the secession referendum is determined. Following Catalonia's elections, CiU gained 50 seats in the local legislature, while ERC ended up with 11 seats. Combined they form the absolute majority in the Catalan parliament.



Parliament of Catalonia. Photo: Jaume Fabras [parlament-cat.net]

The stagnation of economy and the growth of unemployment in Spain have fueled the idea of self-governance in the autonomous community, which under its own steam generates one-fifth to Spain's economy. According to recent polls the Catalonians strongly believe that their province which has its own culture, language, and economic constancy would be better off being independent from Spain. They are also claiming that a lot of their taxes are being distributed to other regions, as such they said that if it is approved, they refuse to pay back the 6.2 billion dollar loan that they requested from Madrid.

The European Union has informed Catalans that if they do manage to separate from Spain they will have to apply for re-admittance in to the community, a procedure that could take years, particularly taking into the consideration the strict EU accession law that all union member states have to approve membership, including Spain.



Pro-independence protest in September 2012. Photo: Josep Renalias [Wikimedia Commons]

“THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT HAS NO INTENTION OF CHANGING ITS POSITION ON CATALONIA’S SECESSION”

Still no green light for Serbia and Macedonia's EU accession

Following a negotiation meeting on December 12, 2012, the EU Council stated that they are willing to evaluate Serbia and Macedonia next year if they satisfy the requirements imposed on them, however until such time, there will be no accession talks with the ex-Yugoslavian nations. The ministers told both Serbia and Macedonia that their candidacy may be deliberated during the Irish presidency in June 2013 if they manage to resolve their individual political issues which are major obstacles that must be resolved before Union membership can be considered. Serbia's key setback surrounds its relations with Kosovo, the partially recognized country located in the southern region of Serbia. Tensions between the two have been high since Kosovo self-declared its inde-

pendence from Serbia in 2008 with the help of Western support. Serbia to date remains among those nations that still do not recognize Kosovo's independent status, nevertheless EU ministers have informed the Serbs that they need to collaborate with Pristina and stabilize the affairs of its day to day interactions. Kosovo is still not acknowledged by all EU members making matters more problematic, however some Union ministers are not too concerned by this, rather they are more than certain that Pristina will sign a pre-accession pact in the future.

North Kosovo, labelled by some officials as a "frozen conflict" remains off-limits to the European Union who continues to push its involvement in the Serb-dominated area. The two border crossings between Serbia and the Kosovo region that have been closed since 1998 was opened under combined control on December 10, 2012, which the Union said was one of the necessary conditions for opening membership talks with Belgrade. These latest border developments have sparked protests all across Serbia with people displaying signs that read "No borders, Kosovo is Serbia", evidence of the nation's increasing nationalism. EU representatives are expecting two additional border openings to be on the agenda in the near



Serbia, Kosovo and North Kosovo

future which they hope will inspire greater freedom of movement.



The Sobranie, the Macedonian parliament

Macedonian's crucial issue on the other hand concerns its name dispute with Greece which has been an ongoing hindrance to the Balkan country for over a decade. Greece is demanding a name

change on the grounds that the title Macedonia implies a region in Greece, which they believe might become the focus of a territorial claim dispute in years to come. Athens' unwillingness to negotiate has proven to be a major stumbling block to Macedonia, both in joining the European Union as well as obtaining NATO membership which is currently pending due to being blocked by Greece at the Bucharest summit in 2008. The EU Commission is expecting the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), as it is referred to by some nations, to make extra efforts to endorse good neighborly dealings and cooperate to find the best solution to the "name question" in order to maintain stability in the region.

Barroso says an Independent Scotland must re-apply for EU membership

Responding to the EU commission claim that an independent Scotland would need to re-apply for EU membership, Edinburgh is arguing that the Independence referendum deal signed by first minister Alexander Salmond and British PM David Cameron in October 2012, would give the newly devolved state protected status within the European Union. Commission President José Manuel Barroso is maintaining that separation from an existing member state is considered from a legal perspective, a new state, as such would have to re-negotiate membership with all 27 member states according to union rules. Rejecting Barroso's interpretation, deputy first Minister Nicola Sturgeon on December 10, 2012, called for urgent talks with the EU Commission insisting that there is no EU law provision for the removal from the treaties

of an existing part of the EU, neither a revocation of Union citizenship. Edinburgh's key argument is that the independence negotiations will be carried out within the realm of the Union, as such Scotland will still be part of the UK and by extension the EU, following a "yes" referendum vote. She argued that the Commission's take on the matter would be to the Union's detriment considering the valuable partnership that it has with Scotland given its vast energy resources and other valued attributes. Barroso's position would significantly impact the Scots as it would require, among other things, signing open border treaties and joining the Eurozone. Furthermore, it could significantly reduce the Scottish National Party's success in the Independence referendum.

