

## December 2006

### INTERNATIONAL

#### Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

- Dec. 11—Gunmen fire on a car in Gaza City in an apparent assassination attempt against Baha Balousheh, an officer in the Palestinian intelligence service and a member of the Fatah faction. Balousheh is not in the car, but his 3 sons, aged between 3 and 9, are killed.
- Dec. 16—Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority and leader of Fatah, calls early presidential and legislative elections in an attempt to break a political impasse with the militant Hamas party, which controls the parliament. Abbas does not set a date for the elections. Hamas argues that Abbas has no constitutional authority to order new voting.
- Dec. 19—Forces loyal to Fatah and Hamas declare a truce after days of street violence touched off by Abbas's call for elections. Scattered violence persists but the truce for the most part holds.
- Dec. 23—Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert hold their first official meeting, with Olmert agreeing to remove some roadblocks in the West Bank and indicating that Israel might soon transfer to the Palestinians a portion of the \$500 million in tax and customs revenue that it has withheld since Hamas gained parliamentary power last spring. The next day, Hamas calls the Israeli concessions inconsequential.
- Dec. 28—It is reported that during Abbas and Olmert's meeting earlier in the month, Israel agreed to allow Egypt to ship weapons and ammunition to Abbas loyalists in Gaza. Palestinian officials deny the report, but Israeli sources tell the media that shipments have already taken place.

#### AFGHANISTAN

- Dec. 23—Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Osmani, reportedly a close associate of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, is killed in a US air strike, the US military announces. Osmani is described as the highest-ranking Taliban leader killed or captured by coalition forces since the US-led invasion in 2001. A Taliban spokesman denies that Osmani has been killed.
- Dec. 28—President Hamid Karzai expresses strong displeasure with Pakistan's announcement 2 days before that it has begun erecting fences and placing mines on its border with Afghanistan. Karzai argues that these steps will cause injuries to civilians and prevent legitimate movement across the border, without stopping the flow of terrorists.
- Dec. 31—At year's end, 117 suicide attacks have killed 206 civilians, 54 Afghan security personnel, and 18 NATO troops. The number of suicide attacks during the year is 6 times greater than 2005's total.

#### BANGLADESH

- Dec. 21—In Dhaka, the capital, police force a crowd of thousands to disperse as protesters demand electoral reform ahead of polling scheduled for Jan. 22. Earlier in the month, the government had called out the army to quell similar protests.

#### BOLIVIA

- Dec. 16—Crowds in the hundreds of thousands fill the streets of Santa Cruz and other eastern cities, demanding more autonomy from the government. The protests are in part a response to President Evo Morales's plan to draft a new constitution giving more power to indigenous people in Andean regions.

#### BRAZIL

- Dec. 4—A tract of Amazon rain forest measuring nearly 58,000 square miles is put under government protection. More than 1/3 of the preserve is to be made off limits to the public.

#### CHILE

- Dec. 10—General Augusto Pinochet, who ruled Chile for nearly 2 decades and carried out notorious human rights abuses, dies at the age of 91.

#### CHINA

- Dec. 22—Human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng is convicted of subversion for his writings and for his defense of Falun Gong members, but he will serve no jail time if he commits no more crimes in the next 5 years. Observers attribute the light sentence to Gao's high international profile.

#### CUBA

- Dec. 26—Spanish surgeon José Luis García Sabrido, having visited Cuba to examine the ailing Cuban president Fidel Castro, says Castro does not have cancer, despite rumors to the contrary.

#### ETHIOPIA

- Dec. 12—Former President Mengistu Haile Mariam, who ruled the country dictatorially from 1977 to 1991, is convicted in absentia of genocide. Mariam lives in exile in Zimbabwe and may never face punishment.

#### FRANCE

- Dec. 21—Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin is questioned by judges in connection with a smear campaign carried out against Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, in which it was falsely alleged that Sarkozy held secret bank accounts. The judges say de Villepin is not a suspect, but the case apparently has scotched his presidential ambitions.

#### INDIA

- Dec. 18—US President George W. Bush signs legislation granting India access to US nuclear technology in exchange for international inspections of its nuclear program. The deal had been worked out during Bush's visit to India in March.

