



Australian News

NEWS VIA SATELLITE from the WORLD'S FOREMOST NEWSWIRES

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TEAMtalk SatNews

WORLD IN BRIEF

Blair visits Afghanistan

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan - British Prime Minister Tony Blair left Afghanistan early on Tuesday after a lightning visit, the first by a Western leader in decades. It was the last stop on his tour of South Asia, aimed to help ease the tensions between India and Pakistan. Blair insisted on Tuesday that meaningful dialogue and an "absolute rejection of terrorism" was the only way to end the tense military stand off.

Suicide blast in Kandahar

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan - One of the seven Arab al-Qaeda fighters barricaded in a hospital ward in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar blew himself up on Tuesday, a security official said.

Bush focuses on economy

WASHINGTON - US President George W. Bush vowed on Monday to include a stalled economic stimulus package in his forthcoming federal budget as he met with top advisers to chart a course out of recession.

Arms enquiry gathers speed

RAMALLAH, West Bank - Palestinian information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo on Tuesday said senior security officers would head an inquiry committee to look into Israeli charges of Palestinian weapons smuggling.

Euro plaudits continue

PARIS - Last week's launch of euro cash continued to draw praise from European officials on Monday as the currency was buffeted by an Italian political row, criticism by French and Italian banks and weakness on the currency exchange markets.

PM expected to tap deputy

ROME - Italy's press on Tuesday predicted Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi would tap his deputy, a post-fascist, as next foreign minister in an appointment being watched by all of Europe.

IMF arrives in Argentina

BUENOS AIRES - A team from the International Monetary Fund arrived in Buenos Aires on Monday to assess new emergency measures adopted in a bid to salvage Argentina's shattered economy.

UK minister's baby girl dies

LONDON - The baby daughter of British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown died Monday at the age of only 10 days after suffering a brain haemorrhage, the hospital treating her in Scotland announced.

Archbishop set to retire

LONDON - George Carey, spiritual leader of around 70 million Anglicans worldwide, is to retire as archbishop of Canterbury later this year, a spokesman at Lambeth Palace, his London residence, said in a statement on Tuesday.

Residents allowed home after fire threat abates

SYDNEY - Residents of townships on the NSW south coast have been allowed to return home as the bushfire threat in the area subsides.

NSW Rural Fire Service spokesman John Winter said all but the residents of Fishermans Paradise returned home on Tuesday morning after being evacuated to the Sussex Inlet RSL on Monday afternoon because of the fire threat.

"The majority went home after (fire services) did an aerial surveillance of the fire," he said.

But authorities remained concerned about fires burning in the south of the state, and the effect weather conditions would have on firefighting efforts, Mr Winter said.

"Our two areas of concern are the fire in the Shoalhaven, particularly as it burns down around the areas of Fishermans Paradise and other areas immediately to

the south of Sussex Inlet," he said. "It is continuing to burn towards Mollmook and that is the cause for some concern.

"There have been a number of spot fires into Narrawallee Nature Reserve - those have been mopped up but we remain concerned about the potential of that fire to spread under the very strong west, nor' westerly winds that are expected again on Tuesday afternoon."

NSW Premier Bob Carr also paid a visit to the south coast on Tuesday to view the fire-affected area at Fishermans Paradise.

With wind gusts of 40 to 60 kilometres per hour and very low levels of humidity, Mr Winter said firefighters could experience ongoing problems with the weather.

"Indeed the high winds on Monday actually suspended some of our water bombing operations because of the way in which the fire was spreading," he said.

WA government calls for national bushfires policy

PERTH - The West Australian government has asked Prime Minister John Howard to develop a national bushfire policy as a result of the bushfire devastation in NSW.

Acting Premier Eric Ripper said on Tuesday that it was ironic that Australia had an agreement to provide firefighting assistance to the United States but did not have a nationally coordinated bushfire strategy.

"While the recent NSW bushfires have clearly demonstrated individual states will respond and assist each other in times of need, there is no formal policy - or strategy - that clearly sets out the arrangements that should apply in such circumstances," Mr Ripper said.

Mr Ripper has written to Mr Howard saying Australia needs a more coordinated approach to the strategic location of bushfire resources.

Victims to get royal visit as helitankers take to sky

SYDNEY - The Duke of York, Prince Andrew, will tour bushfire-ravaged areas of NSW on Wednesday, as Elvis and two new waterbombers The Incredible Hulk and Georgia Peach continue to battle the fire threat on the state's south coast.

