

1) Blair backs drug tests in schools

Head teachers will be given powers to introduce random drug testing in their schools, the prime minister has told a Sunday newspaper.

In an interview with the News of the World, Tony Blair said the guidance will be issued next month.

Heads will have the power to either offer treatment to young users, exclude them or report **offenders** to police.

But the plans have been **condemned** by the Liberal Democrats and civil liberty campaigners.

The Department for Education and Skills disclosed earlier this year that it was looking at new guidelines for head teachers in England, which it had planned to publish this month.

But it had not previously been clear whether they would extend to random testing.

"If you have a serious problem in your school there is no point in trying to **conceal** it," Mr Blair told the paper.

Results from an ICM Research poll which appears in the News of the World on Sunday suggests 82% of parents and 66% of children support drug testing in schools.

Of the 1,000 parents **surveyed**, 96% said they would want to know if their child was taking drugs.

Sniffer dogs

Mr Blair told the paper head teachers could not be forced to introduce drug testing, but said they should have the option if they believe there is a problem in their school.

"Some head teachers may worry that if they go down this path they are declaring there is a problem with their school," said the prime minister.

"But in my view the local community is probably **perfectly** well aware that there is a problem."

David Hart, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said he agreed with Mr Blair's plans but cautioned they would only work with the support of head teachers.

"Whilst it would be quite wrong for it to be imposed externally, it could be a good example of school-police **liaison** that helps in the battle against the widespread drug culture amongst our youth," Mr Hart said.

2) France honours director Scorsese

Director Martin Scorsese and actor Leonardo DiCaprio have been presented with France's highest cultural honours.

Taxi Driver director Scorsese was **awarded** the Legion of Honour in recognition of his 40-year film career.

DiCaprio, 30, was named Commander of the Order of the Arts and Letters during the annual Paris ceremony.

French culture minister Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres said Scorsese's work **demonstrated** "to what extent the cinema is an art".

"Dear Martin Scorsese, the combat for the right of creators and cultural diversity brings together all of those who on both sides of the Atlantic and from all continents take it upon themselves to defend the expressions of identity and creation across all cultures," Mr de Vabres said.

"This fight is your fight."

DiCaprio was described by the minister as an "icon, little Hollywood prince, bad boy from Los Angeles, modern romantic hero, Peter Pan of American cinema".

The Titanic star **responded** by saying he was "extremely, extremely honoured".

DiCaprio stars in Scorsese's latest movie The Aviator, a biopic of eccentric millionaire Howard Hughes, which is being **released** in France on 26 January.

Previous **recipients** of the Legion of Honour include directors Steven Spielberg and David Lynch.

3) Penguins escape huge earthquake

An earthquake on a remote Antarctic archipelago home to 850,000 King Penguins was the **strongest on earth in four years, seismologists say.**

The quake hit 400km (250 miles) off the Macquarie Islands on Friday, measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale.

Penguins appear to have escaped a major disaster as the quake **occurred** deep under the sea, far from inhabited land.

There were no tsunamis, or large tidal waves, because the quake moved horizontally rather than vertically.

The tremors were felt in Tasmania, 1000km (600 miles) away, but because the epicentre was 10km underground, few observers **noticed** the initial quake.

Buildings on the islands shook for 15 seconds, seismologist Cvetan Sinadinovski said.

"If this had happened underneath a population centre it would probably have destroyed a whole city," he said.

The quake was the biggest anywhere on earth **since** an 8.4-magnitude tremor off the coast of Peru in June 2001. That killed 74 people.

Friday's earthquake was caused by the collision of two of the major tectonic plates which **make up** the earth's crust layer, the Indo-Australian and the Pacific plates.

The last quake of a similar magnitude in the Macquarie region was in 1924, Mr Sinadinovski said.

Despite its size, 22 staff of the Australian Antarctic Division slept through the tremors.

"Nobody felt anything," a spokesman said.

4) Delta cuts fares in survival plan

Delta Air Lines is cutting domestic fares by as much as 50% as part of a plan to **ensure** its financial survival.

