

„Discovering International Relations and Contemporary Global Issues“

Cultural Relations Policy

News and Background

March 2013





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.



Editorial Team

Andras Lorincz, Series Editor

Orsolya Erdélyi-Schwabe, Noémi Radnai, Wazir Ali, Csilla Morauszki, Authors – Issue March 2013

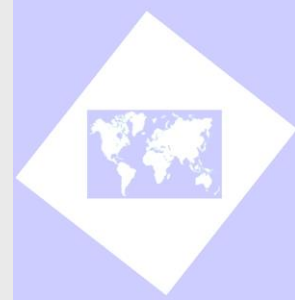
Csilla Morauszki, Executive Publisher

© Institute for Cultural Relations Policy

ICRP Geopolitika Kft

45 Gyongyosi utca, Budapest 1031 - Hungary

Contents



-
- 01** Argentina's Bergoglio elected as new Pope Francis

 - 03** UN sanctions on North Korea

 - 06** Lahad Datu Standoff

 - 09** Chemical weapons allegedly used in Syria

 - 12** Demonstrations for autonomy on Day of Székely Freedom

 - 14** Falkland Islanders voted for British sovereignty

 - 15** Venezuela's socialist president died

 - 17** Unrest in Southern Thailand

 - 18** Mali conflict escalates

 - 20** Obama's visit to the Middle East

 - 21** Kurds in Turkey: steps towards peace

 - 23** Withdrawal from Afghanistan

 - 25** New Chinese president visits African countries

 - 26** Financial crisis in Cyprus

 - 28** News in Brief

Argentina's Bergoglio elected as new Pope Francis

The Papal Conclave started on 12 March 2013 after Pope Benedict XVI abdication on 29 February. During the last six centuries he has been the first Pope who resigned. It was expected that the Conclave would take place around 15-20 March because according to the policy the College of Cardinals it is not allowed to elect a new Pope until 15-20 days after the papacy becomes vacant. However Benedict – who was a Pope emeritus at the time being –, issued the order *Normas Nonnullas* in order to make a schedule change.

Each of the cardinals arrived to Rome until 8th of March, but not all of them were eligible to vote. Those who were more than 80 years old could not participate in the election. Therefore altogether 117 had the right to be an elector but Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja from Indonesia declined his participation because of his bad eye sight. Cardinal Keith O'Brien – who would be the only cardinal elector from Great Britain – recently resigned as Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh because of accusation of sexual misconduct. So he did not want that his presence would drive away the attention from the Conclave and from the new pontiff.

On the first Election Day the 115 elector cardinals took their oath placing their hands on the Gospel in the Sistine Chapel. After this who did not belong to the Conclave were locked out from the



Pope Francis. Photo: casarosada.gob.ar

chapel. Consequently the elector cardinals were not allowed to discuss anything about the voting process with the outside world until the election of the new Pope. It also meant that the Cardinals were banned from using their social network accounts.

However it could not stop the 4,300 accredited journalists to speculate. According to them there are some so called *Papabili*, who have the highest chance to be elected as Pope. Among these speculated candidates we could find cardinals like Angelo Scola of Italy, Marc Ouellet of Canada, Péter Erdő of Hungary, Peter Turkson of Ghana and Odilo Scherer

of Brazil. The Italian candidate was the most popular choice among the media commentators. However many mentioned it is time to look outside Europe for a new Pope although a few considered it as possible. Jorge Bergoglio's name also popped up as a possibility since he was the second after Benedict XVI at the conclave back in 2005.

At the end of the first vote black smoke came out from the Sistine Chapel's chimney which meant that no Pope was elected on the first day. But as a matter of fact no one expected the Cardinals to elect a new Pope that fast. On the second day the Cardinals casted altogether four times their paper ballots. The first three times ended with no result but for the fourth time white smoke emerged from the chimney as more than the two-third of the Cardinals voted for the same person. They elected Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina who is the first Latin-American and the first Jesuit Pope ever. He chose the name Francis to express his gratitude toward Saint Francis of Assisi who was an Italian reformer who lived in poverty.

This name choice suggests what values are important to him. Many think about him as a potential reformer of the Vatican bureaucracy and he is also known for his humility as he prefers to travel with public transportation. With his election a new era has started in Vatican but the new Pope will face difficult times because of the recent damage to reputation of the Church due to the sexual misconduct and the corruption scandals. During the conclave once it seemed that pink smoke came out of the chimney. However it was a protest by Catholic women against the exclusion of women becoming priests. With this question the new Pope will have to deal also.

For the world his election was a complete surprise. For example the Italian Conference of Bishops was so sure about that Angelo Scola will be elected that they released a statement – shortly after the white smoke was seen –, In which they were congratulating him becoming the Pope. Few minutes later they corrected this mistake. However the crowd on the St Marc Square did not know who this archbishop was, after his first appearance everybody took him in their heart as he asked for the crowd's blessing and prayers. And of course this was the biggest deal for the 400 million believers throughout Latin-America.



Inauguration of Pope's Francis Ministry, 19 March 2013. Photo: Fczarnowski [Wikimedia Commons]

Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, President of Argentina congratulated to him among the first ones and wished him "fruitful pastoral mission". She attended the inaugural mass on 19 March where Joe Biden, Vice President of the USA was also present. They both are Catholic. President of the USA, Barack Obama also sent his "warm wishes" to the first Pope from Americas. UK Prime Minister David Cameron said that it was a "momentous day" for Catholics.

UN sanctions on North Korea

On 7 March 2013 the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 2094 on North Korea after the communist country conducted its third nuclear test on 12 February. The new economic sanctions are designed to hold back North Korea from developing further nuclear and ballistic missile programs. These sanctions target the diplomats' cash transfers and access to luxury goods. This resolution is different from the previous ones because North Korea's only ally, China supports these sanctions also. That is why the experts think that it will have a huge impact on the financial situation of North Korea and it will degrade the capabilities to grow its programs.

North Korea responded with shrill communication: it has said that it is cancelling a hotline and the non-aggression pact with South Korea. Additionally it threatened the United States and its "puppets" to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against them. In Pyongyang there was a mass military rally where the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un said to his soldiers "to keep themselves ready to annihilate the enemy at any time." The new President of South Korea, Park Geun-hye, who was elected in February, said that Seoul would respond strongly against any

attacks. Meanwhile China called for both Koreas to calm down and start to continue talking with each other.



Kim Jong-un. Photo: KCNA

On 13 March North Korea confirmed the scrapping of non-aggression pact and the cancelling of the hotline. The Korean War was ended by an armistice, so technically they remained in war until now. But this armistice agreement got the situation under control. From now on the relationship between the two countries will be unpredictable. South Korea and the United Nations repudiate this step from North Korea because the agreement does not allow unilaterally forcing themselves from it. The hotline was installed in 1971 in order to be able to communicate directly in tense situations. Additionally it also helped to

co-ordinate the passage of people and goods through the Demilitarized Zone.