Prince Andrew, accompanied by Governor-General Peter Hollingworth, Premier Bob Carr and rural fire chief Phil Koperberg will visit a Blue Mountains street virtually wiped out by the fires that have blackened the state for 15 days.

On a private visit in Australia, Prince Andrew will take time out to meet the residents of Cross Street, Warrimoo, where Mr Carr and Emergency Services Minister Bob Debus spent New Year's Eve and shared a beer with the locals.

Farmers vote to seek compensation or sue NPWS

SYDNEY - Angry NSW farmers voted on Tuesday to seek compensation from the Premier or sue the custodian of the state's national parks over fires which destroyed tracts of farmland.

Farmers believe the National Parks and Wildlife Service was responsible for fires that razed 16,000 hectares of farmland around the Goobang National Park in the state's central west.

NSW Farmers Association president Mal Peters said some farmers had lost up to \$1 million in foregone income because of the fires.

Ruddock gives UN a dressing down over refugee claims

CANBERRA - Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock gave the United Nations a dressing down on Tuesday over calls for Australia to resettle a greater share of refugees from Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has reportedly accepted the refugee claims of most of the 1,118 asylum seekers on Nauru and believes Australia should take the bulk of them.

But the government has declined to place a figure on how many refugees - many of them from last year's Tampa standoff - Australia will accept, calling instead for an international resettlement solution.

Mr Ruddock called the UNHCR's new Australian representative, Michel Gabaudan, to his parliament house office on Tuesday to reprimand him over the UNHCR's public comments on the future of the Nauru asylum seekers.

Australian commander takes over Gulf force

CANBERRA - The Australian Defence Force assumed command on Tuesday of international ships enforcing sanctions on Iraq in the north Arabian Gulf.

ADF spokesman Brigadier Gary Bornholt said the commander of the Royal Australian Navy task group, Captain Allan Du Toit, and his headquarters staff had moved from HMAS Kanimbla to a United States ship to take over command.

The interception force under Captain Du Toit's command includes Australian, US, British and Canadian ships.

GG discusses child abuse with charity

SYDNEY - Governor-General Peter Hollingworth discussed the effects of child abuse with a welfare group on Tuesday, in what child protection advocates described as "too little, too late".

One bushfire victim finds bright side

Bob Malitz may have lost his prized vegetable garden and 13 chooks in the savage bushfires but still has time for a joke.

"At least I don't have to mow the lawn now," he quipped about his blackened garden.

Mr Malitz and his wife managed to save their Bendalong home on the NSW south coast despite flames licking at their backdoor on Monday. It took 45 minutes for hard-pressed fire crews to make it to their street so the pair braved the blaze alone.

At the end of the battle their house had been spared, but their 13 chickens and the vegetable garden had been destroyed.

"The flames came from nowhere," Mr Malitz recounted on Tuesday.

"My wife described it as devil's brimstone, they were horizontal flames."

The Governor-General has been surrounded by controversy over allegations of a cover-up of child sex abuse at an Anglican school in his diocese while he was archbishop of Brisbane.

A patron of the Kids First Foundation, Dr Hollingworth met with its directors on Tuesday to discuss how he could help reduce the devastating effects of child abuse.

NAB employee in court on \$1.2m embezzlement charges

MELBOURNE - A National Australia Bank employee allegedly pocketed \$1.2 million in false loans for himself while working at the bank's Hawthorn branch and other locations in suburban Melbourne.

William Thomas Connellan, 44, of Camberwell, who worked as a loans officer in the bank's personal banking section until his arrest last Friday, appeared briefly in the Melbourne Magistrates Court on Tuesday.

It is alleged that over a two-year period, Connellan created more than 50 false loan applications worth \$1.2 million.

Qantas workers strike on eve of peace talks

MELBOURNE - Qantas maintenance workers walked off the job in Melbourne on Tuesday, just 24 hours before peace talks in Sydney tomorrow.

Qantas chief executive Geoff Dixon is expected to attend Wednesday's pay negotiations in Sydney after a fiery break-up of talks in Melbourne before Christmas.

More than 300 workers from the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Australian Workers Union stopped work on Tuesday afternoon after Qantas stood down an employee for refusing to complete a job.

Rescue of ice-stranded expeditioners completed

HOBART - Australian Antarctic expeditioners trapped for weeks by ice were rescued on Tuesday by helicopter.