Other US carriers, including United, have sought bankruptcy protection, amid high fuel costs and competition from discount carriers.

Delta is **restructuring** in a bid to fight off insolvency.

This latest move to boost business has prompted speculation other firms will be forced to match their fares, hurting revenues in the sector.

Delta's new SimpliFares were trialled from August last year on tickets from Cincinnati, its second-largest hub.

The airline says no one-way economy fare will now be priced higher than \$499 (£264), and no first-class fare will be priced higher than \$599.

It is also eliminating a Saturday-night stay requirement on discount fares and will give further reductions to customers **opting** for non-refundable tickets, booking in advance and online.

Delta, which lost \$646m in the three months to September, was forced to cut 6,900 jobs worldwide as part of its aim to **slash** \$5bn from its costs.

In October, it reached a crucial agreement with pilots on pay and **conditions** and it has also issued new shares to staff in return for wage cuts.

Airline shares closed lower on the announcement, with Delta, Continental and American Airlines all falling by more than 7%.

"We believe the whole airline industry will now have to move in this direction; this will likely hurt revenue in the short run but could be **beneficial** in the long run," said analyst Ray Neidl at Calyon Securities.

5) World Cup 'perfect gift for SA'

Ex-president Nelson Mandela has said the award of the 2010 World Cup would be an ideal present for South Africa celebrating 10 years of democracy.

Mr Mandela told key backers that the tournament was worth \$400m to the economy and would create 150,000 jobs.

He will join President Thabo Mbeki, Nobel prize winner Desmond Tutu and former president FW de Klerk in Zurich for Saturday's announcement.

South Africa is competing against Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

Fifa president Sepp Blatter has promised that the 2010 World Cup will be held in Africa for the first time.

A Fifa evaluation report to the five nations established the South Africans as favourites ahead of Egypt and Morocco, describing their bid as "excellent".

"In this year of celebration there could be few better gifts to us in our 10th year of democracy than to be awarded the 2010 world soccer cup," Mr Mandela told ministers, businessmen and leading sports officials attending a farewell dinner for the bid committee.

South Africa's lost their attempt to host the last World Cup by one vote when Fifa's Oceania delegate Charles Dempsey abstained, handing the 2006 tournament to Germany

But the bid committee, spearheaded by Danny Jordaan, has left little to chance this time.

Oscar-winning actress Charlize Theron has still to confirm if she will join the high-profile delegation in Switzerland.

South Africa's bid campaign has spent millions of dollars on events and travel over the last 12 months lobbying the 24-member Fifa executive committee to vote for the country.

Archbishop Tutu has jokingly promised Fifa executive committee members "a free ticket to heaven" if they vote for South Africa.

The bid committee have worked hard to allay fears over the country's high crime rate.

6) Smoking 'is bad for your brain'

Researchers from the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh looked at how the cognitive abilities of smokers and non-smokers changed over time. They found smokers performed **significantly** worse in five separate tests.

The research, part of the Scottish Mental Health Survey, is published in New Scientist magazine. Around 465 people were tested on their mental abilities in 1947 when they were aged 11.

They were then tested a second time between 2002 and 2002, when they reached the age of 64.

On this occasion they **underwent** tests to evaluate their non-verbal reasoning, memory and learning, how quickly they processed information, decisions about how to act in particular circumstances and construction tasks.

Current or former smokers were found to perform less well in the tests even after factors such as childhood IQ, education, occupation and alcohol consumption were taken into account.

The effect appeared to be stronger in current smokers according to the study, which was also published in the journal Addictive Behaviors.

The researchers suggest a "small but significant" negative effect of 4% linked to the combined effects of smoking and impaired lung function - itself linked to smoking.

It has been suggested in previous studies that there could be a link between impaired lung function and a negative effect on the thinking processes, but it is not clear what the **mechanism** for that might be.

Dr Lawrence Whalley of the University of Aberdeen, who led the research, said the explanation could be that smoking causes oxidative stress - cumulative damage caused by molecules called "free radicals" - to organs including the brain.

"Ageing neurons are very sensitive to oxidative damage."

