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BURUNDI

Twelve years after a brutal civil war broke out between ethnic Tutsi and Hutu factions, Burundi plans to hold elections in April 2005 to replace its transitional government. Originally scheduled for October 2004, presidential and parliamentary elections will be preceded by a referendum on the constitution. The April elections, which could be postponed again, would be Burundi's second since gaining independence from Belgium in 1962 and would end the political limbo in place since the 1993 assassination of Burundi's first elected president, which sparked civil war. All but one of the parties to the conflict have signed a ceasefire agreement with the government.

IVORY COAST

Tensions continue to run high in Ivory Coast, where President Laurent Gbagbo and northern rebels are quarreling over an amendment to the constitution—Article 35—that requires all presidential candidates' parents be Ivorians. One in four residents of Ivory Coast descends from economic migrants attracted to the country's post-independence cocoa-based prosperity. In mid-December, parliament passed laws naturalizing hundreds of thousands of these foreigners and overthrowing Article 35, which has particularly angered the mostly Muslim residents of the north. However, Gbagbo refused to sign the bill, arguing that constitutional change must be put to popular vote. But Ivorian officials refuse to hold the referendum until rebels disarm, which they refuse to do. Ivory Coast is due to hold presidential elections in October 2005, but these events put that date in question.

LIBYA

In a speech to parliament, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi has asserted that he holds no prisoners of conscience and that any country could verify his claim through visiting. While Gaddafi has recently

received praise for condemning terrorism and WMDs, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have argued that Libya continues to violate basic human rights. In December, the Libyan government refused to grant visas to a Human Rights Watch research team, after months of delays. "They are letting in oil companies and tourists, but keeping out human rights groups," said HRW's Middle East director, Sarah Leah Whitson. Libya still bans free media and independent political parties.

MALAYSIA

In December 2005, East Asian countries led by Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, will meet in Kuala Lumpur to discuss a new East Asian Community (EAC) that Badawi argues will move member states towards regional integration. The EAC will provide for free trade, monetary and financial cooperation, joint efforts to prevent an arms race, a declaration of human rights and obligations, and a communications and transportation network. Member countries will include the 10 ASEAN members plus China, Japan and South Korea but New Zealand and Australia have been excluded. According to Badawi, tensions on the Korean peninsula or between China and Taiwan could derail the community if they are not addressed promptly.

PALESTINE

On January 9, Palestinians voted in a presidential election for the first time since 1996, electing Mahmoud Abbas with 62.3% of the vote. Abbas, who faced little tough competition, hoped the election would provide him the mandate he needs to take on internal reforms and negotiate with Israel. Voter turnout was estimated at 65%, but Palestinians living abroad or in exile were not permitted to vote. Radical Islamic groups such as Hamas urged a boycott of the vote, but made it clear that they would work with the elected president. Shortly af-



(clockwise from top left): A participant in Ukraine's Orange Revolution; Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez; A child stands over a Tutsi mass grave in Burundi; Posters of Palestinian President-Elect Mahmoud Abbas hang next to Arafat's image; Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.

ter the election, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called Abbas to congratulate him, the highest level contact between Israelis and Palestinians in years.

ROMANIA

In a December runoff, Romania elected as president Traian Băsescu, leader of the Democratic Party. The former General Mayor of Bucharest campaigned on a platform of economic and social reform, pledging to fight corruption, improve press freedom and shepherd Romania to its 2007 accession to the European Union. Following close parliamentary elections in November, Băsescu named as Prime Minister Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, Vice-President of the National Liberal Party, who has pledged to fight corruption, lower taxes and increase the independence of the judiciary. Given the fragility of the current centrist government, Băsescu has suggested early elections to solidify the governmental coalition.

UKRAINE

See Taras Kuzio's article in *Elections Today* (bonus section) for an update on the recent events in Ukraine.

VENEZUELA

In December, President Hugo Chavez signed a law enabling the government to censor sex and violence in the media and to ban reports that "endanger national security or incite disruptions of public order." The law came just after Chavez had charged those who attended the inauguration of Pedro Carmona with "civil rebellion." (Carmona took office following the 2002 coup that briefly removed Chavez from power.) Under Venezuelan law, people accused of civil rebellion are not entitled to parole, and therefore the government can hold them indefinitely. Democratic and human rights groups around the world have spoken out against both the new law and new charges.