

This week in history: December 1-7

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

30 November 2025

25 years ago: UN report reveals AIDs as one of the deadliest epidemics in history

On December 1, 2000, the United Nations and the World Health Organization released a report on the AIDS epidemic to coincide with World AIDS Day. An estimated 3 million people died of AIDS in 2000, including 500,000 children, bringing total deaths to about 22 million and approaching the toll of the 1918 Spanish Flu. Around 36.1 million people were living with HIV worldwide, 25.3 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa.?

In countries such as Zambia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda, AIDS overwhelmed families, schools, and local economies. Africans were dying in such numbers that schools relaxed taboos on sex education, graveyards filled, and orphaned children were left sleeping on the streets. The report warned that AIDS would slash economic growth in southern Africa, where gross domestic product was projected to be about 17 percent lower than it would have been without the epidemic. In Botswana, health spending was expected to more than triple in the following decade as governments struggled to cope with the long-term burden of care.?

HIV infections in the former USSR and Eastern Europe, where capitalism had been recently restored, rose to at least 700,000, up from 420,000 the previous year. In the Russian Federation alone, 50,000 new infections were reported in the first nine months of 2000, compared with only 29,000 over the previous twelve years. Russian authorities warned that up to 10 percent of the population could soon be infected, the sharp increase driven largely by intravenous drug use.

South and Southeast Asia already counted millions of HIV cases, with projections of dramatic increases in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and India as infections grew by double-digit rates annually. At the same time, Western Europe and the United States saw renewed increases in new HIV infections after years of relative stability.?

The response of the Western powers underscored capitalism's inability to confront the epidemic. Official prevention efforts largely consisted of educational campaigns and the distribution of condoms in sub-Saharan Africa and ignored structural issues such as clean water, nutrition, basic healthcare, and the social devastation wrought by debt and privatization. The profit motive, meanwhile, prevented basic efforts to save lives. Only a tiny fraction of those infected in countries such as South Africa received lifesaving triple-drug antiretroviral therapy that sold in the US for over \$15,000 per year.

Even the UN's proposal to combat AIDS with just \$3 billion annually was grossly inadequate before the scope of the crisis—a mere drop in the ocean compared to global military spending.

50 years ago: Indonesian dictatorship carries out US-backed invasion of East Timor

On December 7, 1975, the Indonesian military dictatorship, led by General Suharto and backed by the US, launched a full-scale invasion of East Timor. The invasion, codenamed Operation Komodo, began a brutal 24-year occupation that would claim the lives of up to a third of the territory's population, as many as 200,000 people.

East Timor, the eastern half of the island of Timor, had been a Portuguese colony for four centuries, while the western half was governed by Indonesia. Portugal's colonial rule effectively ended in 1974 with the "Carnation Revolution," which overthrew the fascist Caetano dictatorship in Lisbon. This sudden end to colonial authority created a power vacuum and a crisis of control in East Timor. The left-nationalist Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN), developed into a broad but unstable movement with support from among the oppressed masses for national independence and social reform. On November 28, 1975 FRETILIN issued an official declaration of independence for East Timor.

The US role in the invasion has been confirmed by documents declassified only in 2001. Still reeling from the defeat and overthrow of US-backed regimes in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia just months earlier, Washington was desperate to shore up its strategic allies in the region. Indonesia, under the violently anti-communist Suharto, was one of Washington's most valued Asian assets. He had seized power in 1965-66 with US backing, overseeing a genocidal purge of up to one million workers and peasants.

Just hours before the assault, US President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger met with Suharto in Jakarta. Kissinger and Ford were fully briefed on the planned invasion. Suharto requested, "We want your understanding if we deem it necessary to take rapid or drastic action." Ford granted his explicit approval replying, "We will understand and will not press you on the issue. We understand the problems you have and the intentions you have."

Kissinger then cautioned Suharto about the use of US-supplied arms, as it was then illegal under US law for American weapons to be supplied to another nation unless for “self-defense.” But he immediately provided reassurance that the administration was willing to flout the law saying, “It depends on how we construe it... It is important that whatever you do succeeds quickly.” He added that he and Ford could “influence the reaction in America if whatever happens happens after we return,” making it clear that the only concern was to have a plan to manage the political fallout.

