

NATION BRIEFS

Canada says has received no ransom demand for envoy

OTTAWA (Reuters)—Canada has not received a ransom demand for a special U.N. envoy who was abducted in the impoverished west African nation of Niger last month, Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon said on Wednesday.

Robert Fowler, a former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, and his aide Louis Guay were kidnapped northeast of Niger's capital of Niamey on Dec 14. Fowler is the U.N.'s special envoy to Niger, where government forces are battling Tuareg rebels.

"This is a major file that concerns us a great deal ... We haven't had any ransom demands," Cannon told reporters, saying Canadian officials were on the ground in Niger.

A rebel Tuareg splinter faction initially claimed on its website that it carried out the abduction, but later retracted.

The main Tuareg rebel group denied any role in the kidnapping and suggested it may have been carried out by security agencies with the aim of discrediting the rebels.

Cannon said he has had two conversations with U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon about the abduction. Fowler, 64, took up his post as special envoy in July 2008.

Canadian soldier faces murder charge in Afghan death

OTTAWA (Reuters)—Canadian military police have charged an officer with second-degree murder in the death of an unarmed man in the southern Afghan province of Helmand last October.

Captain Robert Semrau is accused of shooting and killing the man—described by the military police on Friday as a "presumed insurgent"—on or about October 19, 2008.

Semrau is a member of a team of Canadian Forces mentors, which trains soldiers in the Afghan army. He is now in custody and will be sent back to Canada to face a military judge.

Canada has around 2,500 troops based in the southern city of Kandahar, just east of Helmand province.

Semrau and the Canadian mentor team were in Helmand province providing guidance to Afghan soldiers last October, when the Taliban launched a major offensive against NATO-led troops and the Afghan army.

Blast damages fourth B.C. gas well site

CALGARY (Reuters)—Police are investigating what appears to be the fourth bombing of an EnCana Corp natural gas facility in British Columbia, authorities said on Monday.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police said workers for the country's largest energy company found a partly destroyed metering shed at a well near Tomslake, in northeastern British Columbia, on Sunday.

No injuries or gas leaks were reported as a result of the explosion, south of Dawson Creek, near the Alberta provincial boundary.

"The well was shut in as a precaution. It's a single-well site," EnCana spokesman Alan Boras said. "Because of the incident, the site was turned over to the RCMP for investigation."

Three other EnCana energy facilities in the region have been damaged by explosions since October, and police have yet to announce any suspects.

In early December, investigators appealed to the public for help.

They said the bombs could have been planted by one person acting alone or a group with some grievance toward the company. Police also said they believed the saboteur, or saboteurs, lived in the region.

Gas well valves and other equipment owned by other energy companies have also been vandalized and tampered with in recent weeks.

EnCana's damaged wells produce gas from the Montney tight sands formation, one of a host of unconventional gas plays in North America that the industry has targeted for billions of dollars of investment.

All four were drilled within the last five years, Boras said.

Tight sands and shale gas deposits, located in such regions as British Columbia, Texas and Louisiana, are known for immense size, but require prolific drilling and expensive rock fracturing techniques to maintain production.

Divine Performing Arts returns to enthrall Canadian theatregoers

By JASON LOFTUS and JOAN DELANEY
Epoch Times Staff

OTTAWA/WATERLOO—The world's premier Chinese dance and music company stirred audiences after beginning the Canadian leg of its 2009 World Tour this week.

Divine Performing Arts New York Company, one of three companies of the New York-based arts group, played to sold-out venues in Ottawa and Kitchener.

Set to begin a week-long run at Toronto's John Bassett Theatre on January 8, the show is attracting growing crowds as word gets out about the unique performing arts company in its third year on tour.

"It's wonderful," said Stephen Woodworth, member of parliament for Kitchener Centre who saw the show Wednesday night. "What's most impressive to me about the Divine Performing Arts is how it works on so many levels. On the outside you could say that it's just great entertainment for the whole family—story telling, colourful pageantry, Chinese dance and music.

"If you just go a little deeper, you could see the craftsmanship, the artistry, the discipline, the wonderful detail that's put into the costumes, and the set design, and the dance composition. And then if you go just a little bit deeper than that, you see that it's really all about universal values, the ideas of truth, compassion, and tolerance," Woodworth said.

"These are values that are universal to everyone."

Ms. McKenna, a Celtic singer who saw the show in Ottawa, agreed.

"My heart was open and I started to cry," she said of the opening act. "The very beginning of the performance touched my heart so much ... I'm just blown away by this performance, I'm just blown away. I'm sort of



Performers give a curtain call at the Divine Performing Arts 2009 World Tour Ottawa show this week. SAM DU

in awe ... I'm awestruck."

She added, "From the heart of an artist myself, I'm really impressed—beyond words. There are no words to describe how amazing this is."

Mr. Morrison, dean of the Faculty of Music at a large university, did have words to describe his experience after attending a performance Tuesday night.