During the annual joint military exercise in Seoul, nuclear-capable B-52 bombers from the Japanese US military base flew over South-Korea as a part of the exercise. Because of this the North Korean threatened to strike U.S homeland, Hawaii, Guam and their military bases in the Korean region. These threats are more likely to be bluffs as it is believed that North Korea is years away to create a long-range missile which could reach the USA. But on the other hand these missiles are capable to destroy both South Korea and Japan. The Obama administration said that they can completely defend their homeland. Furthermore trough the nuclear umbrella and missile defense the United States can also protect South-Korea and Japan as well.



Photo: KCNA

Meanwhile there were cyber-attacks against two South Korean Banks (Shinhan, Nonghyup Bank) and three TV-channels (KBS, MBC, and YTN). North Korea is the obvious suspect because these attacks happened after that the communist

country accused the US and its allies of attacks on its internet servers. These attacks against the South did not make so much damage like the others back in 2009 and 2011. Those two attacks were against governmental agencies and financial firms. Since then the South Koreans created the National Cyber Security Center which meant also a higher level in defense. These banks and TV channels were easy targets and their systems were just down for few hours and no personal data were compromised. They believe that the North Koreans wanted to create confusion in the society, not to make long-term damage with these attacks.



The United Nations unanimously voted too in the question to investigate human rights in North Korea. This resolution, which was presented by Japan and the European Union, was approved on 21 March. It seeks to examine allegations of prison camps, slave labors and food deprivation in the country. North Korea's ambassador to the United Nations, Pyong Se-so said that the council wants to "disgrace the image" of his country. He also added that North-Korea has "one of the best systems in the world for the protections of human rights." They cannot conduct a first-hand

investigation because it is highly unlikely that their access to the country will be granted. So they need to rely on satellite images and accounts of defectors.

South Korea has signed a new military plan with the United States which was revealed on 25 March. According to the new plan in the event of a limited attack from North Korea it allows joint response in which South Korea takes the lead and the United States supports. Before this they could just respond together if there was a full attack against South Korea. With this new plan they can act together against an event of incursion on the border, low-flying aircraft or attacks on border islands.

The last armed conflict between the two Koreas happened in 2010 when the North made an unannounced attack on a South-

Korean island killing two civilians. It was accused of sinking a South Korean navy ship killing 46 sailors. The North denied this back then but if anything like these attacks would happen now the new military plan allows launching joint response immediately. The South Korean defense ministry spokesman, Kim Min-seok said that this “will have the effect of preventing the North from daring to provoke us.”



**“PYONGYANG THREATENED THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ‘PUPPETS’
TO LAUNCH A PRE-EMPTIVE NUCLEAR STRIKE AGAINST THEM”**

Lahad Datu Standoff

Lahad Datu, a district in Sabah, the easternmost state of Malaysia was occupied in early February by a group of Muslims from the Philippines called the Royal Army of Sulu. The leader of the group of a few hundred is Agbimuddin Kiram, who is the brother of the self-proclaimed Sultan of Sulu, Jamalul Kiram III. Sulu is an autonomous island province of the Philippines located in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The group was initially received peacefully, but after several attempts of sending them back to the Philippines, violence broke out, soon leading to a standoff. “Sabah is our home” – a member of the small Sulu army said.

The dormant territorial dispute of Sabah between the Philippines and Malaysia is based on events that occurred several centuries earlier. In the seventeenth century, when Sabah was neither an American nor a Spanish colony, there were two main sultanates in the area: the Brunei and the Sulu. In 1658, Brunei gave Sabah to the Sultan of Sulu, either as a gift or to thank the Sulu for offering military help in a rebellion.

Sabah became part of Malaysia in 1963. Based on an 1878 contract between the Sultanate of Sulu and the British North



Borneo Company, each year Malaysia pays about 5,000 ringgit (£1,000, \$1,500) to the Sultanate of Sulu. The amount was acknowledged as a price paid for Sabah by Malaysia, but Sulu interprets the yearly fee as a lease or rent. “In my opinion, this is more consistent with a lease rather than a sale, because you can't have a purchase price which is not fixed and which is payable until kingdom come,” says Harry Roque, a law professor at the University of the Philippines.

The Sulu troops – about 250 men – arrived to the coast of Lahad Datu on the 11th of February by boat. Shortly after the arrival, Malaysian police blocked roads leading from Lahad Datu through palm oil plantations to Tanduo, and also ordered food blockade. Benigno Aquino III, president of the Philippines asked Kiram to call his followers back and turn to the

government with his concerns. He said that by battling Malaysia the Sulu not only risk their lives but can also cause problems to the Filipino families living and working there. Aquino reminded Kiram that as a Filipino citizen the Constitution applies to him and his people, and in this constitution provoking war is a crime. The 74-year-old sultan said he was ready to be jailed. Kiram emphasized the need to come up with a diplomatic, win-win solution, but said he would not withdraw from Sabah.



Lahad Datu town and sea view

Princess Sitti Jacel, the daughter of Kiram said that the members of the Royal Army of Sulu did not go to Sabah in order to start a war but they want to reside peacefully in the ancestral Sulu territory and would not come home until a concrete solution is provided for them.

On the 1st of March, three days after the deadline of the Royal Army of Sulu to leave the island, Malaysian police engaged in a shooting with the troops. Malaysian Home Minister says that the Sulu were the first to start the fight, in which fourteen people were killed – twelve of Kiram's followers and two Malaysian policemen - and about five

were injured. "We don't want to engage them but they fired at us. We have no option but to return fire" Sabah Police Chief Hamza Taib said.

Malaysian police began to double its forces in order to get ready for more attacks. On the 3rd of March a group of about ten Sulu soldiers ambushed the police in Semporna. Encircled, the police got trapped in the village. After the attack 23 policemen were reported to be missing, and captive four policemen had their bodies mutilated and tortured, leading to allegations of black magic. Reports say that the incident claimed the lives of six policemen and seven assailants.

On the 5th of March, Kiram's camp was bombed by Malaysian air forces. "As I am speaking, the army and police forces, along with other members following behind, are taking action to arrest and destroy the group which has breached the nation's sovereignty" – Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said in Kuala Lumpur. On the 9th Malaysian Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said that "Ops Daulat" (Operation Sovereignty) would only end when not even one of the Sulu troopers are left in Malaysia.

Also, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) announced that they would send reinforcement to Sabah in order to help the Sulu. The Islamic MNLF has been struggling to achieve sovereignty from the Philippines for five decades, claiming Bangsamoro land (including Sulu) to be theirs. Many of their fighters had received military training and arms from Malaysia during the war for Bangsamoro with the Philippines.