Clinton fears Russian efforts to “re-Sovietize” Europe

During a visit to Ireland on December 6, US Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton expressed caution for what she believes are new attempts by governments of the former Soviet Union to “re-Sovietize” Eastern Europe and Central Asian regions. Clinton, citing her claims particularly against Russia because of its work at stifling human rights groups and democratic advancement, particularly criticized Moscow-led efforts to promote deeper regional integration such as its customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, which she considers a façade for a revitalization of the USSR. Clinton articulated her concerns to a gathering of lawyers and civil society advocates, hours ahead of meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to discuss the Syrian crisis. She conveyed her sympathy on hearing the struggles of 11 human rights advocates whose complaints included the



The building of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow



Sergey Lavrov and Hillary Clinton in 2010

barring of discussions on sexual orientation discrimination by Russian authorities and even increasing restrictions on social media. Although Clinton agreed that the protection of civil liberties is shrinking and that post-soviet governments are becoming increasingly aggressive in trying to thwart opposition, she pointed out that US efforts to address the situation are hindered by its lack of influence with some of the regions' administrations. This is further compounded by what she describes as a fresh upsurge in repressive laws and policies aimed at criminalizing US assistance in the area, particularly in countries like Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Turkmenistan. She added that the movement is part of a strategic plan aimed at eliminating outreach efforts by Americans and other international actors. Nonetheless she

affirmed that the US will find new methods to fight the increasing repression, emphasizing that “we know what the goal is and are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it.”



Responding to Clinton's accusations the day after, during a teleconference broadcast in Moscow, Russian NATO envoy Alexander Grushko refuted her claims, asserting that Russia has a purely pragmatic relationship with its regional counterparts. Similarly, Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov referred to Clinton's allegations as “a completely wrong understanding”, maintaining that the new integration is solely economic and that other forms of amalgamation is impossible in today's world. Interestingly enough earlier in October, Russian President Vladimir Putin calling for the closer integration made similar comments in a newspaper article where he conceded that the Russian-led undertaking to pool the former soviet states into a “Eurasian Union” is not a move at reforming the USSR, in fact any attempts at restoration or duplication of the abandoned system would be naïve.

Litvinenko was a paid MI6 agent

A UK pre-inquest into the murder of Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko revealed that the ex-KGB agent was working for the British secret service when he was poisoned in November 2006. Litvinenko who was simultaneously working for Spanish intelligence investigating the Russian mafia, died from radioactive polonium-210 poisoning after allegedly having tea with former KGB agents Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun at the Millennium Hotel in Central London. Although Home Office representative Neil Graham refused to confirm whether Litvinenko's was in fact employed by MI6, the review revealed that both British and Spanish secret service issued payments to a joint bank account he held with his wife. Counsel for the widow told the pre-inquest panel that given the former KGB's involvement with MI6 the British government failed in its duty to ensure his safety. Confidential British government documents implicating Russia also emerged, assessment of which established a prima facie case contradicting the state's prior denial of involvement in the 43-year-old's killing. The documents appear to refute British culpability and also ruled out evidence against other parties including the Spanish mafia, Chechen groups and self-exiled Russian tycoon Boris Berezovsky. UK prosecutors have named Andrei Lugovoi, now a Russian MP, as the prime suspect, despite him passing a British lie-detector test in April affirming his not-guilty plea. Meanwhile Russia refuses to extradite Lugovoi to the UK claiming that such an action would be contrary to its constitution.

Twenty months of civil war in Syria

As the war between President Bashar-Al-Assad Regime and anti-government armed groups approach the end of its second year, Lakhdar Brahimi, UN-Arab League envoy for the Syrian crisis, has warned of a "Somalisation" of Syria, articulating to the media in mid-December that the Middle Eastern nation will end up being controlled by warlords and that "the Syrian people will be persecuted by those who control their fate". He predicted a death toll of up to 100, 000 people in 2013 unless an expeditious solution is presented to end the uprising. Thus far, the United Nations has stated that the December killings has pushed the casualty figure past 60,000 for the 21 months since the Syrian pro-democracy demonstrations escalated into a civil war. Other groups such as the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, estimated a loss of 45,000 lives for the time

period. Fearing a worsening situation, the UN is seeking an additional \$520 million in aid which they hope will ease the suffering of the estimated 4 million Syrians who are in urgent need of help. December figures indicate that the number of Syrians in need of food, shelter, medicine and other relief has quadrupled since 2011. More than 525,000 Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries including Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq, 84,000 of which was recorded in December alone, according to the UN Refugee agency.

The United States, EU and many Arab countries are persisting in their demands for President Assad to step down. Washington on December 11, formally recognized the newly-formed coalition of Syrian rebels, following similar moves by the EU and the UK in November. Obama acknowledged that the US has "made a decision that the Syrian Opposition Coalition is now inclusive enough, is reflective and representative enough of the Syrian population that we consider them the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime." Al-Assad's apparent ally nations on the other hand, Iran, Russia and China are still adamantly condemning opposition calls for regime amendment, with the latter nations continuing to veto tough resolutions against



Checkpoint at Damascus' edge. Photo: Elizabeth Arrott [VOA]

Assad in the Security Council. Even though Moscow has shown notable support for Assad and has been sending military advisers to Syria, Russian officials have declared that they are unwilling to offer sanctuary to President Assad, nevertheless they are encouraging other nations to do so. Furthermore Putin has stated that Russia's goal is not to help Assad retain power, but rather to bring an end to the carnage.



