

Snippets...

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UN initiative struggling

A people's initiative calling for Swiss membership of the United Nations is faltering.

Supporters say they're still more than 40,000 signatures short of being able to force a nationwide vote on the issue.

The campaign started more than a year ago and is backed by more than 30 organisations. Voters rejected a similar initiative in 1986.

Calls to speed up reforms of technical colleges

The federal authorities have criticised the slow pace of reform in technical colleges. Education officials said there was a lack of coordination among communes and cantons and called for reforms to be speeded up.

But they said progress had been made to amalgamate the nearly 60 different technical colleges, business and arts schools.

Railways pledge to work on delays

The Swiss Fed. Railways say they want to reduce delays in train services. A spokesman said a series of incidents over the past months led to an increasing number of trains running late. A survey for September and October shows that 93 percent of trains were on time, missing the target of 95 percent.

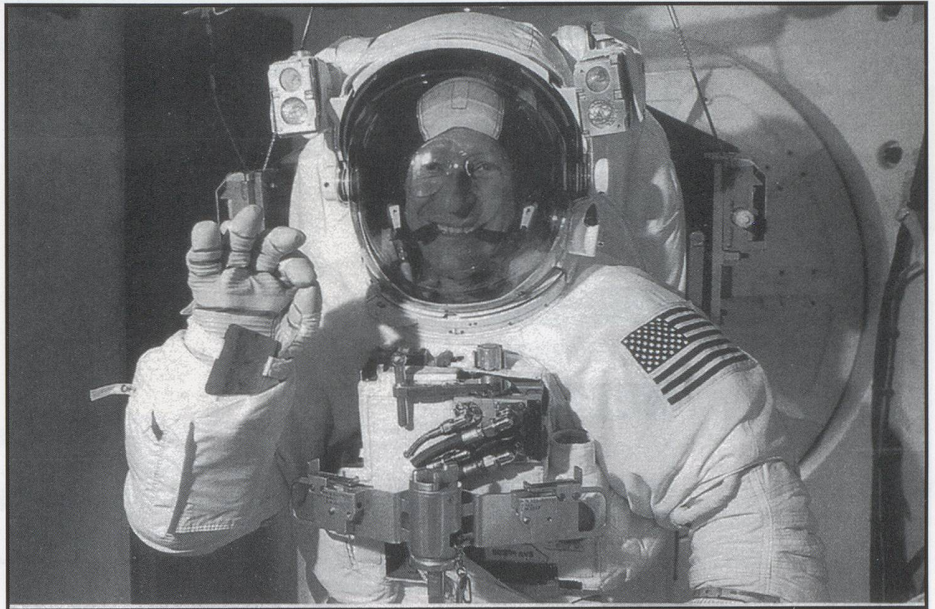
Swiss cheese scandal trial starts

A trial has opened in Italy, of dozens of importers accused of taking bribes from Switzerland's main cheese exporting organisation, the Swiss Cheese Union.

55 Italian importers of Swiss cheese are alleged to have taken kickbacks between 1987 and 1995.

They stand accused of defrauding Swiss, Italian and European tax authorities of hundreds of millions of francs. The Swiss Cheese Union has since been dissolved.

The trial is taking place in a bunker usually reserved for mafia-style cases because the local courtroom is unable to deal with the large number of people involved.



Fifty five year old Swiss Astronaut Claude Nicollier is looking forward to his fourth Spaceshuttle-mission this month (Dec.1999). It is planned that he will leave 'DISCOVERY' and have a 'free walk' in space !

Fewer Asylum Requests in October

The month of October brought 1,849 new asylum requests for Switzerland, the lowest monthly figure since August 1997, according to a report issued by the Federal Bureau for Refugees. The Bureau ascribed the decline to pacification in Kosovo. Since the start of 1999, 42,592 requests for asylum status have been filed here, about 33 percent above the number during the same period in 1998. But, on the whole, the situation has normalized since the record figure of 9,580 applications in June. Even in the event of an increase in the coming two months, the total figure of asylum requests for this year is expected to remain below 50,000.

Declaration Required for Food Imports

Starting next year, imported fresh meat and eggs stemming from production methods which would be illegal in Switzerland are to be labeled as such. This step, ordered on Wednesday by the Federal Council, is designed to protect Swiss farmers from unfair competition from such imports. Parliament had requested that the Federal Council increase the import tariffs on those products. But it turns out that tariff discrimination according to production method

would violate existing international agreements under the World Trade Organization (WTO). The new labeling requirement, chosen instead, may also draw fire from the WTO.

Marriage Fees Coming

Until now, the procedures for publishing banns and getting married have been gratis in Switzerland. But that is to end starting next year.

Recently, the Federal Council made public a new regulation under which the formalities for marriage are to be self-supporting - at least for the federal government. Cantonal governments will still be free to give wedding gifts to new couples by lowering their marriage fees or eliminating them entirely.

Also recently, the Federal Council sent out for consultation draft legislation on computerizing the country's marriage register. This threatens the very existence of the traditional family register, which is often kept by local registry office officials (as a sideline), either by hand or with a typewriter. Instead, a central registry data bank is to be created, at an estimated initial cost of Sfr. 4 million and annual operating costs of Sfr. 2.3 million.