The standoff also gave place for web warfare. The website of the Filipino Globe Telecom was hacked by a group claiming themselves the “Malaysia Cyb3r 4rmy”. The message read “Do not invade our country or you will suffer the consequences.” The Filipino struck back by hacking several Malaysian websites, writing messages like “Stop attacking our cyber space! Or else we will attack your cyber world!” and “The time has come to reclaim what is truly ours. Sabah is owned by the Philippines, you illegally claiming it (sic)”

On the 7th of March, a spokesman for



Modern flag of Sultanate of Sulu. Picture: Jaume Ollé

Kiram said that the sultanate declares a unilateral ceasefire and had ordered their troops to take a defensive position. However, Kuala Lumpur is not willing to accept the call. “A unilateral cease-fire is not accepted by Malaysia unless the militants surrender unconditionally” says Defence Minister Ahmad Zahid.

On the 8th of March, an assembly was held at the Embassy of the Philippines in Kuala Lumpur. The move was named “Ops Bunga” (Operation Flower), with Malaysians placing flowers on the doorstep of the building showing solidarity for the Filipinos living in Malaysia.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called an end to the war and emphasized the need to establish dialogue between the parties in order to solve the conflict appropriately. “I am very sad over the incident because what we had wanted to prevent, which is bloodshed, had actually happened” Najib Razak said.

“THE DORMANT TERRITORIAL DISPUTE OF SABAH BETWEEN THE PHILIPPINES AND MALAYSIA IS BASED ON EVENTS THAT OCCURRED SEVERAL CENTURIES EARLIER”

Chemical weapons allegedly used in Syria

Human Rights Watch report on Syrian Civil war raised the signals on 16th March 2013, that Syrian regime is expanding its use of widely banned cluster bombs, according to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report. According to the report, the Syrian military has used cluster munitions in 119 locations across Syria, dropping at least 156 bombs over the last six months and killings dozens of civilians. The use of these munitions is prohibited under to the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), which Syria has neither signed nor ratified, because of the potential harm they pose to civilians. The CCM bans the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of cluster bombs, weapons that break apart, releasing large numbers of smaller, self-contained explosives which spread out before detonating on impact.

The HRW report is based on field investigations conducted after two cluster bomb attacks outside Homs and Aleppo killed 11 civilians and injured over 25, along with hundreds of Internet videos posted online by activists detailing similar attacks. This is not the first HRW report calling attention to Syria using cluster munitions. In October HRW reported that the Syrian military was using cluster munitions against opposition forces. In July HRW reported evidence of Soviet-made cluster munitions

being used in Syria. There has many pictures and videos shared by different individuals on different social networking websites which could be considered as the evidence that how Syrian forces are using different weapons slaughtering the civilians and opposition forces in different areas in Syria.



Photo: SyrianFree Press

Later on 21st March 2013, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced that the UN would initiate a probe into the possible use of chemical weapons in Syria. The Syrian government requested the probe earlier this week after anti-government forces carried out an attack on a village near Aleppo. Ban declared that the investigation would involve other international bodies such as the World Health Organization and the Organization

for the prohibition of Chemical Weapons. In his remarks, Ban stated that any use of chemical weapons would be a serious crime and that the Syrian government has the primary responsibility of ensuring the security of chemical weapons. Ban said that the investigation would start as soon as possible. The Syrian Civil War has lasted for nearly two years, and the international community has become increasingly concerned about the violence.

Michael R. Gordon a columnist wrote in his op-ed in the month of March in New York Times about US Secretary of State John Kerry said that the Obama administration supported efforts by Middle Eastern nations to send arms to the opposition in Syria, and had had discussions with foreign officials to emphasize that those arms should go to moderate forces rather than to extremists. He further mentioned that Kerry's comments were the most direct public affirmation to date that the Obama administration was supporting efforts to arm the Syrian resistance, provided that the arms are sent by other nations and that care is taken to direct them to factions the United States supports. His comments also signal a more transparent effort to coordinate military assistance for the opponents of President Bashar al-Assad.

The United States also supports a plan by Britain to supply the armed Syrian opposition with nonlethal equipment, which might include vehicles, night vision equipment and body armor. The British government is expected to announce that assistance soon. Persian Gulf nations have been sending military and other aid to the

rebels for more than a year, but weapons shipments to the rebels increased significantly in the last few months as Saudi Arabia financed the purchase of infantry weapons from Croatia, which were sent to the rebels via Jordan.

A major question is whether these efforts will be enough to turn the tide against Assad. The flow of weapons has not stopped the Syrian military from firing missiles at its opponents or bombing them and also use of different clustered bombs which is according to President Obama would be considered as the "red-line" for US and other major countries for the military intervention in Syria.



Photo: Syrian Free Press

Besides all this one of the contributors of op-ed in New York Times wrote that the concerns related to Syrian refugees in neighboring countries of Syria also rising and demand the immediate attention. The neighboring countries offering refuge to Syrians and facing the different challenges related to provide the food, shelter and important resources. Their capacities are stretched to the breaking point. Lebanon's population has increased by a staggering

10 percent. In Jordan, the mounting numbers are putting enormous pressure on limited energy and water resources, and on social services and infrastructure. Turkey has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to erect 17 refugee camps and plans to build more as long as Syrians continue to flee.

Everywhere in the region, food, fuel and rental prices are rising quickly, with a direct impact on local economies. These countries should not only be congratulated for keeping their borders open, but financially supported as well. Regional stability is at stake. In this regards, the situation and its possible solution should be dealt carefully to avoid further killings of the innocent civilians, the concern of the refugees in neighboring countries, possible



Syrian refugee center on the Turkish border. Photo: Henry Ridgwell [VOA]

spillover affect to other countries and international committee also should not forget to take all the other countries which are having close relations with Syrian regime on one table for the possible solution if not the situation will further go worse.

**“NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES OFFERING REFUGE TO SYRIANS
AND FACING THE DIFFERENT CHALLENGES”**

Demonstrations for autonomy on Day of Székely Freedom

Demonstrations for Székely autonomy were held in Hungary as well as in major European and American cities on the 10th of March. Székelyland which have majority Hungarian population sits in three Romanian counties - Harghita, Covasna and Târgu Mures.



*Demonstration for autonomy on the Day of Székely Freedom.
Photo: Derzsi Elekes Andor [Wikimedia Commons]*

More than 3,000 people of all ages protested in front of the Romanian embassy in Budapest. A number of Székely and Hungarian flags could be seen in the crowd and many of the demonstrators came dressed in Székely folk costumes. In Hungary, the demonstrations took place in Budapest and also in other cities. The demonstration in the capital, organised by the Pro Székelyland Association, was scheduled to coincide with others in big

cities in Europe and North America. Mózes Árpád György, who heads the association, said that demonstrators took up the cause in Los Angeles, too, even though the event took place at 6 in the morning, local time.