A US Patriot Missiles near Gaziantep, Turkey. Photo: Scott Bobb [VOA]

Disapproval of the Assad government continues to rise as evidence provided by US satellite imagery has shown increased movement at a number of chemical weapon stockpiles in Syria. Contrary to Syrian denial of such weaponry, the evidence has led US intelligence to believe that President Assad is ordering the making of nerve gas to be used against the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition forces. British foreign secretary William Hague confirmed the US findings through British intelligence and together with the Obama administration have issued warnings against the use of chemical warfare. By Christmas Day, highest officer of the Syrian armed forces, Major General Abdulaziz Al-Shalal, publicly

declared his decision to defect, stating that it was on account of "deviation of (the) fundamental mission to protect the nation". Subsequent to which, Turkish officials have noted that a number of Assad's air force generals and other lower ranking officers have been defecting and joining opposition forces in Turkey.

NATO agrees to deploy Patriot missiles in Turkey

Approving Turkey's request on December 5, 2012, NATO agreed to augment Turkey's air defense by positioning Patriot missiles along its border with Syria. The decision was largely fuelled by news of President Assad's use of chemical weapons to end the nearly two-year rebellion. NATO also stated that the move was also necessary to bolster Turkey's border against the spilling over of the Syrian violence, particularly in light of the killing of five Turkish civilians in October by errant Syrian artillery shells which entered the border city of Akcakale. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen affirming NATO's support of Turkey, announced to the Turks that "we are determined to defend you and your territory. To anyone who would want to attack Turkey, we say, don't even think about it." The US, Netherlands and Germany have indicated their willingness to contribute the missiles, which Rasmussen said are expected to be deployed within a few weeks. Rasmussen further asserted that deployment will only be for defensive purposes and will not in any way support offensive operations, neither the establishment of a no-fly zone. The action will be under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe and will be subjected to their respective national procedures.

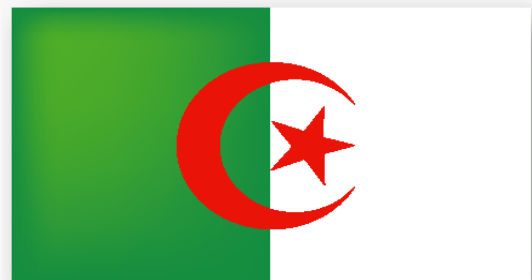
Hollande acknowledges dark colonial past

Ending decades of silence, French President François Hollande finally gave official recognition to the brutal suffering of Algerians during the 132 years under French colonialism, however refused to offer any formal apology for the former colony's anguished past. Hollande acknowledged the injustices inflicted on the Algerians under the colonial system and in an unexpected departure from his predecessors, specifically recognizing those Algerians massacred by the French in the 1954-1962 war that led to Algeria's Independence. Algerians estimated a death toll of 1.5 million people for the seven-year conflict, while France claims a vastly lower casualty figure of 350,000. Hollande also paid particular homage to the Algerians that were killed in Paris during an Independence protest in 1961. No official death toll for the conflict was ever released, nonetheless many historians claim it to be the most lethal use of force by French authorities on their home ground.

Algeria celebrated in July fifty years of Independence since breaking from France and although antagonisms between the two have subsided, yet their relations were still fraught with tension. Many Algerians were eager for an act of contrition during Hollande's visit on December 19, yet he stopped short of the much-anticipated apology. He expressed to a media conference that his visit was not one of

repentance and as such will make no apologies. Instead he asserted that France wants the two nations to move forward as equals, as such a five-year strategic partnership was agreed on to increase trade that he hopes will help revive the French economy that currently lies on the brink of recession. According to Hollande, he and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika are committed to starting a new era in their relations and have decided to renew their economic, cultural and defense ties.

Accompanying Hollande on his first state visit since winning the Presidency in May, were senior executives from French carmaker Renault who announced plans to build a factory in Algeria that will produce roughly around 75,000 cars annually. Renault is carded to be the first automaker to establish manufacturing facilities in the North African nation and will own 49% of the venture and the other 51% owned by two Algerian companies. The contract with Renault was one of 15 agreements signed during the visit.



Zimbabwe amasses forces along Mozambique border

As tensions continue to mount in Mozambique in wake of a threatened bloodshed by rebel leader and commander in chief of the Mozambican Opposition party Afonso Dhlakama, the Zimbabwe defense force has deployed troops along the border fearing an impending civil war and possible rebel incursions from the neighboring nation. The Zimbabwean government has not given any confirmation regarding the strategic positioning of troops, however according to media sources in December, army units are reportedly being stationed along the 1,231 km eastern border with Mozambique to monitor conflict escalations and to avert the spillover of violence, as was the case in previous insurgencies. Zimbabwean officials have also hinted that the move was further fueled by fear of the destabilization of its diamond belt lying 400 km east of Harare, as well as protection of its 287km-long Feruka pipeline which runs from Beira in Mozambique to the oil refinery just beyond Mutare in Zimbabwe. Conversely, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) voiced its suspicions over the border activity stating that the deployment is an excuse to campaign for President Robert Mugabe ahead of the 2013 general elections.



