

The world this year

Barack Obama was inaugurated as America's 44th president. In a whirlwind first year in office, Mr Obama overturned a prohibition on federal funding for stem-cell research, eased some restrictions on dealing with Cuba, lifted a ban on people with HIV travelling to the United States, pushed Congress to pass health-care reform, promised to close the detention camp at Guantánamo, pledged a cut in America's emissions and promoted the first Hispanic person to the Supreme Court.

A new sheriff in town

Mr Obama also set about changing the tone of American foreign and security policy, for example by seeking to "reset" relations with a prickly Russia and by stopping the use of torture during intelligence interrogations. Speaking in Cairo, Mr Obama's call for "a new beginning" with Muslims was applauded by the Arab world. The new president was awarded the Nobel peace prize, though many said this was premature. He defended the use of force in "just wars".

Iran and North Korea remained belligerent despite Mr Obama's plea to tyrannies to "unclench your fist". Iran moved ahead with its nuclear programme, conducting missile tests just before it attended talks in Geneva with six leading powers. A secret Iranian uranium-processing facility was discovered. North Korea launched a rocket that the West believed could target Alaska. Two American female journalists held by North Korea were freed when Bill Clinton went to Pyongyang to meet Kim Jong II, the Hermit Kingdom's ailing dictator.

American troops withdrew from Iraq's big cities in June. Earlier, Mr Obama presented a plan to withdraw most troops from Iraq in 2010. Sporadic bursts of suicide-bombings that killed scores of people continued to plague the country. A general election will be held in March.

Efforts to stabilise Afghanistan were hampered by a disputed presidential election. Amid claims of corruption and poll-rigging, Hamid Karzai was declared the winner, but only after his remaining rival pulled out of a run-off ballot.

It was the worst year by far for coalition casualties in the war in Afghanistan. General Stanley McChrystal, the American commander there, requested more forces to fight the resurgent Taliban, but Mr Obama came in for some flak for dithering over his response. He eventually agreed to send an extra 30,000 troops.

The violence also intensified in Pakistan, with the most savage terrorist assaults carried out in Peshawar, capital of the North-West Frontier Province. In October the Taliban attacked Pakistan's army headquarters in Rawalpindi. Pakistani troops began a campaign against the Taliban in the tribal areas of South Waziristan.

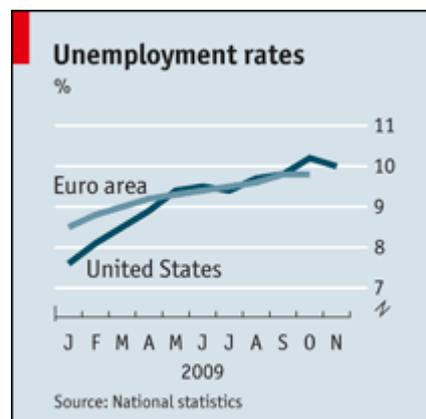
To the right, quick march

A military coup in Honduras ousted Manuel Zelaya from the presidency. Mr Zelaya found refuge in the Brazilian embassy in the capital. After much fruitless diplomacy, an election was won by Porfirio Lobo, the centre-right candidate, though many governments said they would not recognise the result.

The European Union's Lisbon treaty finally came into force after the Irish approved it in a second referendum and the Czech president (eventually) signed it. This did not lessen the enthusiasm of Eurosceptics for bashing the document. Herman Van Rompuy, Belgium's prime minister, was elevated to the lofty position of permanent president of the European Council.

Mexico's government in December achieved a rare success in its war on drugs when troops killed Arturo Beltrán Leyva, a leading trafficker. In March, the United Nations renewed its commitment to drug prohibition, though there were more waverers. Marijuana is becoming legal in many parts of the Americas.

China's economy began to roar ahead again; imports and exports grew following a sharp decline and its returning appetite for raw materials was partly responsible for a rise in commodity prices.



Labour pains

Governments around the world took measures to tackle the worst economic crisis in decades as unemployment shot up. The American Congress passed a massive \$787 billion stimulus package in January and the Bank of England implemented a programme of "quantitative easing" that pumped £200 billion (\$330 billion) of new money into Britain's economy.

As a result of such measures Western economies emerged tentatively from recession, allaying fears that the world would enter a Depression-style slump. But worries were soon aired about the sustainability of large budget deficits: America's hit more than \$1.4 trillion. The IMF, European Central Bank and others urged countries to take steps to unwind their stimulus schemes.

With stockmarkets up, and after passing government "stress tests" to see how they would cope in future downturns, many banks, including Bank of America, Citigroup and Wells Fargo, began to repay the bail-out money they had received at the height of the crisis. Many financed this by offering shares through big capital-raising plans.

