

News in Brief

Hugo Chávez, the charismatic President of Venezuela, has died at the age of 58 after 14 years in power. He had been seriously ill with cancer for more than a year, and had several operations in Cuba to try and arrest the spread of the disease. Mr Chávez, with his personal brand of Latin American radical socialism, which owed as much to Simón Bolívar, José Martí, and Che Guevara as Marx and Lenin, transformed the nature of his nation. The success of his policies – taking key industries into public ownership, building hospitals and expanding schools – inspired a left-wing revival across Latin America. He was a fierce critic of US imperialism in the region – a legacy of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 – and neo-liberal economic policies. Francisco Dominguez of the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign said: “He led the progressive transformation of Venezuela by lifting millions of its citizens from poverty – standing against social exclusion, marginalisation and institutional repression – restoring to them a long-overdue dignity. Under President Chávez’s leadership, his government’s policies improved the life of ordinary Venezuelans as no other government had ever done in the history of that South American nation. He will symbolise, for decades to come, the aspirations of dignity, sovereignty, justice, and a better life, as fully empowered citizens, for people all around the world.”

Nicos Anastasiades has won the run-off to become President of Cyprus. He now faces the daunting task of negotiating a 17 billion euro bailout with his partners in the eurozone. Mr Anastasiades backed a UN plan in 2004 to reunify the island; it was accepted by Turkish Cypriots in the north but rejected by hardline Greek Cypriots in the south.

Turkey is preparing for another push for membership of the EU. Although support has fallen from 70 per cent of Turks when talks began in 2005 to just 33 per cent last year, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan still regards Brussels as his big prize. Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey’s Foreign Minister, said: “No force can tear us away from Europe.”

New figures released by Sunderland Football Club reveal that David Miliband, Labour MP for South Shields, and a fervent Arsenal fan, has earned £125,000 for 15 days’ work since he was made a vice-president of the club in February 2011.

Keith Richmond

Italy

Deadlock follows Italian election with no winners

by Kate Holman in Reggio Calabria

Italy remains in political deadlock, with no sign of progress towards a new national government, amid growing fears in Brussels about the country’s economic stability.

More than a week after the electoral earthquake that split Italian voters three ways – and turned his Five Star protest movement into the country’s biggest single party – comedian Beppe Grillo was in no mood to collaborate with either of Italy’s two mainstream alliances, Pier Luigi Bersani’s centre-left Partito Democratico, which won most seats in the Chamber of Deputies, or Silvio Berlusconi’s right-wing Popolo della Libertà.

President Giorgio Napolitano stepped in to call for all parties to show responsibility. “We all have a duty to safeguard the general interest and the international image of our country,” he warned.

Rejecting both a minority government and new elections, he floated the option of a second, non-elected, technocrat administration, involving either former Prime Minister Mario Monti – who was decisively rejected at the polls – or the Governor of the Bank of Italy, Ignazio Visco.

Mr Grillo has stubbornly rejected all



Beppe Grillo: sound and fury, but what does it signify?

advances, and offered instead to vote for any individual legislative proposal with which his movement agrees – not an approach likely to deliver long-term, stable government. But, on election night, the fresh-faced enthusiasm of his youthful *Grillini* offered a sharp contrast to the world-weary cynicism of veteran politicians, some of them tainted by scandal. According to Mr Grillo, Italy will now have the youngest MPs in Europe.

Austerity, corruption and voters’ disenchantment led to what commentators called a clear vote against a political system that has been incapable of reforming itself. Nowhere were the stakes higher and the sense of betrayal stronger than in the south where, after decades of misrule by Rome and exploitation by the Mafia, poverty, unemployment and social deprivation

are tightening their terrible grip.

Young people in Calabria, where the crisis has cost tens of thousands of jobs and youth unemployment stands at 40 per cent, were not all elated at the success of the Five Star Movement. “Beppe Grillo screams a lot, but proposes nothing that is concretely possible”, explained 24-year-old student Alessandra Guarnieri.

She is pessimistic about getting any kind of job when she completes her law degree. “Young people here are left in a worse position than before. The prospects are frightening. It’s awful to think about having to leave your country to find work.”

“I was shocked that people still voted for Berlusconi”, she added. “What more does he have to do? I thought my generation, especially, would have understood by now.”

Free Trade

Rights at work must be key at talks – unions

by Tony Burke

Just days after the announcement by Barack Obama that the United States and the European Union were to open discussions on a free trade agreement worth trillions of dollars, trade unions on both sides of the Atlantic have said that employment rights have to be a key issue on the agenda.

American media gave the story a higher profile than the European press and were quick to point out that in countries such as Germany and France workers enjoyed shorter working hours, better employment protection, statutory works councils and workers’ representatives on management boards – which spooked US employers into immediately opposing stronger

labour laws. Although quick to support the negotiations to create a \$5 trillion free trade area, the US Chamber of Commerce said: “It would be inappropriate to try to alter US labour law through the back door”.

The European Trade Union Confederation and the TUC in Britain already have well developed policies to ensure employment rights are high on the agenda during discussions on FTAs.

In the past, US unions have opposed trade agreements negotiated by both Republican and Democratic administrations which have provided little in the way of employment rights but opened the US to cheaper labour costs, driving down standards, despite having pro-worker clauses and

wording in agreements.

The ETUC will lobby the EU negotiating team to press the US to strengthen its own labour laws in the context of the free trade talks, said Owen Herrstadt, director of trade and globalisation for the International Association of Machinists. And with a labour-friendly White House, unions would have a president predisposed to helping them improve labour standards working on their side.

Leo Gerard of the United Steelworkers added: “The similarity in our economic development level and economic systems could help reduce the downward pressure on wages and working conditions. An agreement, properly designed and implemented, could be a force for progress.”

Bangladesh

Nationwide rampage

by Ansar Ahmed Ullah

After the sentencing to death of Delwar Hossain Sayedee, one of the leaders of Jamaat-e-Islam, who used to preach at the East London Mosque, for crimes against humanity including genocide, murder, rape, arson, and looting during the nine-month war of independence with Pakistan in 1971, his followers went on a countrywide rampage.

Jamaat-e-Islam and its youth wing Shibir targeted homes and places of worship belonging to the Hindu and Buddhist minority communities traditionally considered to be supporters of the secular Awami League, currently in government.

They wrecked six temples, including one Buddhist, and torched houses and business establishments of Hindus in Noakhali, Gaibandha, Chittagong, Rangpur, Sylhet, and Chapainawabganj.

Police in Bangladesh said that hours after Delwar Hossain Sayedee was sentenced, his supporters, equipped with firearms, iron rods and kerosene, set fire to an Harishiva temple and eight houses in Rajganj. In the port city of Chittagong, they attacked two Hindu-dominated localities and set ablaze a Buddhist temple at Satkania upazila.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called on all concerned to act with respect for the rule of law, to stop the violence and to express their views peacefully.

Kenya

Leader faces ICC charges

by Keith Richmond

Uhuru Kenyatta, who faces trial at the International Criminal Court on charges relating to the post-poll violence in Kenya five years ago, led his main rival, outgoing Prime Minister Raila Odinga, as counting began in the presidential election. Musalia Mudavadi trailed a very distant third. More than 1,000 people were killed in 2007 and 2008 after Mr Odinga said he had been cheated of victory by President Mwai Kibaki, who is stepping down after two terms in office.

The EU has warned it will have only “limited contact” with a president who faces charges at the ICC while the US told voters in Kenya that “choices have consequences”.