Three soldiers of Mozambique
Photo: Steve Evans [Flickr]

Dhlakama who led an uprising against the Frelimo government which claimed close to one million Mozambican lives, said in an exclusive interview from his base in the bushes on the foot of Mount Gorongosa, "I am training my men and, if we need to, we will leave here and destroy Mozambique". The violent insurrection that commenced in 1977 ended fifty years later in 1992 with the ratification of the Rome Peace Accord which paved the way to the establishment of a unified government. After twenty years of peace, the Resistencia Nacional Mocambicana (RENAMO) expressed renewed dissatisfaction in October 2012 insisting that the Frelimo government has not honored the terms of the accord asserting that their patience has run thin regarding the government's so-called

“robbery” of the nation's wealth. The RENAMO guerillas are demanding revision of the 1992 agreement and reformation of the electoral system, as well as a greater share in Mozambique's coal and gas resources. Dhlakama insists that he is seeking a peaceful solution to the current discord, nevertheless he has admitted that he will make good on his threats and will incite division in the country whereby “Frelimo will have the south and we will have the center and north”, unless the government agrees to negotiate.

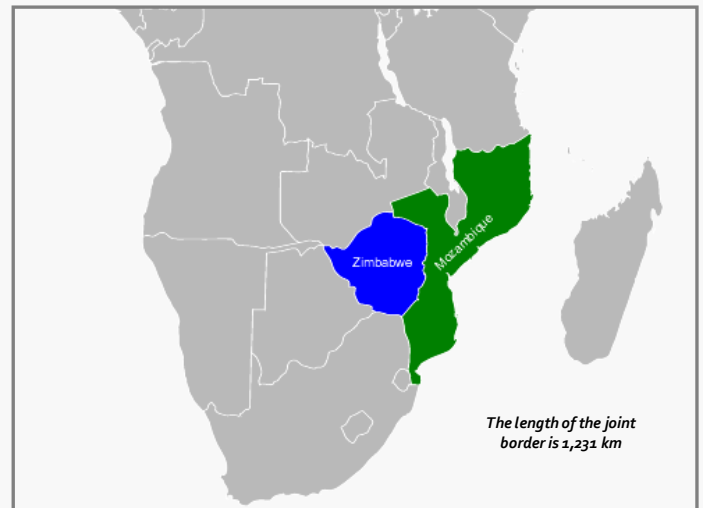


Image: ICRP

“ZIMBABWE DEFENSE FORCE HAS DEPLOYED TROOPS ALONG THE BORDER FEARING AN IMPENDING CIVIL WAR”

Nigeria and Cameroon border demarcation

As per the ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in October 2002 instructing Nigeria and Cameroon to demarcate their land and maritime borders, the two nations finally struck a deal on December 15, 2012 and will begin delineation of the undefined land borders between them, early 2013. After a series of discussions, both countries at their 30th meeting agreed to expedite implementation of ICJ judgment at a United Nations-backed conference in Nigeria's capital city of Abuja. The decision followed from the Green Tree Accord of 2006 under which Nigeria acknowledged Cameroon's authority over part of the border, the Bakassi peninsula. According to UN headquarters in New York, a team of experts from the two West African nations are scheduled to be in the peninsula by February 2013 to hasten the process and begin pillar placements.

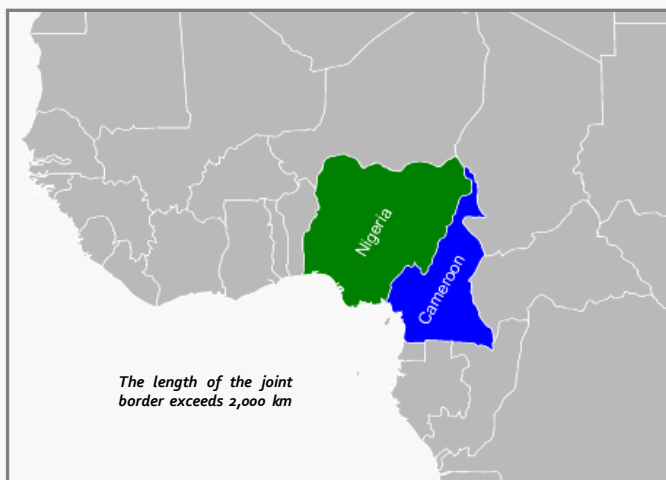


Image: ICRP

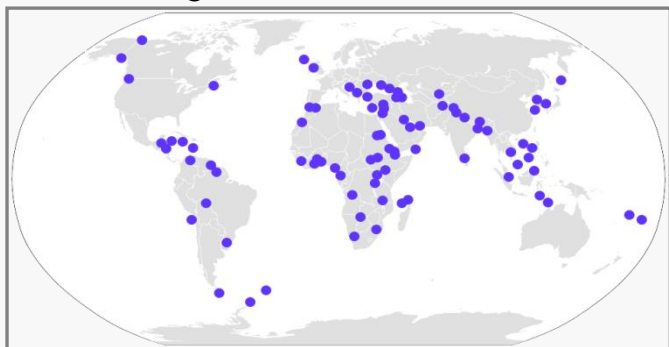


Bakassi Peninsula in the Bight of Bonny, Cameroon

As on December 18, the joint technical team had marked just over 1,845 kilometers of the boundary whose total distance exceeds 2,000 kilometers. After decades of disputing over the undefined borders, the two countries agreed in 2007 on the delineation of the maritime boundaries and the transference of control in the Lake Chad region, along the land border and in the Bakassi peninsula, all of which was concluded the following year in 2008. The land border demarcation is the third component of the mandate of the joint Nigerian-Cameroon Commission, one which is hoped will assist in the fostering of peace among the border communities. The Abuja meeting also emphasized the importance of executing the fourth component of the mandate, which the UN affirmed will address the needs of the

citizens of the two regions affected by the delineation process “through confidence-building initiatives and cross border socio-economic projects”. At the conference, Said Djinnit the Ambassador and Special Representative of the UN Secretary General stated that the needs of the affected population should be given utmost precedence and also stressed the need for “intensified projects in infrastructure, food security, energy and environment, as well as education and capacity building for employment for the affected population.”