Writing in Addictive Behaviors, Dr Whalley added: "The harmful effects of smoking on lung function are well established."

But he said the **detrimental** effect on cognition could be due to be attributable to poor heart and lung function affecting the brain, or directly harmful effects of smoking on brain - as well as lung - tissue.

Amanda Sandford, of the group Action on Smoking and Health said: "It would appear that the **well-worn** cliché that 'smoking stunts your growth' may be true when it comes to intellectual development.

"Contrary to what many people commonly believe - that smoking may help brain function, it is in fact more likely to wreak havoc with brain cells and IQ.

"Any teenager tempted to smoke should **heed** the message that it really is dumb to take up this noxious habit.

7) Transport experts join Paris bid

The Paris 2012 Olympic bid team has signed up the transport bosses from the last two summer Games.

Stephen McIntyre **oversaw** all transport issues around the 2000 Sydney Games and Panos Protopsaltis was general manager of transport for Athens 2004.

Paris 2012 chief executive Philippe Baudillon said: "Their expertise is an invaluable **asset**."

Transport is one of the key criteria on which rivals Paris, London, Madrid, New York and Moscow will be judged.

The host city will be chosen by the International Olympic Committee on 6 July.

Paris believes transport and ease of access to the Games is one of the strong points of its bid.

The French capital's plan relies on a "one village, two clusters" concept, with the athletes' village close to the heart of the city and 80% of events taking place within a 10-minute drive.

Venues will be concentrated around the Stade de France to the north and the Parc des Princes and Roland-Garros to the west.

Paris is also planning "Olympic traffic lanes" to minimise travel times for **accredited** vehicles, and free 24-hour public transport services for spectators.

8) What are your hopes for 2005?

Looking ahead to the new year we would like to know what you are hoping for.

Looking back, the past twelve months have seen continued conflict in Iraq, political upheaval in Ukraine and the re-election of President Bush in America.

In 2005, world leaders including UK Prime Minister Tony Blair have **pledged** to tackle world poverty, along with climate change and the Aids epidemic.

What would you like to see happen this next year? What are your reflections on 2004?

I wish for the New Year to be a time of reflection but also a time for people to embrace life and be thankful for and **appreciate** what they have got. Happy New Year.

Dave, Tyne and Wear

I would do somersaults to see less global whining, widespread reason and tolerance, and more understanding that the **current** US administration is not America.

Jan, Colorado, USA

These disasters are due to man's action. There will be more if not the same. I hope world leaders, under the auspices of UN and the World Bank, will **setup** a Disaster World Fund.

Anoop Kumar Verma, Farnborough. England

I'd like to see an end to smug, self-righteous people **posting** simplistic solutions to the world's problems on the BBC 'Have your say' website.

Dave, London, UK

I would be delighted to see the millions that'll be burnt on New Year's fireworks in London being sent to those who have no reason to celebrate in Asia. That would be a **truly** amazing start to 2005.

FM, London

9) Attack on US Iraq base: Your reaction

An attack on an American military base in northern Iraq has left 20 Americans and two Iraqi soldiers dead, and 66 wounded.

A militant Islamic group says the attack on the base in Mosul was carried out by a suicide bomber though other reports say the explosion was caused by a rocket or mortar.

The attack comes amid an upsurge of violence in the **run-up** to elections planned for 30 January.

An ABC News/Washington Post poll also suggested on Monday that a majority of Americans now believe the war in Iraq was not worth fighting.

What affect will this latest attack in Iraq have on American public opinion? Will the authorities be able to halt the violence in Iraq in the build up to the election?

Despite this tragedy, the terrorists will not win. The Iraqis will have elections, and they will move towards becoming a stable democratic nation. The world will be changed for the better, and the families of the brave men and women who answered the call of duty will know that those who died did not give their lives in **vain**.

David Joyce, Marblehead, MA, USA

How can President Bush say the country is ready for elections in a month? How can he guarantee the safety of Iraqis at the polls when he cannot even guarantee the safety of American troops in their **very own** bases?