At the same time of the demonstration more than 30,000 had protested at the main rally in Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely) on the Day of Székely Freedom. March 10 is the anniversary of the execution in Târgu Mureş in 1854 of three Székelys who tried to achieve national self-determination.

On 10 March 2013, participants of the demonstration in Târgu Mureş read out a petition to the Romanian government, urging territorial autonomy for the country's central Székelyland, a historical region, where about half of the 1.4 million ethnic Hungarians live. The petitioners demanded that Székelyland should become a separate unit in terms of access to EU development funds.

"Székelyland must become an autonomous region and this must be enshrined in legislation," Izsák Balázs, the head of the Székely National Council, told the participants. "We are also protesting against the government's regionalization draft, which threatens our people's existence," he added. The "regionalization"

plan initiated by the centre-left government seeks to group Romania's 42 counties into eight regions.

The protesters peacefully marched through the city that in March 1990 was the scene of violent clashes between ethnic Hungarians and Romanians. At the Prefect's Office, demonstrators submitted their petition to the Romanian Government. The petition suggested that the distinctive cultural and national character of the majority population living in Székelyland reinforces the notion that a viable solution would be to grant it autonomy. Then, it could achieve its own goals, without state disruption and in full respect of existing Romanian laws.

Demonstrations for Székely autonomy were also organised in front of Romanian embassies and consulates in London, Vienna, Helsinki, the Hague, Munich, Stockholm and Zurich. In the United States, protests were planned for New York, Cleveland and Los Angeles. Demonstrations were also to take place in the Canadian cities of Toronto and Ottawa. In addition, about 20 people joined a flashmob with Székely flags near the White House in Washington. In Vienna, about 500 participated at a demonstration for Székely autonomy.

"The goal of the Székely National Council is to achieve territorial autonomy for Székelyland, which in the 21st century means the same as legal, free and independent national status meant in the 19th century," the council says on its website.

The Székely region was autonomous entity

from medieval times, the first official reference dates back to the 13th century. Along with Transylvania, it became part of Romania after World War I. In December 1918 at the Romanian Assembly of Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia), Romanian delegates from throughout Transylvania voted in favour to join the Kingdom of Romania. This move was later internationally recognized in 1920 with the Treaty of Trianon. Between 1952 and 1968, for a short time, Székelyland retrieved its apparent autonomy. After the fall of communism many people hoped that the autonomy would soon be restored again, however – despite new autonomy initiatives – this has not happened yet.



Ethnic map of Székelyland

Falkland Islanders voted for British sovereignty

A new front has been opened in the territorial issue between Argentina and the United Kingdom as the Falkland Islanders held a referendum to express their opinion about the situation. This was a response to an earlier letter back in 2012 from the President of Argentina, Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, who claimed to discuss the sovereignty of the islands with the British government. On 10 and 11 March 90% of the adult citizens casted their vote and among them there were only 3 no answers to the question "Do you wish the Falkland Islands to retain their current political status as an Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom?"

This is an overwhelming statement from the islanders who wish that Argentina would respect their right to self-determination. But the Argentine government has a different opinion about this as they think that the islanders should have no voice in this two-way discussions and their opinion does not count because they were implanted during the British colonization in 1833. Argentina's foreign minister said that Falkland islanders did not exist, what exists is British citizens in the Islas Malvinas. David Cameron, and his British Government welcomed the islanders decision but he also pointed out the fact that the relationship between Argentina and the United Kingdom is at its lowest since 1982.

In 1982 Argentina attacked the Falkland Islands and seized it along with two other islands. After many casualties on both sides Argentina surrendered. After this incident in the 1990s they restored the diplomacy relations between the two countries. It seemed that they would solve the issue; even there was a tight commercial link between the Islands and Argentina until 2003. After the Peronists came into power in Argentina the government cut this link almost immediately and they restored their claims over the Islands.

The Islas Malvinas are so important for Argentina that President Fernandez asked even the newly elected Pope with whom her relationship was rather tense –, to raise his voice in this question. There will be other scenes in this "colonial problem" – as the United Nations titled it in 1965 –, chapter as the Islands' location is really valuable on the way to Antarctica. Not to mention the oil quarries which belong to the islands and they are still waiting for their exploiters.



Venezuela's socialist president died

Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela, died on 5 March after two years battle with cancer. He was a populist leader of what he called "21st Century Socialism", which ideology inspired other countries in the region. He ruled his country for 14 years, in 2012 he was re-elected, but due to his illness he could not take the oath. He was also a controversial figure and his country was the biggest antagonist of the United States of America in the region. Vice President Nicolas Maduro announced Chavez's death in a national television broadcast. His death made millions of his supporter devastated. After the statement they gathered in front of the hospital chanting "We are all Chavez" and "Chavez lives".



Many leaders sent their condolence after the statement. His death had the hugest impact on his loyal allies: Cuba, Bolivia and Ecuador. In Cuba the government declared a three day of national mourning for the leader who was like a son to Fidel Castro. Evo Morales, President of Columbia, said that "Chavez is more alive than ever" and that his presence will influence this region and the whole world in the future as well. In the statement of the Ecuadorian government they expressed their hope that the countries in South-America would carry on Chavez's revolution. Vitaly Churkin, Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations said that Chavez was a great politician not just for his country, but for the whole world. William Hague, foreign minister of the United Kingdom said that Chavez had left a "lasting impression" on Venezuela. Barack Obama stated that these are



*Argentina's President Cristina Fernandez, Venezuela's interim President Nicolas Maduro, Uruguay's President Jose Mujica and Bolivia's President Evo Morales.
Photo: Miraflores Presidential Press Office*

“challenging times” for Venezuela and he reaffirmed the Venezuelan that the United States wants to develop a constructive relationship with the country as it will start a new chapter.

But the facts suggest that Venezuela will continue to go on the road what President Chavez had appointed for the oil-rich country. Due to its Constitution if the President dies, the speaker of the National Assembly, who is now Diosdado Cabello, should be the interim president. But before his death, Chavez named Nicolas Maduro as his successor. The military commanders pledged their loyalty immediately to him. The elections will be in thirty days but the experts think that without doubt the hand-picked candidate will win, simply because it was Chavez’s last wish. Maduro had already assured the mourning Venezuelans that he will continue their great leader’s “revolutionary, anti-imperialist and socialist legacy”. For a start he stated in a television announcement that he has no doubt that Chavez’s cancer had been induced by Venezuela’s enemies. He also mentioned that two US diplomats were expelled from the country for spying on the military. The United States said that the accusations are absurd.