Apart from fishing, the Bakassi indigenes who were relocated in the Cross River State of Nigeria have been carping that it is difficult to find alternative means of supporting themselves and that they feel neglected by the Nigerian government. Consequently Efik, one of the affected communities, threatened to join a separatists group in Cameroon and form an autonomous state, following Nigeria's reluctance to grant a review of the ICJ verdict prior the deadline on October 10, 2012. Given the circumstances, Djinnit, congratulated both the President of Nigeria Goodluck Jonathan and Cameroonian President Paul Biya for their steadfast commitment to the passive execution of the ICJ ruling.



Territorial disputes. Image: ICRP

Peru, Chile Take Sea Border Dispute to UN

The number of countries taking their boundary disputes to the legal arena has been gradually increasing, most recently Peru and Chile are fighting it out in the UN's highest court to finally put an end to the five-year conflict over their maritime borders in a civilized, peaceful manner. Peru initiated proceedings in the International Court of Justice in 2008, at the heart of which they are claiming that the sea border was never established and that the matter was left undecided since the end of the War of the Pacific in 1883. Conversely Chile is insisting that the issue has already been settled and the boundary was clearly established by treaties signed in 1952 and 1954, agreements which Peru counter-argues are non-binding and that they only delineate designated fishing zones. Peru's foreign minister Rafael Roncagliolo, said that his government attempted to negotiate a settlement in 1980 and later again in 2004 sought formal discussions with Chile prior to resorting to The Hague. The water off the Pacific coast of the Andean neighbors is a major source of revenue for the two Latin American countries who are among the top producers of fishmeal worldwide. Peru wants the court to draw a line to evenly divide the ocean off the coast of the two nations according to the established premises of international law. If the court rules in Peru's favor, the country will gain sovereignty over more than 60,000 kilometers of sea which Chile has controlled since 1952. Although there are concerns that a verdict reducing Chilean territorial control will be controversial, both the President of Chile, Sebastian Piñera and his Peruvian equivalent, Ollanta Humala have stated ahead of the proceedings in December that they will uphold the decision of the international court.

China remembers victims of Nanjing Massacre

Some 9,000 people were present at a peace assembly commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Nanjing massacre in which thousands of soldiers and civilians were slain in the capital city of the eastern Jiangsu Province by Japanese invaders in December, 1937. The Chinese national anthem was sung after which residents and people from all over the world, including Americans, Canadians, Koreans and Japanese citizens bowed their heads and paid silent tribute in the square at the front of the Memorial Hall of the Victims. China's records of the tragic event estimates the number of deaths to be as many as 300,000 people over the six-week period of Japanese occupation, which included the murder of newborns and the widespread rape of both women and children. However, several external scholars approximate a much lower death toll, including Jonathan Spence a Chinese historian, who claims that 42,000 were killed and 20,000 were raped, many of whom subsequently succumbed to their injuries. According to the 25,000 pieces of evidence collected from the memorial hall documents, the incidents of rape during the massacre exceeded 20,000 cases and in excess of one-third of the buildings in Nanjing were destroyed. A joint inconclusive study carried out in 2010,

estimated the number of deaths between 20,000 and 200,000. On the other hand, some ultra-conservative Japanese politicians are disputing Chinese claims, saying that no atrocities ever occurred in Nanjing.



The Memorial Hall of the victims of Nanjing massacre. Photo: WL [Flickr]

Nanjing will forever be a painful reminder to the Chinese population of the invasion by the imperial Japanese army during the Second Sino-Japanese war. The horror of the massacre is "the darkest part in modern civilization for human beings" according to Party secretary of the Nanjing Municipal Committee Yang Weize, who told the thousands of commemorators gathered, that through the practice of reviewing history and mourning the dead, "we engrave the lesson in our minds falling behind will suffer beating, only development can make us strong." At the close of the ceremony, many Nanjing residents wept as they listened to a cultural

performance by the Japanese Violet Orychophragmus chorus group. The song's chorus, "The flower of peace, Violet Orychophragmus" was sung in Chinese by dozens of Japanese natives, most of who were in their senior years. School teachers were seen leading their students a short distance away from the memorial site to the covered pit containing the smashed skeletal remains of some of the massacre's victims.



300,000 victims at Nanjing. Photo: Skjackeytse [Wikimedia Commons]

Japan and China, two of the world's largest markets have extensive economic ties, both in trade and business, however the memories of their dark past continue to weigh heavily on their relationship. Nevertheless, a Japanese diplomat, who declined to disclose his name, told media sources that Tokyo is hoping that relations between the two will improve following the upcoming changes in leadership in both countries. Japan informed the media that they did offer apologies for the past grievances that they caused, notably in a 2005 statement made by the then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, where he expressed "deep remorse and heartfelt apology", and also previously in 1995 similar sentiments were said to have been conveyed.