"I think one of the things that struck me was the rhythm, and the music of course and the melody and harmony. But the rhythm and the dance are just very lively. I thought it was a brilliant show."

He was especially struck by the sound of the erhu, a two-stringed instrument known for its stirring, soulful tones.

"I love that instrument. I think that sound is one of the most gripping, haunting sounds of anything that I have heard. I mean it's gor-

geous! It's almost an extension of a human-like sound even more so than a violin or a traditional stringed instrument, which can be very vocal-like. The erhu is just an amazing sound, it's beautiful."

He added that the type of scales that are used for the erhu have "a sort of very deep emotional quality to them. There is a certain sense in which one feels quite connected to that music in a fairly deep way."

"It's all there, it's very exuberant it's very passionate, emotional—the music, the dance and the drama, so it's a real package," he summarized.

The show has grown in both scale and reputation as former patrons have spread the word after attending. Among those was Lisa MacLeod, a member of provincial parliament who attended Saturday night's show in Ottawa.

"Last year I said 'every child

should have an opportunity to see this show,'" she told a VIP reception before the show including government officials, arts, community and business leaders, as well as show sponsors. She then explained that this year she'd brought her own three-year-old daughter, as well as her mother.

"I can't wait for all of you to see it with your own eyes, to listen to the music, to see the beauty, and to see what a Canadian-Chinese is truly capable of here in the national capital," she said.

Her words were echoed by David Kilgour, Canada's former secretary of state for Asia-Pacific, and another fan of Divine Performing Arts, who said simply: "You will be moved tonight."

Mr. Kilgour applauded organizers who had helped the show to quadruple its audience in just three

years performing at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa.

David Matas, an international human rights lawyer just recently appointed to the Order of Canada and another repeat patron of Divine Performing Arts, helped explain the show's appeal.

"A combination of history and spirituality in one," was how Mr. Matas described show.

"I'm impressed with the choreography, the music, the costumes, the originality, the blending of ancient and modern. I've seen the show before and it just gets better each year."

For Cyril Dabydeen, an award-winning poet and professor, the show was a combination of aesthetic beauty and inner beauty.

"The dance has all the energy, the tumbling movements of the ancient past ... the joy of it, the quintessence of the various movements, male and female—the agility, the exercise of the men and the gracefulness of the women. It's just beautiful," he said.

He added, "When you look at the lyrics of the singers -- and I look at the words carefully because I'm a poet -- I made a connection in my own spiritual and poetic mind. It is very ennobling."

He added that "compassion and humanity are very uplifting overall," qualities in the show that impressed him. The "great message" of what he saw encompassed "great warmth and human spirit." The show "was extremely full of hope," he said.

"We see the Divine Performing Arts really and truly in action, the morality and the values of the past, which human civilization around the world should never forget and overlook, no matter how much materialistic progress you make.

"The divine spirit in all of us, [the show] awakens it," said Mr. Dabydeen "I rank this show very, very highly ... the very best."

Transition to adulthood tougher for disadvantaged, troubled youth

More support needed to give struggling youth a leg up

By CINDY CHAN
Epoch Times Staff

For youth who grew up under adversity, the transition to adulthood in the late teens is a critical stage for helping them turn their lives around, recent research has found.

The report, entitled "Listening to Vulnerable Youth: Transitioning to Adulthood in British Columbia," said that while disadvantaged youth "want and dream of better futures," many who left school early, lack family support, or are involved in risky or even criminal behaviour face an uphill battle.

"They are struggling to reconnect to their families or to anyone who cares. Coming from backgrounds of family dysfunction, abuse, discrimination, bullying, homophobia, homelessness, drugs, criminal activities and school dropout, they arrive at the threshold of adulthood with few opportunities for re-entry," the report said.

"One of the main problems they encounter is the loss of all support services when they turn 19," said University of Victoria psychologist Bonnie Leadbeater, co-author of the research.

The report summarizes the results of consultations with 75 youth aged 14 to 28.

The research recommends broader change in areas such as providing life-skills for the transition to adulthood, extending youth services to older ages, integrating access to services, providing permanent life mentors, extending low-cost housing to youth, and combating bullying and discrimination in schools.

In addition, "[greater] appreciation of what these youth have been through is needed so that we can be sensitive to their needs and try to do something more worthwhile," said University of Victoria psychologist Bonnie Leadbeater, co-author of the research.

"These kids have been thought of as 'good for nothing,' 'lazy,' 'it's too late.' People don't always appreciate the disadvantage that they're coming from and how hard it has been for some of these



Youth coming from a dysfunctional background have a hard time transitioning to adulthood, says recent report. PAULA MASON

kids. It's as if they've somehow in adolescence just chosen to be 'good for nothing,' dropping out of school," she said.

"It doesn't work like that ... You're building on a path where either you've had supportive family and many advantages, or a path where you've had nothing and possibly abusive relationships. Or parents who themselves weren't able to parent because of alcoholism, mental health problems, poverty, or whatever."

