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Wife beating

A 61-year-old man yesterday admitted to beating his wife but their son denied being violent to his mother in the same incident. » Page 4



Foetus on video

Rather than looking at conventional ultrasound images, state-of-the-art 4D technology allows one to see a clear moving picture of the unborn baby.

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Tourism up

Tourist departures last month were estimated at 149,491, an increase of 1.2 per cent over the same month last year.

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Pedestrian streets

Walking through the heart of Valletta will be easier from Monday when the city's pedestrian areas will expand by another two streets.

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Drug smuggling

A 32-year-old Nigerian national was yesterday remanded in custody after pleading not guilty to importing cocaine and heroin on Wednesday afternoon.

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International

Gutted house

Police searching for millionaire businessman Christopher Foster and his wife and daughter since an arson attack destroyed their Shropshire mansion gained access to the site of the gutted house for the first time yesterday. » Page 13

Italy-Libya pact

Italian and Libyan officials were finalising a pact yesterday that will see Italy pay compensation for misdeeds committed under colonial rule and improve ties between Rome and Tripoli, a major energy producer. » Page 15

Michael Jackson is 50

Singer Michael Jackson turned 50 yesterday, a shadow of the superstar once known as the King of Pop whose records thrilled millions before his bizarre personal life eclipsed his musical brilliance.

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Polish protest march

About 18,000 workers joined a protest march yesterday organised by Poland's main trade union Solidarity to demand higher wages and pensions. » Page 18

National

'Effective participation' in core group's first meeting in Meusac

Nestor Laiviera

The core group of the newly formed Malta-EU Steering and Action Committee (Meusac) met for the first time yesterday, seeing "effective and active participation by representatives", Meusac head Vanni Xuereb said.

Dr Xuereb explained how the consultation process was, so far, a positive and successful one which, he believes, will lead to concrete and effective recommendations being made to decision makers.

Prior to Malta's accession to the European Union, Meusac was a platform for debate between the government, Malta's political parties, and civil society in general. Meusac will now be engaged in coordinating the process of consultation on EU legislation and Malta's role in various EU structures, as well as promoting debate on EU issues.

The consultation process is to be managed by the core group which is formed of representatives drawn from the government, political parties, constituted bodies, non-governmental organisations and experts from various sectors, amongst them a legal expert on EU legislation.

Dr Xuereb said he was positive, but still remained realistic, as he could already see various limitations to what the core group could achieve. Amongst such limitations, Dr Xuereb explained, was the problem with representation of non-governmental organisations. For Meusac to be an effective stage for debate, "one cannot have so many organisations from the same sector."

To address this issue, one of the first decisions taken by the core group was to assign a committee to recommend criteria and methods by which NGOs can be accepted and formed into a subcommittee, he said. Three representatives will eventually be drawn from this subcommittee to take their place on the core group itself.

He expressed the hope that the three NGO representatives would be able to take their place on the core group committee by the next meeting.

Parliamentary Secretary Chris Said, who is the Meusac chairman, echoed Dr Xuereb's statement that the meeting went "very well".

The comments which he received from members, he said,

were all very positive, especially on the importance of the reformation of Meusac following the "positive experiences of the pre-accession body and subsequently also with *Forum Malta Fl-Ewropa*."

Mr Said said the committee debated various issues, amongst them being the consultative process itself, as well as the financial and human resources available to Meusac through which it could fulfil its main objective, that being, to act as a forum for consultation. When the Maltese government takes its place in EU structures, it would base itself on the consultation undertaken through the committee.

Mr Said explained that he was confident that the core group would achieve this objective, given the calibre and quality of the representatives which were present on the committee and which afforded the committee a significantly wide representation.

The core group's primary two priorities are to determine the most effective mechanism for the consultation process, and to establish the various sectoral committees.

Government spent more on interest on loans to service debt

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The widening deficit means the government spent more on interest on loans taken out to service the debt. About €106 million were borrowed during the period under review, pushing public debt servicing costs up to €108 million – a comparative increase of €4.7 million over 2007.

The Consolidated Fund recorded an increase of €26.7 million from income tax and of €24.4 million from

VAT while social security contributions also increased by €15.1 million, but revenue from licences, taxes and fines is down by €7.3 million.

Overall, recurrent expenditure stood at €1,204.2 million, an increase of €129.1 million compared to the same period last year. Major increases in recurrent expenditure were recorded under social security benefits, which added €35.1 million, along with surges in the budget spend of the health and the IT ministries, which

went up by €29.9 million and €12.3 million respectively.

The total government debt outstanding at the end of July amounted to €3,486.9 million, an increase of €159.6 million compared to the gross Central Government debt outstanding at the end of July last year. While long-term borrowing increased by €149.3 million, short-term borrowing and foreign borrowing declined by €11.2 million and €6.3 million respectively.

Office of Fair Competition monitoring food prices

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The world has been grappling with something of a food crisis over the past few months, with the cost of some basic items, like pasta, bread, milk, oils, cereals and butter, seeing a sudden jump.

When contacted, a spokesman for the Office of Fair Competition said the Office investigated an

alleged collusion in the cereals market, but found that in most instances, when considering the total addition in the selling price, it was lower than the total increase in the cost price.

The inquiry on cheese was to establish whether the local higher prices were disproportionate compared to international price increases, and whether there was

any indication of collusion between suppliers to manipulate prices.

The Office operations directorate is monitoring prices of a number of products to detect any possible breach of the Competition Act, which aims to counter abusive practices – either through cartels or abuse of dominance.