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Global News Dispatches: 5 Stories

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Note to Editors: This is a selection of news wire reports that have been edited to be relevant for audiences for the next two weeks. You are welcome to select and publish individual items or the whole stack.

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Australians to Vote in Referendum on Indigenous Rights

Voters in Australia will decide through a referendum on October 14, 2023, whether or not to create a representative body for Indigenous peoples of Australia, [reported Reuters](#). The new body would be able to provide nonbinding advice to Parliament.

“It’s a moment calling out to the best of our Australian character. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people this has been a marathon. For all of us, it is now a sprint,” [said Prime Minister Anthony Albanese](#).

[Elle Australia described](#) the proposal as “a [formalized] system for First Nations people to

meaningfully guide and influence [policymaking] across all areas of government that they're impacted by, and one that is embedded into law and [cannot] be changed.” [According to Reuters](#), the idea for a so-called “Voice to Parliament” came from negotiations among Indigenous groups in 2017.

There are currently about 800,000 Indigenous people in Australia. Their communities, who have inhabited the continent for as long as 60,000 years, faced racist discrimination with the advent of the colonial era. [Their people were decimated](#) by disease, afflicted by [violence from settlers](#), and displaced from their land. From the 19th century until as late as the 1970s, Australian policymakers kidnapped First Nations children from their families. The government’s own [Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission found](#) in 1997 that the latter constituted a crime against humanity.

[Reuters reported](#) that the Labor and Green parties support the referendum, while the conservative Liberal Party is calling for votes against it. However, opposition to the plan also exists from the left, with some feeling that the new body would be, according to Reuters, “symbolic and toothless.”

Twenty-Year-Old Faces Execution Under New Ugandan Anti-LGBTQ+ Law

[284 words]

A Ugandan [law passed in March](#) that makes some same-sex relations punishable by death has its second captive. A 20-year-old man who had sex with a 41-year-old man has been charged with “aggravated homosexuality” under the law, [reported National Public Radio \(NPR\)](#). Because the 41-year-old man is disabled, authorities were able to reach for the death penalty rather than solely imprison the 20-year-old.

“The Ugandan government lays to rest the view that its outrageous new law allowing the death penalty for same-sex conduct was just for show. It has now charged a young man under it, who now faces possible execution for being himself,” [said Kenneth Roth](#), executive director of the nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch (HRW).

Since the law passed in March, at least five people in total have been charged under it, [according to the 20-year-old man’s lawyer Justine Balya](#), who spoke to Reuters. But her client is just the second to be charged under the “aggravated homosexuality” provisions, which makes HIV+ people who have sex, people who have sex with disabled people, and people who commit statutory rape subject to the death penalty. According to HRW, the law also criminalizes the “promotion of homosexuality,” carrying a sentence of up to 20 years, and lengthens the sentence for attempts at same-sex relations to 10 years.

[According to Efemia Chela](#), an editor and researcher at the leftist organization Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, contemporary anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in Africa was built off similar laws put in place by colonizing countries. More recently, say researchers like [Political Research Associates](#) and the website [openDemocracy](#), the influence of extremist Christian groups in the United States on Ugandan LGBTQ+ policy is visible through tens of millions in funding.

Military Coup Attempts Overthrow of Gabon's Government

[188 words]

[Al Jazeera reported](#) that officers of the Gabonese military removed President Ali Bongo from office just minutes after he was declared re-elected on Saturday, August 25. The military personnel also announced the dissolution of state institutions and border closures. Bongo's family had [ruled Gabon](#) almost continuously since 1967. Ali Bongo himself took power in 2009 in the first election after the death of his father. But despite his [pleas for outside intervention](#), the erstwhile leader remained under house arrest as of August 30.

"It is an oil emirate run like a family property for almost six decades," French analyst Thomas Borrel [told the Associated Press](#).

Gabon exported \$6 billion worth of oil in 2022 and has the [fourth-highest human development index in sub-Saharan Africa](#) as of 2021. However, this still left it in the bottom half of countries globally and residents are reportedly [aggravated by the wealth of their ruling elite](#).

The attempted coup was the eighth in Central and West Africa since 2020. Like Niger, which also saw a coup attempt in mid-2023, Gabon is a former French colony whose civilian government had close ties with France.

India's West Bengal State Proposes Land Grant to Tea Estate Workers

[233 words]

Ahead of the 2024 national parliamentary elections, the government of West Bengal said in February 2023 that it would distribute about 584 acres of land to tea estate workers. The workers will be given rights to the land in allotments ranging from about 0.05 to about 0.08 acres, [reported EastMojo](#).

Reporter Rupam Deb said, though, that the issue is more complicated. "[S]mall victories aside, the tea workers are likely to continue their struggle for years in their quest to get land rights," he said.

The issue of tea estate workers' land rights, like much else in northern West Bengal, is wrapped up in an intricate mesh of party and ethnolinguistic politics. Caught in the middle are the region's tea laborers who are legally entitled to numerous benefits from their employers like housing, medical care, and schools for their children, but often receive little or none of these. The government has not stepped in to date to remedy the situation in a meaningful way.

In the north, West Bengal narrows to the so-called "chicken neck" that connects Northeast India to the rest of the country. The dominant culture of West Bengal past the 12-mile-wide corridor differs in language and race from the mostly Bengali south. This contributed to the emergence of a movement for a separate state in the north, to be called "Gorkhaland" after the Nepali-speaking residents of the region.

Saudi Social Media User Sentenced to Death Over Posts

[201 words]

The [Associated Press \(AP\) reports](#) that Saudi Arabia's authoritarian government has sentenced to death retired schoolteacher Mohammed bin Nasser al-Ghamdi. The brother of a UK-based dissident is facing execution for his online activity on Twitter and YouTube that was critical of the Saudi government.

"They are sending a clear and sinister message—that nobody is safe and even a tweet can get you killed," said Lina Alhathloul to the AP. Alhathloul is the Head of Monitoring and Advocacy at the UK-based Saudi rights organization, [ALQST for Human Rights](#).

Al-Ghamdi's execution order comes in the context of previous lengthy prison terms for others who spoke out online against the Saudi government's repression. However, this is the first case that involves the death penalty.

According to the AP, Saudi Arabia executed the third-most individuals in the world in 2022. This included [a mass execution](#) of 81 people on March 12, reported Amnesty International. Beyond the death penalty, the country has also been criticized for attacking the freedom of speech, freedom of association, women's rights, religious freedoms, and migrants' rights. "Saudi Arabia has announced important reforms, but the repression of independent civil society and critical voices impedes any attempt," said rights group [Human Rights Watch](#).