The funeral was held three days after his death where hundreds of thousands of people were present. From all over the world 33 leaders, including Cuba’s Raul Castro, Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Argentina’s



Commercial products about Chavez. Photo: Jean-Marc/JoBeLo/Jhon-John [Flickr]

Christina de Kirchner, Brasilia’s Dilma Vana Rousseff, Belarus’s Alexander Lukashenko and Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, paid their respects in Caracas. His body laid in state additionally for a week to allow more people to say goodbye to him. Later on his body will be embalmed and displayed in a crystal urn in the planned Museum of Revolution. Maduro, who had sworn in as acting president on the day of the funeral said that the urn will be “like Ho Chi Minh, like Lenin”.

Unrest in Southern Thailand

Thailand began to negotiate with southern rebels after they had signed a peace talk deal in the end of February 2013 in Malaysia. The insurgency took place in three southern provinces of Thailand: Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. The complexity of the conflict derives from that the insurgents hiding their identities and their claims. That's why at the beginning they could only guess who they were and what they wanted to achieve. Their attacks are mostly against Thai authority personnel but there are also many civilian casualties due to the daily bomb and gun attacks. In these regions most of the people are Muslim and they speak a local dialect of Malay. For a long time the Thai government thought that these attacks are mostly because of the difference between Muslims and Buddhists, financed by Islamic terrorist groups. But after many attacks where Muslim policemen were also killed they needed to look deeper. These attacks are against everything what represent the Thai state, therefore mostly against policemen, military base and schools. They can't use their language officially; in the schools the teaching language is Thai. That's why these institutions are so hated among them. This is a nationalistic insurgency what uses the language of Jihad.

These attacks are reignited in 2004 after the

so called Tak Bai incident. Six local men were arrested by the Thai police because they were handling guns to the members of rebel groups. The rebels organized a demonstration in order to release these men. The police and army worked together against the insurgents and they arrested hundreds of people. They tied their hands together, threw them into trucks and brought them to a military base which was five hours away. Almost one hundred of the prisoners were suffocated because of the heat and the fact that they were lying upon each other. After this incident – which was actually condemned by the Thai inhabitants as well –, the number of violent acts increased in the Southern provinces.

This is not the first attempt to negotiate with the rebels but until now they have not been successful. This one is different from the other attempts while they do it publically and they also signed a deal which commits them to negotiate with each other. The only question is if Hassan Thaib – who represents the insurgents and member of one fraction of the rebels PULO (Pattani United Liberation Organisation), has enough influence on the many different rebel groups to stop the violence which has already claimed more than 5,000 people's lives over the past decade.

Mali conflict escalates

Over a year ago a Tuareg rebellion broke out in the Northern part of Mali, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA). In March 2013, a coup d'état was carried out by the rebels in the capital, Bamako, with the help of Islamist groups Ansar Dine and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The Tuareg rebels declared the independence of a new state in the north, Azawad. However, Ansar Dine and the AQIM turned on the NMLA and took control over the north, intending to introduce the Islamic law (sharia) in Northern Mali. In this year's January, the French intervened militarily at the request of Malian military officer Amadou Sanogo, leader of the 2012 coup d'état. Troops from other African countries, such as Chad have also been involved in the fighting. By the end of January Mali has claimed the northern part to be retaken.

Now the events of the first week of this year's March may bring a turning point to the war. On the 2nd of March, Chad's president Idriss Deby claimed that his armed forces have killed two of the most feared al-Qaeda commanders within some days only, in the Adrar des Ifoghas Mountains close to the Algerian border.

The first commander likely to have been killed is Abdelhamid Abou Zei, one of the

feared leaders of AQIM. He is believed to be the commander behind many actions of taking European tourists as hostage in order to raise money for AQIM's operations. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the other al-Qaeda commander killed only some days later is said to be the mastermind behind actions such as the hostage-taking at a gas plant in Algeria, this year's January. Analysts say that the action was a message aimed at the West, showing that al-Qaeda is still an alive threat despite the killing of Osama bin Laden. "On Saturday, the 2nd of March, at noon, Chadian armed forces operating in northern Mali completely destroyed a terrorist base" Chad's armed forces reported. Belmokhtar is likely to be among the dead.



Tuareg nomads in the south of Algeria. Photo: Garrondo [Wikimedia Commons]



Mokhtar Belmokhtar

However, the deaths have not yet been confirmed. In the case of Abou Zeid, DNA samples have been taken from his family members to be able to recognize the remains found in the mountains. "It's probable, but it's only probable" French top commander Édouard Guillaud told Europe-1. Belmokhtar, who is often referred as "one-eye" because of an earlier war injury, is still rumoured to be alive on the internet's Jihadist forums.

The deaths, if confirmed, may weaken the Islamist forces but it could also be fatal for the seven French hostages believed to be

held in Northern Mali. Andrew Lebovich, a local analyst says that the killing of the two commanders within such a short amount of time "will likely have an impact on militant operations."

A French soldier has also been killed during the same fights clearing out caves where the Islamist rebels had taken refuge after withdrawing to the mountains. The 26-year-old paratrooper died in one of the most severe fights France has carried out in Mali since January, French defence minister said. Col Thierry Burkhard, army spokesman claimed the enemy to be a "fanatical adversary".

On the 4th of March, William Hague, British Foreign Secretary travelled to the West African country to meet Mali's president and prime minister for talks. Britain and the United States are hoping that Mali will be able to hold democratic elections in July. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon emphasized the need to establish a UN peacekeeping force in Mali in order to replace French troops.

**"THE EVENTS IN MARCH MAY BRING
A TURNING POINT TO THE WAR."**

Obama's visit to the Middle East

Barack Obama started a 4-day visit to the Middle East on 20 March. In 2009 he had already made a trip here but back then he approached the Arabic world. Now he had a different strategy due to his first visit ever to Israel as President. He wanted to reach out not just to the politicians but to the ordinary people as well. That's why he had many public events where he urged the people of Israel to recognize the Palestinian's right to self-determination and to pressure their leaders to create a world where the Jews, Christians and Muslims can live together in peace.

On 21 March an official state dinner was held where the President Simon Peres awarded President Obama with the Presidential Medal of Honor. He got this highest civilian honor for the support of building the Iron Dome which gives protection against missiles. In his acceptance speech Obama said that the United States of America will always be an ally of Israel. The most important goals for the country are to make peace and avoid isolation.

He also visited West Bank and Ramallah where he pointed out that Israel could just negotiate with a partner who does not want its destruction. But in the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and in the

Prime Minister Salam Fayyad he sees true negotiation partners for Israel. He also expressed his wish that the Palestinian kids should have an own state where they can live in peace just as his daughters do.