#### IRAN

- Dec. 11—In the first major instance of protest against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad since his election, the president is heckled during a speech at a university in Tehran.
- Dec. 15—Candidates allied with Ahmadinejad win less than 20 percent of the seats at stake in city council elections around the country. Former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a relative moderate and an opponent of Ahmadinejad, wins by far the most votes in elections for the Assembly of Experts, a body that chooses the country's Supreme Leader.
- Dec. 20—The United States and Britain announce plans to place more naval vessels, including an additional US aircraft carrier group, in the Persian Gulf vicinity.
- Dec. 23—After months of wrangling, the UN Security Council approves sanctions targeting Iran's nuclear program. The

sanctions cover trade in materials and technology related to uranium enrichment and ballistic missiles. Iran responds with defiant rhetoric, and its parliament passes a bill that may limit cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

## IRAQ

Dec. 18—A Pentagon report covering the time between early August and early November concludes that violence in Iraq, directed at both US and Iraqi targets, reached an all-time high during the period, with an average of 960 attacks recorded weekly. In December the heavy violence continues, most of it from bombings and sectarian reprisal killings between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

Dec. 23—Government delegations visit Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and radical cleric Moktada al-Sadr, both leading Shiites, to seek their support for the existing Shiite government coalition. The move is seen as aimed at preempting US efforts to establish a new coalition that includes Sunnis and Kurds.

Dec. 25—British and Iraqi soldiers storm a prison in Basra maintained by Iraqi security forces, rescuing 127 prisoners from miserable conditions and the likely prospect of execution. Many of the prisoners show signs of torture.

Dec. 30—Former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is hanged pursuant to a death sentence for his role in a 1982 massacre. Observers question the Iraqi government's motives in carrying out the execution in a rushed fashion and on a major religious holiday observed by Sunnis.

## ITALY

Dec. 5—Prosecutors ask for the indictment of the country's former intelligence chief, along with 25 US intelligence operatives, in connection with the 2003 abduction of an Egyptian cleric in Milan.

## KOREA, NORTH

Dec. 22—Five days of 6-party talks—including China, the US, Russia, Japan, and both Koreas—end in Beijing with no progress toward North Korea's nuclear disarmament. North Korean negotiators insist that, before the future of their nuclear program can be discussed, US financial pressure against their country must end.

## LEBANON

Dec. 18—A coalition led by the Shiite militant group Hezbollah demands that new elections be held. For weeks the coalition has been holding demonstrations in Beirut aimed at forcing the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, whom they perceive as too close to the United States, to step down. Siniora is supported by a Sunni, Christian, and Druse coalition.

## MEXICO

Dec. 1—Following a disputed election, the conservative Felipe Calderón is sworn in as president. The inauguration is chaotic, with opposition politicians blowing whistles and screaming insults. Calderón's election rival, the left-leaning Andrés Manuel López Obrador, does not concede defeat.

Dec. 16—After having occupied the city's center for several weeks, federal riot police leave Oaxaca. Previously, protesters had occupied the city's square demanding the ouster of the state's government.

## SAUDI ARABIA

Dec. 10—Arab leaders meeting in Riyadh agree to start a joint program to develop nuclear energy.

## SOMALIA

Dec. 6—The UN Security Council authorizes the establishment of an African force to protect the country's internationally recognized transitional government. The next day, Islamists controlling most of the southern part of the country warn that the UN decision will lead to war.

Dec. 23—Despite a European-led effort to prevent the situation from spinning out of control, Islamists launch fierce military attacks on the transitional government.

Dec. 24—Ethiopia enters the conflict on the side of the transitional government, using tanks and fighter jets against the Islamists.

Dec. 30—The Islamists, having been put on the run by Ethiopian forces, retreat to Kismayo, their final stronghold. Masked gunmen, however, appear on the streets of the capital, Mogadishu, suggesting an insurgency may be brewing.

## SPAIN

Dec. 30—A car bomb explodes at Madrid's airport, killing 2. The bombing is blamed on the Basque separatist group ETA, and it interrupts a 9-month cease-fire in the long conflict between ETA and the Spanish government.

## SUDAN

Dec. 20—The Bush administration warns the Sudanese government that by year's end it must allow UN personnel in Darfur and accept an international force for the region torn by conflict and killings by government-backed militias. The United States does not specify what will happen if Sudan refuses to comply.

## THAILAND

Dec. 31—New Year's celebrations are disrupted as 9 small bombs explode around Bangkok, killing 3 and wounding 38. The army says the bombings were meant to undermine the government, which came to power in a September coup, while some suspect the government of staging the bombings for propaganda purposes.

## TURKMENISTAN

Dec. 21—President Saparmurat Niyazov, an authoritarian who ruled his country for 2 decades, dies at 66. Authoritarianism is not thought likely to decrease.

## UNITED STATES

Dec. 4—US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton resigns when it becomes clear he will not win Senate confirmation to the post. President Bush had installed him a year previously through a recess appointment, which allowed Bolton to take the post temporarily without confirmation.

Dec. 6—The Iraq Study Group, a high-profile bipartisan commission, releases a report calling the situation in Iraq "grave and deteriorating." The report implicitly criticizes Bush administration policy and recommends, among other steps, diplomatic engagement with Iran and Syria.

## VENEZUELA

Dec. 3—Winning 61% of the vote, leftist President Hugo Chávez is reelected to another 6-year term. ■