Self-Immolations in Tibet causes Chinese authorities to seize TVs and satellites

Close to one hundred self-immolations in Tibet have prompted Chinese authorities in December, to dismantle satellite equipment and seize televisions from 300 monasteries in a largely Tibetan area in western China. State-run media have reported that some 94 Tibetans set themselves alight in acts of protest against Chinese governance, 81 of which took place in 2012. The Huangnan prefecture government told Qinghai news agency, also state-run, that its confiscatory approach to combatting self-immolations is part of a strategic plan to "guide public opinion on the Dalai issue", and inhibit the entry of harmful information from outside, such as anti-China programs. Additionally, the government plans to invest 8.64 million Yuan (\$1.69 million) for the installation of 50 transmitters which will broadcast 70 per cent of the prefecture's television programming. The Dalai Lama who absconded from China in 1959 following an unsuccessful uprising against the Chinese government, is considered a separatist by Beijing, however the Nobel peace laureate affirms that his only motive is to procure increased autonomy for his homeland. Many countries, including the United States are calling on Chinese authorities to open negotiations with the Dalai Lama, however Beijing refuses to concede. Defending its iron-fist governance in Tibet, China is claiming that the region was poor and economically stagnant until the Communist army "peacefully liberated it" in 1950.

North Korea's credibility bolstered after successful rocket launch

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea reinforced its position as a global threat on December 12, 2012 with its successful launching of a long-range rocket which they claim was used to place a meteorological satellite into orbit. While it is defined as "provocative" in the Korean Peninsula, the western world branded the launch as a nuclear technology test. Even though North Koreans are maintaining that their motives are pacific and of a purely scientific nature, Americans and South Koreans claim that they have reason to believe that the launch was a camouflage for a warhead ballistic missile test, if true, it will be an outright violation of UN Security Council resolutions. According to the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), "The missile deployed an object that appeared to achieve orbit". The United States, South Korea and Japan are convinced that in the near future North Korea will be able to successfully launch nuclear missiles as far as the North American continent. The US in particular are harboring major concerns now that Pyongyang's credibility has been bolstered. The launch successfully proved that the North has in its possession missiles capable of striking the Americans and pose a real and tangible threat.



North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un

Following media reports of the success of the launch which took place shortly before 10a.m. (0100 GMT), Pyongyang organized mass gatherings nationwide in celebration. Patriotic songs were played and speeches were made commemorating past rulers and praising current North Korean leader Kim Jung-Un's success, particularly in light of the failure of the first rocket launch in April, which flew for not more than two minutes. Observers saw the timing of the launch as politically motivated by Kim Jung Un given the close proximity to the anniversary of the death of his father and former ruler Kim Jong-Il on December 17. Meanwhile others viewed the launch itself as a means of fortifying the nation's communist regime and toughening the state's "military first" program.

South Korea estimated the cost of the rocket program at \$2.8–\$3.2 billion since 1998, which does not include the risk of extra financial burdens from additional Security Council and unilateral sanctions. According to the figures the already impoverished state is barely surviving current sanctions, any further measure is sure to push North Korea to the edge of bankruptcy. The Security Council is to deliberate a response to the launch which they allege is in direct breach of the 2006 and 2009 sanctions which placed a ban on Pyongyang's missile and nuclear development. All things considered, it is surprising to many however, that the Security Council still thinks it can discourage Pyongyang from carrying out additional nuclear tests. Even China, who continues to hinder UN action because of its continuous support of North Korea, has argued that they do not have much sway over the regime, however they have admitted that they are open to negotiating the best approach to dealing with the situation.



"Banquet given for scientists, technicians, workers and officials who succeeded in satellite lift-off"
Photo: KCNA

North Korea slams Christmas lights as provocation

Pyongyang on December 24, 2012 issued warnings against South Korea over the 30-meter Christmas exhibition along its border, deeming it as an "unacceptable provocation" that could spark war between the two. The dazzling lights of the tree-shaped display which is scheduled to remain switched on until January, is clearly visible from its military-controlled hilltop location several kilometres inside the Northern state, known to frequently endure electricity outages. The communist nation condemned the illuminations by Seoul as an attempt at "psychological warfare" targeted to spread its Christian beliefs. Repeated condemnations and threats from the North over the seasonal lights has prompted the scared South Korean residents to go out in protest. Christmas lighting was a common practice prior the launch of the 1998 "Sunshine policy", the main aim of which was to soften North Korea's attitude towards the South. After coming to an agreement in 2004 Seoul stopped their border lights display, however after North Korea attacked a South Korean island six years later, they opted to resume the illuminations. As a conciliatory gesture, their defiance was suspended the next year following the death of the North's leader Kim Jong-Il on 17 December 2011. Tensions between the two have been strained since the North successfully launched a long-range missile earlier in December which its Southern neighbor and the wider global community strongly condemned as a disguised nuclear test.

■ News in Brief

World news

UN Extension of Kyoto Protocol

■ Nearly 200 countries at a UN Climate Conference held in Doha, Qatar on December 8, 2012, adopted an extension of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol Climate Accord which was set to expire this year. The International Agreement aimed at controlling greenhouse gas emissions of rich, industrialized countries and which only covers roughly 15 percent of global emissions was extended through to 2020 to cope with climate change until a wider treaty applicable to the entire global community can be effected.