He also worked on to bring the other goal closer as he brokered the rapprochement between Israel and Turkey. Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, called Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the President of Turkey, and officially apologised for the death of 9 Turkish citizens. The incident happened in a naval-raid in 2010 on a Gaza bound flotilla. After the United Nations' report on the incident Turkey suspended the diplomatic relations with Israel. Back then Israel did not want to apologise because it would have made them guilty. But now the new strategy for Israel is to avoid isolation. So Israel's Prime Minister made this gesture to the Turkish people and from now on they could face the threat of Iran together.

Obama had also a meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan whom he agreed to give \$ 200 million financial aid to cope with the Syrian refugees. He also talked about that they need to prevent Syria from becoming a nest of extremists. He closed his visit to the Middle East with a trip to the ancient city of Petra.

Kurds in Turkey: steps towards peace

Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdish movement in Turkey calls for ceasefire after thirty years of fighting for Kurdish homeland. Since 1984, the conflict has claimed more than 40,000 victims. The PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) is now recognised as a terrorist organization by the international community, and its symbols have been banned in Turkey.



Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Photo: Random [Wikimedia Commons]

Öcalan, who has been serving a life sentence for treason for fourteen years now, is still considered to be the main leader and decision maker of the Kurds. Government talks began last year, and peace efforts are being made in order to bring an end to the war. Many attempts of ceasefire have failed, but now, as Turkey aims for a leading role in the Middle East and also wishes to join the European Union, the conflict must be ended.

On the 13th of March, Kurdish rebels freed eight Turkish hostages, who had been held in captivity for two years in Northern Iraq. Turkish president Abdullah Gül welcomed the move with joy. This step is part of a government-led initiative to bring an end to the war. In a message presented by Kurdish politicians, Öcalan said he would make a historical announcement for the Kurdish New Year, 21st of March.

On the 20th of March explosions hit the headquarters of the governing AK Party (Justice and Development Party) and the Turkish Ministry of Justice in Ankara. The AK Party building was hit by a bomb on the 7th floor, where Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has an office. The Ministry was hit by two hand grenades later. No-one was reported to be injured at the party headquarters, but one person was

wounded at the Ministry. No group took responsibility for the explosions. A banned Marxist group is believed to have committed the attacks, but the PKK was also linked to the event as in the past days it had been present more frequently in the media due to the steps taken towards peace.

The call for ceasefire was announced during the Kurdish New Year celebrations in Diyarbakir, on the 21st of March. "We have reached the point where weapons should be silent and ideas and politics should speak," Öcalan wrote. He also ordered the fighters of PKK to withdraw from Turkish territories, back to Northern Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were present at the celebration to hear the message. The announcement was read out in both Kurdish and Turkish, and was broadcasted live on Turkish television. Öcalan described the forthcoming era as a start to a "different", "democratic struggle". "A new phase in our struggle is beginning. Now a door is opening to a phase where we are moving from armed resistance to an era of democratic political struggle," Öcalan wrote.



Newroz celebration in Istanbul. Photo: Bertil Videt [Wikimedia Commons]

There was a huge applause in the crowd when the announcement was finished, but some people in the audience were sceptical, saying that attempts of ceasefire have already failed many times. More hopeful others say that this is not simply a call for technical ceasefire itself, it has to be more than that. Some of the Turkish media, including Hürriyet columnist Fatih Cekirge describes the announcement as "a historical chance", while on Twitter a trending statement says #DiyarbakirdaTarihiRezillik, meaning "Historical Disgrace in Diyarbakir."

"AS TURKEY AIMS FOR A LEADING ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ALSO WISHES TO JOIN THE EUROPEAN UNION, THE CONFLICT MUST BE ENDED"

Withdrawal from Afghanistan

United States Secretary of State John Kerry visited Afghanistan on the 25th of March to meet President Hamid Karzai in order to discuss recent points of political strain. Several topics of mutual interest have been discussed, such as Karzai's worries about America's respect towards the sovereignty of Afghanistan. In a news conference in Kabul, Kerry said that both the US and Afghanistan were "on the same page"



Hamid Karzai. Photo: ISAF Headquarters Public Affairs Office [Flickr]

about negotiations with the Taliban. The visit also coincided with the United States' handover of the Bagram military prison to Afghanistan.

However, the results of the talks described as "positive" by Karzai follow a rather unpleasant chain of events. The US agreed last year to hand responsibility of the prison with about 3,000 detainees to Afghanistan last year. Nonetheless, the final transfer ceremony was cancelled in September by General Joseph Dunford, the head of international forces in Afghanistan, because Karzai did not agree with the whole transfer deal. The Afghan government had raised concerns about the US detaining more than 600 Afghan individuals after the agreement took place in March 2012. The incident was quite embarrassing for both sides because US defence secretary Chuck Hagel was about to pay his first official visit to the country. By now, after months of negotiation, agreement has been reached.

On the 25th of March, before the formal handover ceremony of the Bagram prison, Hagel spoke to Karzai on the phone. "The secretary welcomed president Karzai's commitment that the transfer will be carried out in a way that assures the safety of the Afghan people and coalition forces, by keeping dangerous individuals detained

in a secure and humane manner in accordance with Afghan law,” Pentagon spokesman said. The US promised to provide advisers to the army of Afghanistan along with 39 million dollars of funding. After the handover, the facility was renamed to the Afghan National Detention Facility at Parwan. “The transfer highlights an increasingly confident, capable and sovereign Afghanistan” – General Dunford said.

According to the agreement, about fifty detainees of the non-Afghan nationals remain under custody of the US. The real database of the detainees has never been revealed. Non-governmental organizations in Afghanistan are worried about the treatment of detainees under Afghan control, saying there have not been sufficient reforms of the prison system.

Sadly, the day following Kerry's visit, the police station of eastern Afghan city Jalalabad was shaken by a Taliban suicide attack. Five police officers have been killed and thirteen were wounded, including seven civilians.

Meanwhile, Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith has come to the decision of shutting down the main Australian military camp in Afghanistan until the end of this



*An abandoned Russian T-55B Tank lies in ruin in a spot near Bagram.
Photo: Scott T. Sturkol [USAF]*

year. The order that ends twelve years of military operation is part of the plan to hand over control of security to Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Smith describes the decision as “confident”, also “necessary, logical and natural”. Chief of the Defence Force David Hurley said that corruption and tribal fights will continue to be a part of the country's life. Smith responded by pointing out that the International Security Assistance Force cannot leave Afghanistan a “perfect society”. “The risk is different but nonetheless there is still a risk,” he said. The international community hopes that after the handover of control to Afghanistan, democratic elections will be held.

New Chinese president visits African countries

On 14 March Xi Jinping was elected as Chinese President during the 12th National Congress in Beijing. Just few hours later he already had a phone call with Barack Obama and they discussed subjects such as cyber security and North Korea. Eight days after his installation, Xi launched his first presidential tour. His first destination was Russia which shows that he follows his predecessor's foreign policy. Hu's first move as President was also to visit Russia in order to make good diplomatic relations and to make deals on energy supplies. Xi's visit had all these purposes but it had a great symbolic meaning as well. It shows to the world, and especially to the United States, that they will make joint efforts to protect their regional interests through tighter diplomatic ties.

