



Top News Stories of 2004

December 27, 2004

What will we remember about 2004? President Bush's re-election? "Red" states and "blue" states? The swarm of chirping bugs that descended on the East Coast? The Red Sox overcoming the curse of the Bambino? Historic elections in Afghanistan, or the first gay marriages in Boston and San Francisco?

As we look ahead to 2005, here is a brief review of the major stories of the year gone by.

ON THE HOMEFRONT

Man of the year

George W. Bush beat Democratic challenger, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, in November's heated presidential election. The election was close, and unlike in 2000 President Bush won the popular vote 51 percent to Senator Kerry's 48 percent. The election further tipped the balance of power decisively into the Republican corner in Washington as the party won larger advantages in the Senate and House. Voter turn out rate approached 60 percent, the highest since 1968.

Same-sex marriage

Massachusetts stepped into the debate over gay marriage in February, becoming the first state in the nation to offer court-approved, legal marriage to same-sex couples. The hot-button issue is decided at the state level and some argue that a federal constitutional amendment would best resolve the matter. Several national polls indicate a majority of Americans oppose same-sex marriages, and in the November election 11 states backed referendums making same-sex marriage illegal.

Soaring Oil Prices

In May, oil prices reached the highest levels since the 1990s. The surge in oil prices was caused by a number of factors: soaring demand in the United States and China, the action of speculators, supply bottlenecks at U.S. refineries and instability in oil-producing countries such as Nigeria, Venezuela and Iraq.

Although OPEC, the 11-member organization that produces 40 percent of the world's crude, agree to increase output in June, prices still remain high and consumers will continue to pay more at the pump into 2005.

Former President Ronald Reagan dies

Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, died on June 5 from Alzheimer's-related complications at the age of 93. The nation observed a week of services and tributes in his memory, and he was laid to rest at his presidential library in California after a state funeral in Washington, D.C.

Former President Reagan was both hailed and vilified as one of the preeminent leaders of the conservative movement in the 20th century. When Reagan left office in 1989 he had the highest approval rating of any U.S. president since Franklin Roosevelt.

Hurricane destruction

Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Alex pounded Florida during what has been called the worst hurricane season in years. But the most devastating effects of the storms were felt in Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, where hundreds were killed and millions left homeless. The Caribbean island nations are still struggling to recover.

Flu Vaccine Shortage

Contamination problems at one of two companies that supply flu vaccine to the American market reduced the number of doses available and caused worry of a flu epidemic. The flu kills an estimated 36,000 Americans each year. More than 200,000 people are hospitalized each year due to flu complications.

The shortage caused Americans to take flu-shot trips up to Canada, but as of December, the flu season was milder than expected and more vaccines were made available.

AROUND THE WORLD

War in Iraq

U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq continue to battle a sophisticated insurgency as they proceed with rebuilding the country and instituting a new government.

Terror groups and insurgents took up the grisly practice of kidnapping and beheading foreign workers in a bid to drive away those carrying out reconstruction projects or humanitarian work. In the fall, coalition forces launched an offensive on Fallujah, a suspected insurgent haven.

With the June transfer of authority from the United States to the Iraqi interim government, plans continue for countrywide elections in January 2005.

Afghan Elections

On Oct. 9, Afghans voted for the first time in a democratic election. The U.S.-backed interim leader, Hamid Karzai, emerged as the winner. Remnants of the Taliban regime and the al-Qaida terrorist network had promised to use bombings and assaults to hinder the elections, but the Afghans did not seem deterred.

Karzai now faces an uphill task of stabilizing the country, battling the opium trade and bringing down the power of the warlords.

Genocide in Sudan

The conflict in western Sudan's Darfur region continues despite intervention by the African Union and the threat of U.N.-imposed sanctions. The Sudanese government continues to deny backing the Janjaweed militia, which has been responsible for widespread murder, rape and arson.

In September, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that the atrocities committed in Darfur amount to "genocide." Human rights groups estimate 70,000 civilians have been killed in clashes between the government and rebel groups, and another 1.2 million have been displaced from their homes.

PLO leader dies

Palestinian Leader Yasser Arafat died Nov. 11 of undisclosed causes at the age of 75. The controversial leader, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1994 for his efforts to obtain a Palestinian homeland while at the same time being accused of encouraging terrorism, had been ostracized as an ineffective leader of his Palestinian Liberation Organization in recent years. Viewed by President Bush as an obstacle to the peace process, his passing opens a window of opportunity for peace between Palestinians and Israelis, according to many Middle East watchers.

Earthquake and tidal waves in Asia

The most powerful earthquake in 40 years struck deep beneath the Indian Ocean near the Indonesian island of Sumatra on Dec. 26, triggering tsunamis that devastated villages and resorts, killing tens of thousands and leaving untold numbers missing.

The tsunamis -- a Japanese word for tidal wave -- traveled at speeds up to 500 miles per hour and rose 30 feet in the air. Many of the victims were elderly people, children and tourists on vacation in Sri Lanka, India and Thailand.

--Compiled by Wendy Mbekulu for NewsHour Extra