The US backing of Suharto’s invasion translated into a continuous flow of military equipment, directly supporting the occupation and mass murder campaign. The human cost was staggering. Estimates placed casualties from military action, starvation, and disease at up to 100,000 Timorese within the first 12 months.

75 years ago: United States military begins evacuation of Pyongyang

On December 5, 1950, the Eighth Army of the United States began its withdrawal from the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, captured in October the same year. The US forces were compelled to retreat under the impact of China’s Second Phase Offensive, launched less than two weeks prior.

American intelligence reports estimated that the 100,000 UN troops in Korea were outnumbered 5-to-1 by the combined North Korean and Chinese armies, which were quickly advancing. The US-led forces thus began their retreat from Pyongyang, and other captured North Korean cities such as Wonsan, to the northeastern port of Hungnam, where they would be evacuated from North Korea by sea. The retreat was so rapid that the troops were forced to destroy stockpiles of ammunition and equipment.

The evacuation from Pyongyang was a resounding defeat for US imperialism. China’s entry into the Korean war—first in October, then a renewed offensive in late November—was a turning point in the war against the imperialist forces, whose string of military victories from September to November came to a drastic halt after they reached the Yalu River bordering China. The Chinese counterstrike involved battles at the Ch’ongch’on River and the Chosin Reservoir, taking the opposing military forces by surprise and cutting off any chance of a swift victory for the imperialists.

The response from the US military high command to these defeats was a further escalation of war. UN General Douglas MacArthur stated days before the evacuation of Pyongyang that there now existed a “state of undeclared war between the Chinese Communists and the United States forces.” He lamented the orders that prohibited him from directly bombing China, reflecting the tension within US ruling circles between their imperialist ambitions in the region and the risk of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, a formal ally of the Chinese regime headed by Mao Zedong.

100 years: Saudi forces capture Medina

On December 5, 1925, the government of the Hashemite monarchy in Medina in the Hijaz region along the Red Sea in the

Arabian Peninsula, surrendered to the Saudi troops who had been besieging the city, Islam’s second holiest after Mecca.

The Saudis, the ruling family from the Emirate of Nejd in the eastern part of the peninsula, led by Abdulaziz ibn Saud, had since 1924 been systematically conquering the Hijaz region, which was ruled by the Hashemite Hussein family, British puppets whom the imperialists had decided to stop supporting in the region, although the Hashemites continued to be figureheads for British imperialism in Iraq. The family still rules the modern state of Jordan.

The Saudis, who belong to the puritanical Islamic sect of Wahhabism, had committed a massacre of Shia civilians in the Hejaz city of Taif in September 1924, to international outcry, and were eager to avoid a repeat of the incident. The Hashemite forces withdrew from Mecca in October, and the Saudi forces entered it peacefully.

The *New York Times* called the fall of the city as having “possibilities of the most serious import for European powers having interests in the Orient” and referred to the possibility that the Saudis would not want to be under the heel of the imperialist powers. It noted that the capture of Medina included the first railway head that the Saudis had seized. Especially after large reserves of oil were discovered in the peninsula in 1938, the Saudi state became closely associated with American imperialism.

With the fall of the port city of Jeddah in January 1926, the Saudi conquest of what is now modern Saudi Arabia was complete. Ibn Saud declared himself the ruler of the Hejaz.

Despite promises not to do so, the Saudis almost immediately began destroying monuments and graves in Medina. Building domes or elaborate structures over the graves of religious figures was seen by the Wahhabi sect as promoting veneration, intercession, and pilgrimage to sites other than the Kaaba (in Mecca) and a form of polytheism.

First among these in Medina was the Al-Baqi Cemetery, the oldest and one of the most sacred Islamic graveyards, containing the remains of numerous key figures in early Islam, including many of the Prophet Muhammad’s relatives and companions, and four revered Shia imams.



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