After the flourishing time what President Xi had spent in Russia he continued his presidential tour in Africa, at first in Tanzania. Some criticised China for exploiting the African countries. So Xi stated during his visit that he thinks about the African countries as equal partners despite of China's attempt to be a major power. For his country the Sino-African relationship will be always important. He promised financial aid, technical support and scholarship for the Tanzanian.

His next stop was in South Africa where he attended a summit meeting of the so-called BRICS emerging countries: Brazil,

Russia, India, China and South Africa. These countries decided to establish a joint bank which can be a rival for World Bank and IMF. President Xi and Jacob Zuma, President of South Africa negotiated about bilateral ties in agriculture and industry.



President Xi Jinping

His final stop was to the Republic of Congo to deepen the friendship between the two countries. China is already the largest trading partner of Congo. During his two-day visit he signed 11 deals worth millions of dollars. These projects will allow the African country to make developments in several areas such as infrastructure, communication and banking.

This presidential tour was followed by more attention than any other former presidential tours because of the president's wife, Peng Liyuan, who is a professional singer. Their lifestyle is becoming part of the Chinese dream and she became in few days as iconic in her country as Michelle Obama in the USA.

Financial crisis in Cyprus

Cyprus had been struggling to save the country's economic conditions for months since the collapse of major financial institutions and working on different options to propose the bailout package to save the country's key banks. Eurozone finance ministers and the International Monetary Fund on 15th March 2013 agreed to a 10 billion euro bailout for Cyprus, which became the fifth Eurozone member to be saved from bankruptcy. Under the deal, bank deposits of more than €100,000 will be hit with a 9.9% one-off levy. Under that threshold the levy drops to 6.75%. At the same time, a "withholding tax" will be imposed on interest on bank deposits while corporate tax will be raised from 10 percent to 12.5.

Further measures include bank restructuring, a "bail-in" of junior bondholders (where some of their debt will be turned into less valuable equity) and the increase of the taxes on capital income. Similarly bail-in means it will allow the financial institutions such as banks in the case of Cyprus to protect the remaining shareholders rather than collapsing completely, it might be hard as the pressure from the depositors are mounting day by day and giving tough time to the policy makers. Cypriot politicians were

working to cut the levy on small depositors to 3% or less ahead of a crucial parliamentary vote, which was delayed some days. It was also agreed that Cyprus' banks would stay closed until the decision will be carried out. Germany applauded the Cypriot deal, but Russian President Vladimir Putin called a proposed tax in Cyprus on bank deposits "unfair, unprofessional and dangerous".



Bank of Cyprus offices in Nicosia. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

On 19th March, Cypriot MPs rejected the bailout terms in parliament, with more than half of the country's legislators voting against a controversial bank levy, and 19 MPs choosing to abstain. Cyprus appeared to turn to Russia for help, with the Cypriot finance ministry saying its boss had gone to Moscow. Government sources also said the

Cypriot government was considering asking Middle East investors for help. Later on 22nd March Cyprus's options narrowed after Russia spurned a bid for a loan and German lawmakers dismissed the Cypriot government's latest rescue proposals. That



left the troika of international creditors to hammer out fresh terms with President Nicos Anastasiades's coalition focusing on the fate of Cyprus's ailing banks.

The BBC's Steve Rosenberg in Moscow says suspicion has been growing in Russia that Europe is using the banking crisis to target Russian money in Cyprus. This could be one of the reasons that Russia rejected to help further to save country from deep financial crisis in the future. Beside that Michael Meister, Deputy Parliamentary Leader of Germany mentioned in one interview to BBC Radio 4's "Today" program that "Cyprus is living in an illusion", and further told. "They have to restructure the whole economy, restructure the banking sector and until now I don't see the Cyprus people and politicians agreeing on this."

“CYPRUS BECAME THE FIFTH EUROZONE MEMBER TO BE SAVED FROM BANKRUPTCY”

■ News in Brief

Defence issues

Final phase of European missile shield concept scrapped by US

■ The fourth and final phase of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) for missile defence has been scrapped by US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel. The speech was delivered on the 15th of March in the Pentagon, announcing four steps to be taken in order to keep up with the recent nuclear developments of Iran and North Korea. Resources will have to be restructured to complete the new plan, causing the deployment of the missile shield in East Europe to be delayed to at least 2022. The interceptors were to have been installed in Poland to fight medium- and intermediate-range missiles. After the announcement, Hagel emphasized the strong commitment of the US to keep NATO developments in Europe ongoing.



Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announces a change in the U.S. missile defense deployment during a Pentagon press briefing on March 15, 2013.

Russia flexes military muscle



*"Moskva" - guided missile cruiser of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea, Sevastopol bay.
Photo: George Chernilevsky*

■ Russia surprised the international community by launching war games in the Black Sea without prior notice. Vladimir Putin ordered large-scale air and naval maneuvers to be performed. NATO pointed out the need for partners to notify each other when planning to launch war games, but in this case Russia was not obliged to do that. Meanwhile, Putin also announced the plan to gradually increase the number of soldiers in the Russian army, drafting more than 150,000 men into the armed forces until the 15th of July this year. Putin plans to pump up the number of contract servicemen to 240,000 by the end of 2013.

■ News in Brief

Ethnic and religious conflicts

Netanyahu apologises to Turkey

■ Benjamin Netanyahu has apologised to Turkey for the commando raid that was carried out in May 2010 against a Turkish-led international aid flotilla trying to breach the Gaza blockade. The attack claimed the lives of nine activists. The incident led to an international scandal and it has soured the relations between the two nations. Now, at the end of March Netanyahu expressed regret over injuries and loss of lives, and agreed to compensate the families of the victims. Recep Tayyip Erdogan accepted the apology "in the name of Turkish people".



The Mavi Marmara vessel in May 2010. Photo: Free Gaza Movement [Flickr]

Violent attack against Christian community in Pakistan



The St. Patrick's Cathedral in Karachi

■ About two hundred Christian homes were torched in the Lahore area of Pakistan. The Badami Bagh community suffered violent attacks by a Muslim mob after a blasphemy complaint made against Sawan Masih, a young Christian man. The arrest of the alleged blasphemer did not prove to satisfy the outraged Muslim mob of about 3,000; on the 9th of March about two hundred Christian buildings, including homes, shops and churches were set on fire in Lahore. Since many Christian residents had fled the area before the attack, there was no loss of life, though some were injured and many have become homeless. After the incident, Christians all across the country have taken it to the streets, demanding actions to be taken in order to protect the Christian community in Pakistan.