The Australian Antarctic Division said the choppers finished shuttling 34 expeditioners from the Polar Bird to the icebreaker Aurora Australis early on Tuesday morning - after snow storms slowed the weekend operation.

The Aurora is now heading for Australia's Mawson station in Antarctica - and is due in three to five days.

The Polar Bird was trapped in ice in Prydz Bay in mid-December while on its way to Mawson.

TV reporter dismissal case resolved

BRISBANE - Lawyers for a television reporter sacked for allegedly making comments to Ian Thorpe about his large feet reached a confidential resolution with Channel Seven on Tuesday in her unfair dismissal case.

Former Channel Seven reporter Nikki Voss, 29, was sent to interview the world champion swimmer in a hotel room on the Gold Coast on November 23 for a story about his business interests, the Daily Telegraph reported on Tuesday.

Before the interview, Ms Voss allegedly joked about his large, size 17 feet.

The swimmer allegedly took offence at the comment and his management protested to Seven executives.

Jacob's Creek wins gold

ADELAIDE - Australian winemaker Jacob's Creek has won two gold medals at the San Francisco International Wine Competition.

Jacob's Creek won the golden gongs for its 1998 Shiraz and 1998 Shiraz Reserve.

The San Francisco competition, in its 18th year, is the largest such contest in the United States.

Jacob's Creek chief winemaker Phil Laffer said the gold medals were an outstanding achievement for the Barossa Valley based winery.

"This confirms, yet again, the quality of Jacob's Creek, which is steadily becoming one of Australia's truly global wine brands," Mr Laffer said on Tuesday in a statement.

AUSTRALIAN STOCK EXCHANGE

Closing prices by value on Tuesday

BHPBilton	216,491,248	11.20	-0.040
NAB	112,884,672	31.51	-0.307
TelstraCp	80,109,288	5.57	-0.030
CBA	75,555,360	29.99	-0.067
Westpac	67,830,304	15.19	-0.240
ANZ Bank	67,147,872	17.39	-0.410
NormandyM	66,696,480	1.86	+0.010
News Corp	61,064,720	15.48	-0.180
AMP	48,863,956	19.00	-0.200
Mayne N	46,796,136	6.50	-0.170

CURRENCY RATES

Snapshot at 1700 AEDT

	Jan 08	Jan 07
AUD-USD	0.5194-99	0.5194-99
AUD-JPY	68.95-00	67.90-95
AUD-EUR	0.5825-30	0.5789-94
AUD-NZD	1.2175-85	1.2119-29
AUD-GBP	0.3608-13	0.3595-00
EUR-USD	0.8912-17	0.8970-75
USD-JPY	132.70-75	130.69-74
EUR-JPY	118.33-38	117.37-42

FINANCIAL NEWS

Stocks close lower, weighed down by weak blue chips

MELBOURNE - The Australian sharemarket slumped to a softer finish on Tuesday, weighed down across-the-board weakness by blue chip stocks.

The weaker performance, particularly by banks and media stocks, eroded earlier slim gains to lead the benchmark S&P-ASX 200 down 23.9 points to 3423.0.

The all ordinaries index shed 21.1 points to 3364.2, while the all industrials index gave up 39.8 points to 5725.4.

The all resources index slipped four points to 1609.8.

On the Sydney Futures Exchange, the March share price contract fell four points to 3427 - a four point premium to the S&P-ASX 200 - on volume of 8949 contracts.

Dicksons research director Russell Lander said the market still appeared to be in holiday mode.

"I couldn't grab hold of a theme," he said.

S P O R T S N E W S

Kiwis struggle with sun against Australia A

BRISBANE - New Zealand's cricketers braved a blazing Brisbane afternoon but they couldn't contain Australia A's batsmen in the day-night clash at the Gabba on Tuesday.

Australia A made 5-282 from its 50 overs after New Zealand captain Stephen Fleming invited the home team to bat.

With temperatures hitting 37 degrees, the Australia A bowling attack was probably delighted with Fleming's choice.

It looked to backfire when Fleming's opening bowler Shane Bond was taken to hospital suffering heat stress as Australia A surged to 0-80 from 15 overs.

Bond had bowled just four overs when he left the field but New Zealand physiotherapist Dayle Shackel was hopeful he would recover for Friday's opening tri-series clash with Australia in Melbourne.

Bond, a policeman in the cooler climes of Christchurch, also suffered heat problems in India.

He could have also sustained a sore neck if he turned to watch opener Ryan Campbell smack him for a straight six in the eighth over as Australia A scored quickly.

