

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 31 (2004)
Heft: 1

Rubrik: News

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NEWS IN BRIEF

On 26 November Valencia was selected as the venue for the 32nd America's Cup to be held in 2007. This prestigious international sailing competition will be held in Europe for the first time in 152 years.

On 1 December the Geneva initiative on the Middle East was launched under the aegis of Federal Councillor Micheline Calmy-Rey. The initiative was drawn up by former Israeli minister Yossi Beilin, Palestinian Yasser Abed Rabbo and Professor Alexis Keller of Geneva.

On 3 December the National Council approved the Federal Partnership Law (FPL) on the registration of same-sex partnerships. However, gay and lesbian couples were denied the right to adopt children or the option of reproductive medical procedures.

On 3 December the Swiss Conference of Universities (SCU) approved the 1999 Bologna Guidelines on higher education reform. The universities must now adopt regulations and plans for bringing curricula into line with the two-tier Bachelor's and Master's degree by the end of 2005.

On 4 December Zurich media pioneer Roger Schawinski was appointed head of the private German channel, SAT1.

On 10 December a second SVP representative was elected to the Federal Council. On 1 January Christoph Blocher (ZH) took over as head of the Department of Justice and Police after CVP representative Ruth Metzler's failure to be re-elected. FDP representative Hans-Rudolf Merz was appointed to succeed his retiring party colleague Kasper Villiger. Merz took over at the Finance Department on 1 January. Joseph Deiss has assumed the office of Federal President for 2004.

Between 10 and 12 December the UN Summit on the Information Society was held in Geneva. Participants included representatives of 174 states, 663 non-governmental organisations, 111 companies and 72 international organisations. As a result of the North-South divide, only minimum consensus was reached.

On 13 December Basle tennis ace Roger Federer was voted 2003 Sportsman of the Year (and subsequently also 2003 Swiss of the Year). Four-time orienteering world champion Simone Niggli-Luder was voted Sportswoman of the Year, and Alinghi won the team prize.

On 15 December, for the first time in four years, unemployment topped the list of public concerns registered by the Credit Suisse "worry barometer", followed in second and third place by health care and old age pensions.

On 16 December the National Council acknowledged the 1915 genocide committed on Armenians. Against the Federal Council's recommendation, a majority of the main chamber gave historical and humanitarian aspects precedence over political and economic considerations.

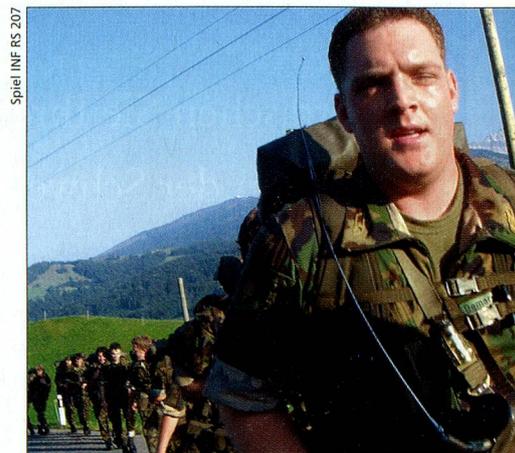
On 17 December the National Council rejected the second revision of the Health Insurance Law (HIL). The bill was three years in the making and had already been approved by the Council of States.

On 19 December 56-year-old Geneva State Councillor Christiane Brunner announced that she was standing down as President of the Social Democrats after more than three years in office. The sceptre will be handed over at the SP Party Conference on 6 March.

On 1 January Switzerland replaced the Army 95 model with the Army XXI model, ushering in a professional army reduced in size in line with the new geo-strategic approach and international collaboration efforts. The army reform was accepted by some 75% of voters in the referendum held on 18 May 2003.

On 5 January the Swiss Society for Theatrical Culture and the Federal Office for Culture awarded Aargau dancer, choreographer and teacher Brigitta Luisa Merki (50) the 2004 Hans-Reinhardt-Ring, the highest award in the Swiss theatrical world.

On 5 January approximately 300,000 people were registered on social welfare. In 2002 the number of people drawing welfare benefits rose by 10%. Communities, which are obliged to bear the bulk of the CHF 2 billion



One of the last old-style army recruits.

burden, are sounding the alarm bells. Within three or four years the number of people on welfare could rise to 400,000.

On 14 January Jean-Daniel Gerber, Head of the Federal Office for Refugees (FOR), was appointed head of the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (seco). The 58-year-old economist has worked for the federal administration for 30 years and will succeed David Syz on 1 April.

On 16 January Switzerland and the European Union signed an agreement in Brussels on scientific and technical collaboration, allowing Switzerland to participate in the sixth EU framework programme (2003 to 2006) and granting Swiss scientists equal opportunities with their EU colleagues.

Between 20 and 25 January, 2,100 of the world's key decision-makers met at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos. The police managed to prevent demos by anti-globalisation groups. *IE*

Translated from German