■ News in Brief

International Relations

Arab League summit in Doha

■ The Arab League summit kicked off in Qatar's capital, Doha. The summit, opened by Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, welcomed Moaz al-Khatib, the president of the Syrian National Coalition to represent Syria. In his speech Khatib raised awareness of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria and requested further help from the League. Khatib announced his resignation from the coalition earlier, expressing his wish to work more freely. In an interview before the opening he denied the rumours of the coalition's collapse: "What's happening within the coalition is normal. It's just like what happens in parliaments around the world", he said.



Hamid Karzai in Qatar for peace talks



Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

■ Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan travelled to Doha to meet Qatari emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassem Al Thani. "Issues of mutual interest" were discussed, including opening an office for the Taliban in Doha. Even though the circumstances are already set for peace talks, the Taliban still refuse to negotiate with Karzai, who demands the Taliban to break all ties with the al-Qaeda and give up violence. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said: "The opening of the Taliban office in Qatar is not related to Karzai, it is a matter between the Taliban and the Qatar government."

■ News in Brief

Bilateral relations

143 rebels dead in South Sudan

■ South Sudan army officials said 143 rebels were killed in Jonglei when South Sudan's army took over an airstrip at the end of March. Not only the rebels of David Yau Yau's group, but twenty SPLA soldiers were also killed and seventy were wounded. According to SPLA spokesman, the airstrip located in Pibor County had been a significant port of arms and ammunition supplies by Khartoum for Yau Yau's rebels. Khartoum denies the allegations of supporting the rebels. The fights have caused a significant rise in the number of people fleeing to Kenya this year, says the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Bolivia takes Chile to the International Court of Justice

■ On the 23rd of March, Evo Morales, president of Bolivia has announced his decision of filing a complaint against Chile at the International Court of Justice, the Hague, to demand access to the Pacific Ocean. In an 1879 war Bolivia lost about 400 kilometres of coastline together with 120,000 square kilometres of land. Bolivia has never been able to accept its loss. The two countries failed to reach agreement as Chile continuously refused to grant Bolivia a sovereign access to the sea. Now, after years of preparation, Bolivia is ready to present its historical, economic and legal arguments in front of the ICJ, hoping to become a maritime nation again.

China attacks Vietnamese boat on disputed waters

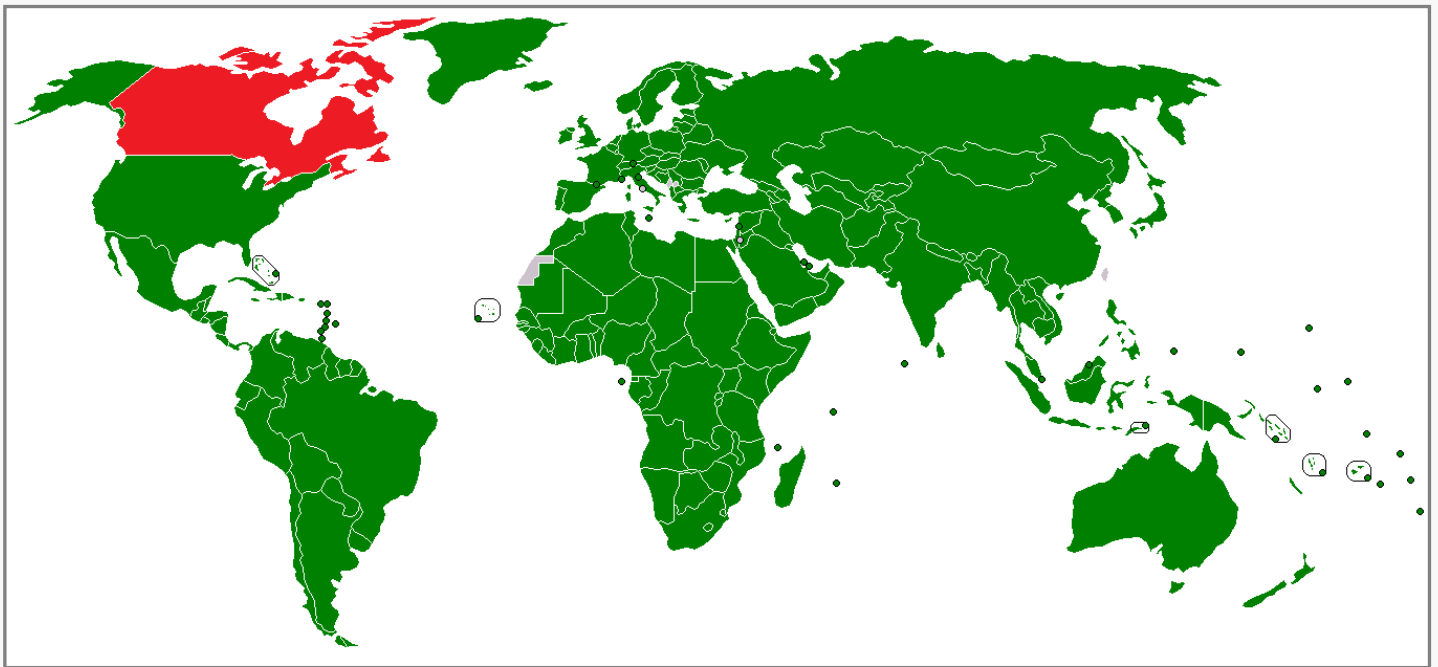
■ On the 20th of March, a Chinese patrol ship chased and fired at a Vietnamese fishing boat in the South China Sea. The incident happened near the disputed Xisha (Paracel) Islands, which are claimed by both countries. Since the 1974 war China controls the Islands, therefore Beijing claimed the action to be "necessary and legitimate". Vietnam protests strongly, demanding urgent compensation for the Vietnamese fishermen. Earlier in March, a similar incident was reported when two Vietnamese boats were chased out of disputed waters by Chinese ships. More emphasis has been put on guarding disputed waters since the National Assembly of Vietnam released "Vietnamese Law of the Sea" in June 2012, stating the Xisha and the Nansha Islands to be under Vietnamese jurisdiction.

■ News in Brief

Environment

Canada pulls out of UNCCD agreement

■ Canada's Conservative government decided to leave the UN Convention to Combat Desertification agreement. UNCCD is a convention established in 1994 after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to fight desertification in Africa. Canada became a member among the first in 1994. By now, every UN nation has signed the convention, so the withdrawal makes Canada the only nation to pull out of the agreement. According to the International Cooperation Minister, Julian Fantino, Canada cannot afford such a costly membership without seeing visible results. The withdrawal surprised both the international community and Canadian civilians.



State parties to United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.. Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Institute for Cultural Relations Policy



<http://culturalrelations.org>