WikiLeaks to release 'million more files in 2013'

■ On December 20, 2012, WikiLeaks Founder Julian Assange asserted that his work will not be intimidated and vowed the publication of million more documents in 2013 on his tell-all website. Addressing a small gathering from the balcony of the Ecuadorean Embassy in London he stated that these files will affect "every country in the world". Assange who denies the sexual assault claims against him has for six months sought asylum to avoid extradition to Sweden. At the same time he fears that he will be sent to the US and punished for leaking diplomatic files.

UK to bring home troops from Afghanistan

■ British PM David Cameron announced to Parliament on December 19, 2012 his intention to bring 3,800 troops home from Afghanistan by the end of 2013, a decision he said stems from military advice and growing confidence in the Afghan National Security Forces. The withdrawal which will leave behind approximately 5,200 by December next year is targeted to begin in April 2013. Although NATO is scheduled to conclude operations in Afghanistan in 2014, Cameron stated that a UK token force will remain.



Photo: Derek B. Carlson

■ News in Brief

US foreign policy

U.S. seeks clarification of new China Sea law

■ The US government, in a move to assuage its growing concerns over the new maritime laws imposed by China allowing Chinese authorities to intercept and search foreign vessels in the South China Sea is requesting clarification on their ambiguity. According to the China Daily, an English language news source, the coast guard has the right to seize control and repel vessels that engage in illegal activities or illegally enter the defined territorial claim. These rules carded to take effect on January 1, 2013 are argued by Washington and other foreign governments to be elusive and open to interpretation, offering no elucidation of their purpose and scope. Outside analysts also view the move as yet another strategic step by China to usurp control over most of the seas. Contentions over the South China Sea which is also believed to be rich in oil and gas deposits comes at a time when China and Japan are heavily enthralled in heated debates over islands in the East China Sea.

State Dept. officials resign following Benghazi report

■ Although no individuals were mentioned as directly culpable in the Accountability Review Board Report on the September 11 attack of a US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, four US State Department officials have allegedly resigned following its release on December 19, 2012. Of the four resignations, only three names were revealed to date, namely, Eric Boswell, Head of Diplomatic Security, Charlene Lamb, Deputy Assistant Secretary responsible for Embassy Security and Raymond Maxwell, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of state overseeing the Maghreb nations of Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The highly critical report identified several failings that lead to the death of US Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens along with three other Americans, including systemic failures and inadequate management and leadership at senior levels within the two Bureaus of Diplomatic Security and Near East Affairs.



Barack Obama stands with State Hillary Clinton during the transfer of remains ceremony
Photo: Pete Souza [White House]

■ News in Brief

Africa

UN approves military mission to oust Mali Islamists

■ In a move to regain control in northern Mali, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a French-backed resolution authorizing an African-led military force intervention to overthrow Al Qaeda linked Islamists extremists. A security vacuum was created in the turbulent African nation after rebels engaged in a coup d'état and took over the capital city of Bamako earlier in March. Islamic militants later ousted the rebels and proceeded to impose austere Shariah law in the northern region. The UN measure stresses both a military and political plan to restore constitutional equilibrium and alleviate the turmoil that has already displaced over 400,000 persons. Military operations are expected to commence in either September or October 2013 according to UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous.

Libya orders temporary closure of southern borders

■ The Libyan National Assembly ordered on December 16, the temporary closure of its borders with Chad, Niger, Sudan and Algeria and declared the southern desert region a closed military zone in response to the mounting unrest and increase in the flow of arms, illegal immigrants and goods plaguing the Sahel region. Contrary to skeptics who doubt the efficacy of the measure to stem cross-border criminality, and who also consider the 4,000 kilometers of Saharan wasteland to be too tall an order for the Libyan security forces, Libyan PM Ali Zeidan, conceded the need for further analysis and careful decision-making in the implementation process. Libya plans to establish a system whereby the four nations will each have one authorized border-crossing point. According to army spokesman Ali Al-Sheikhi, entry at any other point will be held as infiltration. The length of the time the border closure is expected to remain in effect is yet to be determined.

Nigerian Islamist sect suspected of killing 10 Christians

■ Islamist sect Boko Haram are suspected by the Nigerian army of killing at least 10 Christians in an overnight gun and machete attack in the largely Christian community of Chibok, in the northeastern Borno state of Nigeria. Residents including Nuhu Clark, the former councilor for the village who managed to escape the rampage, told reporters that the group of men set houses ablaze prior to slitting the throats of 10 persons. Three churches were also burnt in a separate incident the day before in Gamboru, another village in the Borno State. According to Human Rights Watch, over 3,000 people were killed in the insurgency by the Islamist group since its escalation in 2010, with government bureaucrats, armed forces and Christians being the usual targets. Their main objective is to overthrow the government and enact extreme Sharia law in the northern area of Nigeria. A few days before the Borno attacks, the Jihadist movement was applauded by leader Abubakar Shekar for airing a video singling out the UK, US, Israel and Nigeria as adversaries, while across the Atlantic, three senior Boko Haram members were deemed terrorists by the US government.