'I lost my family and everything'

What stand out in the report are poignant voices from the youth themselves that tell of uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and struggle—but also of recovery, resilience, and hope.

"I've had a lot of experience, but that doesn't mean I know how to act like an adult," one said.

Another said, "I only make like \$8.50. And I live on my own, and I have to live off that. It's stupid, and I have been doing it for like two years ..."

"Even phoning like Kids Help Phone ... I have had a few people hang up on me. ... You are crying. And at one point I was almost ready to lose it and I was on the edge literally and she was like: 'Oh, you're 21. I can't help you,'" said another youth.

Speaking about the meaning of family, one said: "I hit rock bottom ... I was into drugs and everything else, and actually this

program saved my life. I lost my family and everything, but the way that I am looking at it now is just 'cause they are blood doesn't mean they are family. And I am starting to find out actually who my family is."

"Some of the quotes are pretty heart-wrenching, particularly some of the bullying that these kids experienced at school, that made school a hostile environment for them," Ms. Leadbeater said.

These young people miss a lot of ordinary life, she said. This includes life skills that their more advantaged peers learn at home or at school to prepare them to live independently as adults, such as paying bills, managing a budget, buying groceries, cooking, career planning, accessing healthcare, finding housing, and getting a job.

Youth with caring families continue to have them for advice and support, said Ms. Leadbeater. And post-secondary students have access to a healthcare centre and career counsellors as well as financial support from parents or guardians, or the ability to get jobs themselves.

"They have so many more advantages than these kids, and many of those advantages are paid by our taxes. So it seems unfair that we only support some of our children—that some are getting a lot of advantages and some are getting none, and the ones get-

ting none are kids who are already disadvantaged in many ways."

'They're still very hopeful'

In Canada, the legal age of adulthood varies from 18 to 19 across jurisdictions. When young people age out of youth services they must learn to find their way in the world of adult services.

Yet even among youth from stable homes, many do not feel ready to call themselves adults by these ages, said the report. "All youth need a permanent life mentor," it said.

Rather than breaking the bonds and leaving vulnerable youth to struggle on their own, they need an ongoing network of support. This includes continuing active support from people such as foster parents, youth services, social workers, and probation officers, said Ms. Leadbeater.

"It's not easy to find someone, and extending some of these services to that age group or having more youth friendly services would be an advantage to these kids. You need someone to go to."

The Ministry of Children and Family Development in British Columbia has extended their independent living plan to youth over 19, the age of majority in that province, Ms. Leadbeater said.

She noted, however, that in addition to monetary aid from the government, service agreements with youth are most helpful if they also include essential support such as for learning life skills, finding housing, finishing school, and getting employment.

The report also recommends listening to youth's input before creating policies that affect them; extending public transportation hours; providing gender and culturally specific programming; and providing help that allows for self-respect, choice, and self-determination.

"At this age, they're really at the edge of either doing well or having a hard time for a very long time ... The resilience that some of them show is remarkable. Others go on to have some fairly serious long-term mental health problems and then we see them in our practice further along."

But "this is a good point for kids to re-engage with their communities," Ms. Leadbeater said. "They're still very hopeful ... They're really hoping that their lives will turn out."

Air Canada, WestJet say planes fuller in December

CALGARY (Reuters)—Canada's two major airlines said on Wednesday their planes flew with higher passenger loads in December as Air Canada cut capacity and smaller rival WestJet Airlines Ltd attracted more travelers despite a weak economy.

Air Canada, the biggest national carrier, said its load factor, a measure of how crowded its planes flew, rose to 82.7 percent in December, up 3.4 percentage points from 79.3 percent in December 2007.

The airline said its December revenue passenger miles, a traffic measure, fell 6.2 percent from the year-prior month, to 3.43 billion miles.

However the drop in paying passengers was outstripped by a 10 percent cut in the airline's capacity as it followed through on previously announced plans to drop some flights and routes to cope with the weakening economy and heavy fuel costs.

The airline's available seat miles dropped to 4.15 billion from 4.61 billion in the month.

Air Canada's regional affiliate, Jazz Air, reported a 1.4 percentage point drop in its December load factor, to 72.1 percent, as a 10.8 decline in traffic outstripped a 9.1 percent cut in the carrier's capacity.

WestJet loads climb

WestJet, which unlike Air Canada operates mostly in the domestic market, said December traffic rose even as it continued to boost capacity.

WestJet's load factor in the month rose 1.6 percentage points to 80.9 percent. It added new aircraft and raised its available seat miles by 10.6 percent to 1.46 billion.

Revenue passenger miles climbed 12.8 percent to 1.18 billion from 1.05 billion in December 2007.

The two airlines also released their full year results. Air Canada's 2008 load factor rose 1.1 percentage points to 82.3 percent as traffic climbed 0.1 percent over the year while capacity fell 1.2 percent.

WestJet's 2008 load factor fell 0.6 percentage points as a 12.3 percent rise in capacity surpassed a 12.2 percent increase in traffic.