Polish News Bytes

Compiled by *Robert Strybel*, Our Warsaw Correspondent

parliament overwhelmingly Poland's approved a European Union reform treaty after the government agreed to include safeguards proposed by President Lech Kaczyński. The safeguards exempt Poland from being forced to legalize homosexual "marriages", ensure Poland of more favorable voting rights until 2014 and protect against German property claims. Poland became the sixth country in the 27nation bloc to approve the treaty. Critics claim the treaty is nothing more than a veiled attempt to rejuvenate the EU constitution, which French and Dutch voters rejected in 2005 referenda, and create a European superstate ruled by Brussels bureaucrats.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has become the first European Union government to declare he would boycott the opening of the Olympic Games in Beijing this summer in protest against China's brutal reprisals against Tibet. The Czech government has followed suit, and Tusk has tried to persuade other European leaders to join in the campaign. Close to 80,000 Poles have signed petitions calling on Tusk to set a negotiating team to mediate in the Sino-Tibetan dispute.

Poles and Ukrainian will be able to travel freely within 50 kilometers (about 30 miles) of the border without a visa. Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his Ukrainian counterpart Yulia Tymoshenko signed an agreement to that effect during his recent visit to Kyïv. Since Poland entered the European Union's visa-free Schengen zone, Poland's eastern border has become the outer border of the EU, requiring visas of non-EU citizens to cross

Canada's lifting of the visa requirement for tourists from Poland and other EU countries has raised hopes that the United States may soon follow suit. The US is now the only NATO country still requiring visitors from some alliance countries to apply for tourist visas. Last year, the visa-rejection rate qualifying a country for visa waiver was lowered from 30 to 10 percent. At present Poland has a 13 percent denial rate. One reason is that fewer Poles these days try to work on the sly in America when they can find legal jobs in the British Isles and elsewhere in Europe.

Polish astronomers, led by Warsaw University's Professor Andrzej Udalski, have discovered a planetary system in some ways similar to be a scaled-down version of our own. Conducting their observations as part of the Optical Gravitational Lensing Experiment (OGLE), they detected two large planets similar to Jupiter and Saturn orbiting around a Sun some 4,500 light years away. According to Udalski, that method allows us to determine whether there are planets around a parent-star.

Poland's government has pledged to enact a property-restitution law by end of 2008. Former owners will be eligible to receive 20 percent compensation for property was seized by the Nazi Germans or Poland's communist rulers during and after World War II. About 80 percent of the confiscated property had belonged to ethnic Poles, including Polish nobility whose lavish

palaces, mansions and manor houses were confiscated. The remaining 20 percent of the lost property had belonged to Jews.

An unusual April snowstorm paralyzed northwestern Poland's Szczecin region, damaging power lines and leaving thousands without power, water and heat. Schools and factories in the Baltic coastal region were closed, gas stations became inoperative and people were advised to stay home until power was restored. Old Diesel and coal-fired locomotives were temporarily put into emergency service after the more modern electric-powered trains had ground to a halt. In recent months, meteorological anomalies have abounded in Poland which has experienced an unusually mild, spring-like winter and a wintry spring.

Polish diplomats have reportedly been ordered to shun contacts with Latin American Polonian leaders who have been critical of the present Polish government and supportive of the controversial Catholic right-wing radio station Radio Marya. Among those blacklisted are Jan Kobylański, president of the umbrella organization Union of Polish Associations in Latin America, Marian Kurzac, who heads Juventus (Brazil's largest Polish organization) and Polish missionary priest Father Jerzy Morkis.

The 1996 Nobel Literary Prize laureate Wisława Szymborska has decried decommunization by Poland's previous conservative government as causing "more harm than good. Szymborska, 85, who once wrote poems praising Stalin and communism, told Italy's left-wing daily "La Reppublica" she hoped the present liberal government would discontinue it. Asked to define the spirit of the Polish nation, Szymborska said: "Most people don't bother about independent thinking and easily fall victim to collective suggestions... People grow stupid wholesale and wise up retail."

Armia Krajowa "bandits" are neutralized by "courageous" Soviet agents in "Smersh", a new fictional series being shown on prime -time TV in neighboring Belarus. Set in 1945 at the end of World War II, the film portrays Polish AK freedom-fighters as roving bands of blood-thirsty thugs shown murdering the bride, groom and guests at a Belarussian country wedding. The series has outraged AK veterans in Belarus, whose strongman Alexandr Lukashenka is widely regarded as Europe's last dictator.

Civil marriages were chosen by nearly one -half of all Polish newly-weds in 2007. After Poland signed a Concordat with the Vatican in 1998, Church marriages received equal status with civil ones and the vast majority of couples chose to tie the knot at the altar. In 1999, only 31% decided on only a civil wedding, but by 2006 that percentage had risen to 44. Many couples feel they can always marry their present or some future spouse in church and regard the civil marriage as a trial period which can be easily terminated by divorce.

Polish female mountaineers, Katarzyna Skłodowska and i Kinga Baranowska of Warsaw, are hoping to reach the top of Dhaulagiri 1, the only more than 8,000-meter (26,000-foot) Himalayan peak never climbed by a Polish woman. Last year, Baranowska had launched an assault on the mountain, but an outburst of violent weather forced her back down with only 100 meters (328 feet) to go. □

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Republic of Poland in Los Angeles website:www.PolishConsulateLA.com (310) 442-8500

Consul General

Paulina Kapuścińska ext. 109
e-mail: mailing.list@consulplla.org

Culture, Science Education,
Public Affairs

Consul Jakub Zaborowski ext. 108
e-mail: culture@consulplla.org

Administration and Finances Consul Malgorzata Kopeć ext. 104, 105 e-mail: admin@consulplla.org

Passports/Visas/Citizenship Section Consul Marzena Gronostajska ext. 103, 106

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