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## NEWS IN BRIEF

**17 June:** The number of foreigners permanently resident in Switzerland increased to 1.46 million i.e. from 19.8% to 20% of the population within the space of a year. Most are originally from Italy, Serbia and Montenegro.

**23 June:** Cantonal directors of education launch a package of measures in response to the findings of the PISA study, which showed that Swiss schoolchildren's reading skills are mediocre. The measures include consistent use of High German as the language of instruction in all subjects.

**24 June:** Swiss announces a radical step: the airline plans a 35% cut in its network of routes, a reduction of its fleet by 34 planes, and some 3000 job cuts. Another 2000 jobs will go in areas connected with Swiss.

**2 July:** Switzerland is an expensive country. Consumer prices in the European Union are around one third lower than in Switzerland. There is too little competition in the electricity, health care and agricultural sectors.

**5 July:** In an educational survey on the political knowledge of schoolchildren in 28 countries, Switzerland ranks only 19th. The survey studies not only students' knowledge, but also their political interests and attitudes.

**9 July:** The Federal Court decides that putting naturalisation applications to the popular vote is unconstitutional. Applications cannot be decided either at the ballot box or by public municipal assemblies.

**19 July:** Pierre Graber, Federal Councillor between 1970 and 1978, dies in Lausanne at the age of 94. Originally from the canton of Neuchâtel, the Social Democrat became politically active in Vaud and made a major contribution to strengthening Switzerland's international relations.

**21 July:** Over 19,000 young men and women embark on the last ever 15-week army recruit course. As of next year, in line



Keystone Press

A fireman watches the first raindrops fall. In mid-August forest fires above Leuk (VS) destroyed 450 hectares of woodland.

with the new Army XXI scheme, this basic military training will last 18 or 21 weeks depending on the service.

**30 July:** The Federal Council plans to promote road safety. It proposes awarding full driving licences to new drivers only after a 3-year probation period. As of 2004, the new blood-alcohol limit is 0.5%.

**10 August:** Despite intense heat, 45,000 people attend the horse show in Saignelégier. Fittingly, the guest of honour at the 100th "Marché-Concours national des chevaux" is the Fribourg horse itself.

**14 August:** A huge forest fire destroys over 450 hectares of land above the Valais village of Leuk. It is the largest fire in Switzerland for a hundred years. No-one is hurt and the cause is unclear.

**16 August:** Young Swiss are more conservative towards foreigners than their parents. According to a survey among army recruits, 49% of the 20-year-olds cite "tensions between Swiss and foreigners" as the most pressing problem.

**19 August:** Zurich, Geneva, Basle and Lugano are among the world's most expensive cities according to a UBS study. But thanks to the world's highest salary levels, they also rank first in terms of spending power, followed by Los Angeles and Miami.

**19 August:** The UN is hugely popular – 80% of Swiss are in favour of membership. Swiss are generally critical towards the USA.

Neutrality is also popular, while EU and NATO membership is viewed less favourably.

**20 August:** After six months in captivity, fourteen tourists kidnapped in the Sahara in Algeria are released in Mali. Federal Councillor Calmy-Rey welcomes the four Swiss hostages in Kloten. It remains unclear whether or not a ransom was paid.

**1 September:** The concept of "dying forests" entered the public consciousness twenty years ago. In 1985 the debate reached its climax with the "forest march" by Federal Councillor Alfons Egli and forestry experts. Tens of thousands demonstrated in front of the Houses of Parliament.

**2 September:** June, July and August were the warmest months in Switzerland since official measurements commenced in 1864. Overall, the summer was 4 to 6 degrees hotter than the highest recorded average. A large rockslide occurred on the Matterhorn.

**8 September:** Over the past two years, Swiss daily and weekly newspapers have been steadily gaining readership. This is attributed to the increased demand for information following September 11 and the preparations for the Iraq war.

**10 September:** One year after Switzerland joins the UN, opinions are divided on its merits. Neuchâtel lawyer Barbara Ott failed to be elected to the International Court of Justice, and Carla del Ponte lost her mandate as chief prosecutor on the Ruanda tribunal.

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