Campbell was eventually out for 46, before his teammates Jimmy Maher (42), Greg Blewett (42) and Simon Katich (47) also fell before their half-centuries.

Captain Darren Lehmann reached 50 but he was run out seconds later going for a second run.

Williams scrambles through while Hingis does it in style

SYDNEY - A rusty Serena Williams took three sets to overpower Anna Kournikova while defending champion Martina Hingis looked razor sharp in her comeback match at the adidas International on Tuesday.

Williams, the world No.6, struggled to find her range against the resurgent Kournikova, whose ranking plummeted as low as 77 while battling a stress fracture in her foot last year.

The fourth seed eventually triumphed 6-2 4-6 6-3 in a centre court match at Homebush Bay lasting two hours.

Hingis crushed American doubles specialist Lisa Raymond 6-1 6-1 in just 46 minutes in her first singles match since undergoing ankle surgery in October.

"I think it is a great start to the new season, especially since I hadn't played in so long," 21-year-old Hingis said.

Davenport withdraws from Australian Open

MELBOURNE - World No.1 Lindsay Davenport has lost her battle to recover from a knee injury in time for the Australian Open.

The 25-year-old American officially withdrew from the opening grand slam tournament of the year on Tuesday because of the right knee injury she suffered during the Sanex Championships in Munich in November.

Davenport had also pulled out of this week's adidas International in Sydney.

"Lindsay's doctor has determined she has cartilage damage in her right knee," Davenport's agent Tony Godsick said from Miami.

"They're exploring the best ways to solve the problem, which might include surgery."

News in brief...

DARWIN - Darwin Lord Mayor George Brown died on Tuesday, six days after he suffered a stroke in his office. Alderman Brown will be remembered for his eccentricity and for promoting the lush green city that Darwin became during his 32 years in local government.

MELBOURNE - Thousands of Victorian bushfire fighters will be treated to a parade in Melbourne, the state government announced on Tuesday, as the last volunteers returned from NSW. A total of 3,065 Country Fire Authority volunteers have been involved in battling the devastating NSW bushfires from Christmas Day.

CANBERRA - A part of Australia's history was wiped out in the Christmas bushfires, with up to 1,000 trees planted under the direction of Walter Burley Griffin now charred ruins. The cluster of Roman Cypress trees, known as pencil pines, exploded in the December fires that raged through plantations around Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra.

SYDNEY - The people of East Timor will have access to public transport for the first time in 25 years thanks to Australian assistance. The NSW government officially handed over five of its public buses to the people of East Timor on Tuesday.

MELBOURNE - Welfare groups said on Tuesday that many of the 85,000 who illegally claimed welfare payments each year had accidentally broken the rules because they were too complex. Community Services Minister Senator Amanda Vanstone revealed on Tuesday that taxpayers had been saved more than \$550 million in welfare payments that were either cancelled or recouped from cheats between 1999 and 2001.

ADELAIDE - More kangaroos must be killed to maintain manageable numbers, the South Australian Farmers Federation said on Tuesday. SA Farmers Federation natural resources policy committee chairman Kent Martin said kangaroo numbers were gradually reaching unsustainable levels.

CANBERRA - The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service remains on full alert for a possible outbreak of foot and mouth disease (FMD) after outbreaks throughout Asia. The CSIRO this week issued a new warning to watch for FMD after recent outbreaks in South-East Asia.

WEATHER IN AUSTRALIA

Observations at 1815 on Tuesday

	Max	Min
MELBOURNE	24	14
SYDNEY	35	20
ADELAIDE	20	14
BRISBANE	34	25
TOWNSVILLE	33	26
CANBERRA AP	29	13
HOBART	17	12
DARWIN	33	28
ALICE SPRINGS	33	13
PERTH AP	34	9
BROOME	32	27

Pratt tames swirling wind and Frenchwoman

HOBART - Australian Nicole Pratt overcame swirling winds and big-hitting Frenchwoman Virginie Razzano in the first round of the Tasmanian International women's tennis tournament on Tuesday.

The eighth-seeded Pratt beat Razzano 6-2 6-3 to become the third seeded player into the second round of the rain-disrupted tournament.

Second-seed Argentinian Paola Suarez and American fifth seed Meilen Tu also had comfortable wins.

Suarez beat Elena Tatarkova of Ukraine 6-3 6-3 and Tu was too strong for Cara Black of Zimbabwe, winning 6-4 6-3.