Adam Yarina, Bronx NY USA

I feel sorry and sad for American soldiers. I feel sorry for poor Iraqis - be they guards or civilians! How can a military might such as American with all those forces, money and think tanks not overcome this **insurgency**? There is definitely something wrong with those devising military strategy!

Uzair Aziz Dawood, Dubai, UAE

Looks like people are beginning to wake up. How many more lives **must** be lost and cities destroyed before our leaders learn that we belong at home in the USA, and not trying to rule the world?

Claire Whitley, Raleigh, USA

In 20 years when there is a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Iraq at the centre of a **stable** Middle East, I hope the naysayers preaching doom and gloom are still around to eat their words. Stay the course!

Donald Clark, Hudson Falls, NY

10) Is the world doing enough for quake areas?

Relief agencies are continuing attempts to send supplies to areas affected by the tsunami disaster.

However, transport difficulties have prevented aid getting to some of the worst hit regions.

Many roads are blocked, there are petrol shortages and some local airports are damaged or simply unable to cope.

Is aid getting through to the affected areas? Have you contributed to the appeals? Send us your views.

I became aware this morning that "pledge" does not mean "donation", in respect of governments' offers of aid. I sincerely hope the governments who have pledged actually do hand over the money, and soon.

Sarah D, Norwich, UK

We may be couple of miles away from each other but when disaster happens we come together so quickly. Thanks to those countries who donated to the Asian disaster victims. It is clear that we are one big family.

Edward Bogatsu, Gaborone, Botswana

The affected countries will need years and years to pick themselves back up - their debt to western countries should be written off not just frozen. They are getting our help now but will need it for some considerable time to come.

Debra Travers, Okehampton, Devon

The worldwide pledges of funds to help the Asian tsunami victims is impressive but much more will be necessary over the next few years. One of the problems will be the control of funds being disbursed around the needy victims.

Barcas, Wassenaar, NL

I think there should be a worldwide programme set up to help people foster or adopt orphans to help rebuild their lives after they have lost their families. This might help in the long term. In the meantime I think people just need to give as much money as they can.

Fiona McLaren, Glasgow, UK

11) Ageing Britain: Your views

People in Britain are living longer to such an extent that by 2025 a fifth of the population will be over 65.

In an ICM poll for the BBC News website, 55% of those surveyed said that health was the most worrying **aspect** of growing old. Following that, 20% said they were worried about money.

One of the main reasons for the demographic shift is that people are having fewer children these days and the baby boomer generation is just starting to retire.

Are you worried about your health in later life? Have you experienced ageism? What about the positive side to getting older?

If the current prejudice against age can be overcome then there is no reason why people should not continue working. Even if it is only on a part time basis. It would be good for them because keeping busy helps keep you healthy, and it's good for the economy because you are still **earning**.

Martyn, Stratford upon Avon, UK

Made redundant at 50 and unable to get a permanent position which I have always suspected was age related. Now 60 - self employed, doubled my income, less stress, can retire when I want to and have at least 3 holidays a year. No-one **owes** anyone a living!!

Ken Collins, Sutton, UK

Maybe young adults should take more responsibility over the well-being of their parents. I intend to help out my parents financially after **graduating** and finding a job. After all, they contributed so much towards my education.

Jan, Nottingham

The government does nothing to encourage couples to have children. Think pensions crisis and house prices. Could an average working class family **afford** to have 3 kids, a house and a good enough pension fund?

TB, Spain

My experience is that people over 50 are ten times more **reliable** than youngsters. If I was an employer I would only employ people over 50. It would be interesting to know what the time-off-sick-rate is for those over, and those under 50.

Lester Stenner, Weston super Mare, UK

12) Music piracy: Your reaction?

The British Phonographic Industry (BPI) is to take legal action against people who download music illegally from the internet.

The organisation has said it will target **individuals** who make music available to share free with others, also known as "major uploaders".

Music file-sharers have been blamed for a decline in world-wide CD sales although sales are said to be rising in the UK.

The BPI's actions follow that of its US counterpart which is already suing those it calls the worst offenders.

Is the BPI right to take action against people who download music illegally from the internet? Is downloading a good thing for the music industry? Does it encourage people to buy more CDs?