'Tis the season to be jolly

Bank bosses were roasted by politicians for continuing to pay out large bonuses. The revelation that bonuses were given to executives at American International Group, a troubled insurer that obtained a \$170 billion bail-out, sparked outrage. Britain's chancellor imposed a supertax on bankers' bonuses in Britain.

Bernie Madoff received a 150-year jail sentence for defrauding clients of \$65 billion in his Ponzi scheme. Sir Allen Stanford, a Texan billionaire and cricket promoter, was arrested for allegedly defrauding investors out of \$8 billion through his bank in Antigua.

An Air France jet en route from Rio de Janeiro to Paris crashed into the mid-Atlantic in June killing 228 people, the worst plane crash in a decade.

The Iranian presidential election brought about the Islamic Republic's worst crisis since the 1979 revolution. Polls had suggested that Mir Hosein Mousavi, a reform-minded candidate, might defeat Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The scale of Mr Ahmadinejad's victory caused millions to

take to the streets to protest against what they said was a rigged election. Hundreds were arrested in Tehran and elsewhere. Dissidents were sentenced in a series of televised trials.

After a quarter of a century of conflict, Sri Lanka's civil war came to an end when the army overwhelmed the last remnants of the rebel Tamil Tigers. Thousands were killed in the final days of fighting and up to 300,000 were displaced.

Australia suffered its worst-ever outbreak of wildfires in February, in which more than 170 people died across Victoria.

Deck the halls

Revelations about the expenses charged by British members of Parliament crushed many reputations. The juicier claims included those for duck islands, manure, moat-cleaning and adult films.

General Motors went bust with debts of \$172 billion, America's biggest-ever industrial failure. The American government took a majority stake in the carmaker as it emerged from bankruptcy protection. GM and its rivals benefited from "cash-for-clunkers" subsidies schemes, which encouraged consumers to trade in their old bangers for more fuel-efficient models.

Chrysler also went bankrupt and was eventually rescued by Fiat. Other companies of note that went to the wall included Nortel Networks, a telecoms-equipment maker, Reader's Digest, Six Flags, an amusement-park operator, Trump Entertainment, a casino-owner in Atlantic City, the publisher of the Chicago Sun-Times, and Waterford Wedgwood, a maker of crystal and china.

A power-sharing government in Zimbabwe saw Robert Mugabe retain the presidency and Morgan Tsvangirai, the opposition leader, become prime minister. A month after being sworn in Mr Tsvangirai was injured in a car crash in which his wife died.

After Hamas stepped up its rocket attacks at the end of 2008, Israel began a major offensive in the Gaza Strip, launching air strikes and a ground invasion. Hundreds of Palestinian civilians were killed and thousands injured before Israel pulled out in mid-January. Following an investigation, the UN's Goldstone report, published in September, accused both Israeli forces and Hamas of committing war crimes, but reserved its harshest criticism for Israel, which rejected the document as grossly biased.

Binyamin Netanyahu became prime minister of Israel—for the second time—at the head of a coalition government following an election. Diplomacy over prisoner exchanges and settlement freezes continued at a glacial pace, frustrating many, though in June Mr Netanyahu for the first time publicly accepted the idea of Palestinian statehood.

Venezuela's Hugo Chávez won a referendum that abolished term limits for the presidency. Mr Chávez continued to harass the opposition and threatened military action against Colombia, after its government updated an agreement which allows American troops to use its bases to fight drug-traffickers.

The H1N1 influenza virus, or swine flu, spread from Mexico prompting the World Health Organisation to declare a global pandemic. Countries advised their citizens to restrict travel and avoid public places. At least 9,500 people worldwide are thought to have died from the disease so far.

Global swarming

Hordes of environmental activists mingled with heads of state at the Copenhagen conference on climate change, at which governments tried to thrash out agreements to reduce emissions.

In other elections, Angela Merkel was returned to power in Germany at the head of a new centre-right coalition, the Congress party increased its majority in India, Jacob Zuma was chosen as South Africa's new president and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was re-elected president in Indonesia. Japan's election was won by the Democratic Party of Japan, ending almost half a century of uninterrupted rule by the Liberal Democratic Party.

Greenland celebrated home rule from Denmark by distributing two tonnes of rare whale meat.

Georgia's entry was banned from the Eurovision song contest. Its ditty, "We Don't Wanna Put In", was deemed to be a swipe at Vladimir Putin, Russia's prime minister, whose "negative move" was allegedly "killin' the groove".

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