The only upset came when German Martina Muller defeated sixth seeded South African Joannette Kruger 6-3 7-6 (7-3).

Pierce comeback on track

HOBART - Mary Pierce's comeback stayed on track when she overcame rain interruptions, a cold wind and hamstring problems to cruise into the second round of the Tasmanian International women's tennis tournament on Tuesday.

Pierce, a dual Grand Slam winner whose ranking has blown out to 129 after missing most of last year with a serious back injury, had too much power for American Kristina Brandi, winning 6-0 6-3.

The Frenchwoman said she was happy with her win in the first official tournament of her comeback.

Pierce played with her left thigh heavily strapped to protect a hamstring strain suffered in an exhibition tournament in Hong Kong last week.

But she had far too much firepower, especially on serve and forehand, for Brandi.

Ivanisevic, Safin and Rusedski through

AUCKLAND - Wimbledon champion Goran Ivanisevic and top seed Marat Safin won their opening matches at the \$725,600 Heineken Open men's tennis tournament on Tuesday, but third seed Jan-Michael Gambill made an early exit.

Pollock hopes for one-day turnaround

Shaun Pollock knows one day doesn't make a summer.

But the South African captain hopes the looming one-day series against Australia and New Zealand will bring some joy to his beleaguered charges.

Pollock said on Tuesday that the one-day tournament could help South Africa partly erase the fresh and bitter memories of a three-nil flogging by Australia in the recent Test series.

Arriving on Tuesday to prepare for Thursday's day-night fixture against Australia A at Adelaide Oval, Pollock was confident the Proteas' wounds opened by Australia in the Test series had healed.

"We were disappointed with the way we played in the Test series but one-day cricket is a completely different thing," Pollock said.

"It has been nice to have a few days off and now we are going to turn our attention to really putting in a quality performance.

"We have played good one-day cricket over the years, we always pride ourselves as being a good one-day unit.

"I don't see any reason why we can't pick ourselves up again."

Another first round loser was defending champion and eighth seed Dominik Hrbaty of Slovakia, beaten by a qualifier.

Russia's Safin, the 2000 US Open winner and former world No.1, needed three sets to beat wildcard Michael Chang of the United States 2-6 6-3 6-4, but said later he was happy with the way he played.

Croatian second seed Ivanisevic beat Finland's world No.61 Jarkko Nieminen 7-6 (7-5) 6-3, serving 18 aces in the match and winning 94 percent of the points off his first serve.

Ice cream exhibition could be Hewitt's fitness test

ADELAIDE - A humble exhibition tournament named after an ice cream could be the scene for Lleyton Hewitt to test his recovery from chicken pox.

Hewitt's manager said on Tuesday that if the world No.1 played any matches this week to test his fitness for the Australian Open, it would be at the Peter's Drumstick Challenge at the Boroondara tennis centre in suburban Melbourne.

Manager John McCurdy said a final decision on whether Hewitt would play matches this week had yet to be made.

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Meanwhile, Hewitt achieved another first in tennis on Tuesday, becoming the first Australian player to have a postage stamp released in his honour.

Australia Post recognised his rapid rise to the pinnacle of world tennis with a 45c stamp featuring his face.

"This is just a great honour and something that will remain with me for the rest of my life," Hewitt said in a statement on Tuesday.

Richmond suspends Royce Vardy until end of Jan

MELBOURNE - AFL club Richmond suspended defender Royce Vardy until the end of January on Tuesday after he was charged with drink-driving, which jeopardised the club's sponsorship deal with the Transport Accident Commission.

The Richmond board will also discuss any further action when Vardy's suspension ends. The TAC was still discussing the issue and had yet to announce whether the sponsorship deal was secure.

Vardy, who has played 22 games with the Tigers, had an alleged blood alcohol reading of 0.14 when arrested on December 29.

The AFL Players Association was considering its response to the announcement.

Bullets apologise for racist spectator

BRISBANE - The Brisbane Bullets have apologised to Adelaide 36ers import Willie Farley over a spectator's racist taunt during Saturday's NBL match at the Brisbane Convention Centre.

Bullets general manager Robert Sibley said on Tuesday that he contacted Farley in Adelaide on Monday night and apologised on behalf of the club.

The racist remark was made to Farley as he left the court at halftime, prompting an investigation by the Bullets administration.

"I told Willie that our club does not condone that kind of behaviour in any way, shape or form," Sibley said in a statement on Tuesday.