It amazes me that people try to defend this kind of **theft**. It is no different to walking into a shop and stealing goods. As for the view that the record industry shouldn't take their customer to court: they are not their customers if they are stealing music!

Keith, Cheshire

A lot of the time the songs that are illegally downloaded are the hard to find records not available on legal sites. Maybe if a record company's or smaller record label's **entire** back catalogue was released it would cut a lot of illegal downloads.

Scott, UK

How can the record labels be complaining? They make so much money anyway - especially by **ripping off** artists - so this is a sort of poetic justice! Keep on downloading!

Benjamin, Bristol

The majority of musicians make their fortunes (in some cases obscene amounts of money) through promotions and touring, not through the sale of CDs. Finally there are several pay per download sites which means the reliance on swapping music freely is in **decline**. I think the industry would be better off embracing the technology than trying to fight against it.

Ian, UK

It has been proved that the music industry combined the sales figures of tapes and cd's to make it appear that file sharing had caused a slump cd sales, when in truth the sale of cd's has in **fact** increased year on year.

Silent Bob, Southampton

13) Oscars 2004: Your views

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King has swept the board at this year's Oscars with 11 awards.

As the final part in Jackson's trilogy of JRR Tolkien's epic novel, it had been **hotly** tipped to win.

But it dominated the Oscars, perhaps at the expense of other films, including Lost in Translation, Mystic River and Master and Commander.

Do you agree with the Oscar voters - did Jackson's film deserve to win so many prizes? Were the other films sidelined?

The Return of the Kings marked the **culmination** of sweat, toil and tears and a 'never say die' attitude of the entire crew and cast. A remarkable trilogy which deserved the recognition it got.

Sharon Divan, Dubai, UAE

It says more about the Academy's bias than the quality of the film that Rings got so many awards. How we can continue to take this organisation **seriously** is just as baffling as the fact that Rings won over so many amazing films.

Damion Armentrout, Columbus, OH, USA

The great **injustice** of the night is that Bill Murray's sublime performance in Lost In Translation lost out to Sean Penn's method-by-numbers histrionics. Still, Bill can console himself with the thought that he's on a par with Cary Grant, Richard Burton and many other superb actors who never won Oscars.

Tim, Bangkok, Thailand

LOTR is an epic tale, **thoroughly** deserving of its accolades. For New Zealanders it's a fantastic advert for our country; its stunning landscapes and talented people. Hats off to you Peter J.

Andrew, Hong Kong

14) Should Turkey join the EU?

The EU and Turkey have struck a deal over an EU demand that Turkey recognise Cyprus before membership talks begin.

The EU and Turkey have struck a deal over a demand that Turkey recognise Cyprus before it begins talks on membership.

European and Turkish diplomats said a **compromise** had been reached in which Turkey promises to recognise Cyprus by next October's start date for negotiations.

Some countries are worried that Turkey's large and rapidly growing population and low average income might make integration into the EU difficult.

Other opponents are concerned about Turkey's human rights record, despite reforms it has recently enacted.

Do you think Turkey should join the EU?

One thing is for **sure**, if Turkey joins the EU then it can no longer be called the EU or European Union. What next? WU or World Union? World power and world domination? Exactly what is the plan of these unelected officials who are running the EU?

Anna, Amsterdam

Yes Turkey should join the EU or we **should have** told them from the start (as we did to Morocco), that it was not possible. They have worked hard to reach EU standards in all sorts of domains, so it would be incorrect to tell them we don't want them now.

Alain Hernu, Andresy, France

Greece and Turkey caused already so many malfunctions within NATO, imagine what their bilateral rivalry would bring into the EU. And if that's not enough, Euroskepticism will grow further than the British Isles and Scandinavia. Is Europe trying to formally **disintegrate**? If so Turkey's admission is the right choice

Andreas, San Francisco CA, USA

If the EU **denies** Turkey the right to accession, it would be nothing short of scandalous. If any country wants to join, and they meet the criteria, then there should be nothing to stop them.

James Wilson, Dundee, Scotland