■ News in Brief

Middle East

Amnesty Reports Human Rights Catastrophe in Yemen

■ An Amnesty International report entitled "Conflict in Yemen: Abyan's Darkest Hour", released on December 4, 2012 has accused Al-Qaeda affiliate Anshar Al-Sharia of committing dreadful human rights cruelties including amputations for thievery, decapitation for alleged sorcery, floggings and the crucifixion of a suspected spy, during the 16 months of their control in southern Yemen. The militants seized control of the Arabian Peninsula in February 2011 amidst the tumultuous insurgency to overthrow then President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The group implemented their own disciplinary committees and released videotapes of the rulings and macabre punishments which they claim to be in keeping with Islamic law. According to the London-based organization, the videos contain scenes of the severed woman's head being paraded through the streets, while another graphic image is that of the crucified decomposing corpse left on display to serve as a public deterrence. The human rights group also released a compilation of the disturbing videos, which the Yemen government has stated their intention to review in conjunction with the report.

Western oil and banking sanctions will not stop Tehran's nuclear program

■ President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has taken a defiant stance towards the punitive banking and oil sanctions imposed on Iran by the US and Europe despite the fact that Iran's oil production and currency has plummeted within recent months. Asserting that the West is displeased with Iran's progress, particularly in the field of uranium enrichment, President Ahmadinejad adamantly stated that the sanctions may cause delay, but will not substantially slow down Tehran's nuclear program. In response to western concerns of nuclear bomb production, Iran has denied pursuit of weapons technology claiming pacific purposes behind the program. Iran has requested the West to respect its nuclear rights and upon agreement will consider opening the Parchin military facility near the capital to the UN nuclear supervisory body, the International Atomic Energy Agency, who suspects the area of being a base for clandestine nuclear research.

Iraq bars minister's plane from landing in Arbil amid tensions

■ Relations between Iraq and Turkey, soured significantly by a number of political and economic issues, are likely to become further strained after Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız's plane was prevented from landing in Arbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, and was instead forced to land in Kayseri, Turkey. According to an Iraqi official the plane was denied landing permission because the flight did not acquire the necessary legal approval. The Minister was due to attend an energy conference in Arbil where he was scheduled to give a speech and conclude oil and gas development dealings. Tensions between the two have been running high most recently owing to Turkey's refusal to extradite fugitive Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi and disagreements over the Syrian crisis.

■ News in Brief

South Asia

Pakistan Hails Closer Relations with India

■ Following discussions in September, Pakistan Interior Minister Rehman Malik and Indian Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde signed a new visa agreement in New Delhi in December as part of a three day tour. The Pakistani Minister delivering messages of peace and love, praised the improvement in bilateral relations which has been strained since talks between the two were suspended in wake of the 2008 attacks in Mumbai by Pakistani militants in which 175 people were killed. Both Ministers welcomed the increased interaction between the rival nations amidst current tensions surrounding Indian pleas to have Pakistani Hafiz Saeed extradited, to which Malik acquiesced compliance solely on the basis of concrete proof of his guilt.



The evening flag lowering ceremony at the India-Pakistan International Border near Wagah
Photo: Kamran Ali [Wikimedia Commons]

Bhutto's Son Launches Political Career on the Anniversary of her Assassination



Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. Photo: Shehryar A. Malik [Wikimedia Commons]

■ In an impassioned speech on December 27, 2012, the 24-year old son of former Pakistani PM Benazir Bhutto launched his political career before the thousands of supporters commemorating the fifth anniversary of her assassination at the family mausoleum in the southern Sindh province. Bhutto who served as PM in the 1980s and 1990s was killed in 2007 by a gun and suicide bomb attack after a political rally in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Following his mother's death Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's was appointed Chairman of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), however he remained a background actor while finishing his studies at Oxford University in the UK. Although Zardari is too young to run in the general election himself, being that the minimum age is 25, he is still likely to play a key role in boosting the image of the PPP whose popularity has significantly dimmed over the past five years since the country's last election.

■ News in Brief

Southeast Asia

Laos ratifies WTO membership

■ Ending 15 years of negotiations since filing its first application to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) Laos, one of the least developed nations of Southeast Asia has ratified its accession to the WTO, paving the way to become the 158th member of the global trading body on February 2, 2013. According to proponents, the landlocked country which is also the last in the region to join the WTO, will soon be able to reap the benefits of market liberalization including wider access to markets, greater integration of its economy in the global community and a boost in its domestic business and overall economic status. The country's goal to progress from a lesser developed country status by 2020 also contributed to the decision to join the WTO.



Local market in Xiengkhouang, Laos. Photo: magical-world [Flickr]

ASEAN, India conclude trade pact



Big Bazaar shopping mall in Kolkata. Photo: Biswarup Ganguly [Wikimedia Commons]

■ India and the 10 member Association of Southeast Asian Nations concluded a free trade agreement in services and investment adding to the initial FTA on goods signed in 2009, forming one of the largest free trade markets with a combined GDP of US\$2.8 trillion and a market population of approximately 1.8 billion. The new agreement is expected to significantly increase economic relations between the two in a similar fashion to the initial trade deal on goods. The FTA which was concluded ahead of a two day

commemorative summit in New Delhi will also pave the way for first round discussions on a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between ASEAN and six major trading partners including India.



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