

This week in history: March 23-29

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

22 March 2026

25 years ago: Kyanguli Secondary School fire kills 67 in Kenya

In the early hours of March 26, 2001, a catastrophic fire swept through a boarding school in Machakos, Kenya. The early morning blaze spread quickly, filling the room with flames and toxic smoke, followed by a roof collapse that pinned and crushed survivors. Sixty-seven boys died and dozens were injured. Some children were burned beyond recognition, forcing mass burial on school grounds.

While the scale of the tragedy shocked the world, its underlying causes bore a striking similarity to the 1998 school fire in Bombolulu, Kenya that killed 25 female students. A slew of failures—unsafe conditions, poor planning, corruption and severe underfunding—contributed to the horrific death toll and injuries at Kyanguli Secondary School. A government inquiry absolved government and school officials from any criminal negligence or misconduct.

Originally constructed to house around 65 students, school officials packed the one-storey, austere building with over 130 boys, aged 15-19. Iron bars placed over the windows prevented escape, and one of two exits had been locked from the outside. No evacuation plan existed and there was no functioning fire extinguisher. For those who witnessed the aftermath, the failures were painfully obvious. A Red Cross coordinator at the school, Vera Makuti, said, “If the building had big doors and windows without grills, I believe many boys would have escaped the fire before the roof fell in.”

The tragedy underscored the class divide in Kenya, where poor and working class parents often sent children to government-run boarding schools in order to escape the grinding poverty of the impoverished country. One father’s reasoning for sending his son to this school was shared by thousands: “We don’t have electricity in many homes and sometimes we lack kerosene for lamps for them to study... why not keep them in boarding if I can afford it?”

Boarding schools were prevalent throughout Kenya, numbering around 3,500. Almost 1,000 were operated by the Catholic Church. For one year of education and lodging at Kyanguli Secondary School, families spent \$260. The boarding schools received minimal financial support and resources from the government. Students studied in overcrowded classrooms and dormitories where school officials rationed water and electricity and subjected children to strict discipline. By contrast, privately run boarding schools offered extensive resources—computers and fully equipped science labs,

costing \$5,000 per year.

50 years ago: Argentine military coup overthrows Isabel Perón

On March 24, 1976, a military junta led by General Jorge Rafael Videla seized power in Argentina, overthrowing the crisis-ridden government of Isabel Martínez de Perón. The coup inaugurated the so-called “National Reorganization Process,” a period of unprecedented state terror that resulted in the disappearance, torture and murder of an estimated 30,000 workers, students and intellectuals.

By early 1976, Argentine bourgeois rule had reached a point of total collapse. Inflation had soared to a world-worst rate of 713 percent, and the country faced a \$1 billion debt payment to international bankers. To meet the imperialist powers’ demands for repayment, the Peronist government attempted to impose the “Mondelli Plan,” a brutal austerity program that tripled the price of basic goods like milk and fuel. This sparked a massive strike wave across industrial centers like Córdoba and Buenos Aires, with workers in the auto, steel and textile industries paralyzing production and threatening to bring down the government.

The crisis was the final failure of the Argentine bourgeoisie’s attempt to use Peronism to stabilize the country. In 1973, the military had allowed the aging populist Juan Perón to return from 18 years of exile, hoping his reputation as a nationalist reformist could head off the revolutionary upsurge that followed the 1969 Cordobazo uprising.

After his return to power Perón made clear he was brought back to intervene on behalf of capital. His “Social Pact” was designed to attack the working class by freezing wages and criminalizing left-wing organizations. After his death in 1974, his third wife and vice president, Isabel Perón, took power. Her administration quickly became associated with the fascist paramilitary violence of the Triple A (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance).

Left-wing groups like the Montoneros and the Communist Party disarmed the working class by maintaining the illusion that Peronism was a “national liberation” movement. By subordinating the working class to a bourgeois-nationalist leadership, these groups blocked an independent struggle for workers’ power. This was facilitated by the Peronist trade union bureaucracy in the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), which worked frantically to limit strikes.

Autoworkers CGT leader José Rodríguez told workers just days before the coup that “the labor movement must not be responsible for bringing down this [Peronist] government, even if it is a bad one.”

Behind the junta stood the Ford administration and Henry Kissinger, who provided explicit support for the takeover. From the standpoint of Washington, the Peronist government was no longer a reliable instrument for suppressing the working class; Perón had failed to act with the ruthlessness required to impose the dictates of international capital. After the coup, US Ambassador Robert Hill immediately pledged “cordial relations” with the new dictatorship.

The “Dirty War” that followed was a systematic campaign of state terror designed to physically liquidate working class leadership. The military took over union offices and inserted a military presence into the factories—including those of multinationals like Ford and Mercedes-Benz. Certain factories would house detention and torture facilities directly in the plants, where militant workers would be “disappeared,” tortured and murdered.

75 years ago: US General Douglas MacArthur issues military ultimatum against China

On March 24, 1951, United States General of the Army Douglas MacArthur released a public statement that amounted to an ultimatum against China, threatening direct war if it did not cease its military efforts in Korea.

MacArthur declared in the statement that China had shown its “complete inability to accomplish by force of arms the conquest of Korea.” The United States had less than two weeks before recaptured the city of Seoul and advanced to the 38th parallel which divided North and South Korea.

MacArthur threatened that the United States may “depart from its tolerant efforts to contain the war to the area of Korea” and instead expand its military operations to China’s “coastal areas and interior bases” which “would doom Red China to the risks of imminent military collapse.”

The statement was released shortly after MacArthur was informed that President Harry Truman had planned to propose a truce to China. The US commander was deliberately sabotaging any negotiations and settlement. This was a major factor in Truman’s dismissal of MacArthur from his position, replacing him with General Matthew B. Ridgway on April 11.

This affair brought to a head bitter tensions within the ruling class in America on how the imperialist war against Korea should be conducted. China’s entry into the war in late 1950 revealed a sharp miscalculation on the part of the United States, which had underestimated the extent to which its military campaigns would be resisted. The victories by the imperialist forces between September and November 1950 were quickly reversed after China’s Second Phase Offensive, culminating in the complete evacuation of US troops from Pyongyang.

Truman initially reacted to China’s entry by declaring that the use of atomic weapons was under “active consideration.” His decision to eventually attempt to limit the war’s expansion reflected the fear of a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, which was an ally of the Chinese regime. MacArthur rejected this position and continued his push for direct war against China. In the months prior, he had requested permission to bomb China directly and to implement a naval blockade, as well as the

discretion to employ nuclear weapons, submitting a list of targets in both Korea and China that would have required 34 atomic bombs.

100 years: Murderers of socialist leader Matteotti given light sentences in Italian court

On March 24, 1926, the trial of the Fascist killers of the socialist parliamentary leader Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 concluded. Two of his killers were acquitted and three others sentenced to nearly six years in prison for the lesser charge of manslaughter. The latter decision was a farce since a 1925 amnesty law had already reduced their sentences. Two of the killers remained in jail for another two months and the ringleader of the assassination, Amerigo Dumini, was released 11 months later.

The murder of Matteotti in June 1924 was one of the turning points in the establishment of Fascist dictatorship in Italy. Matteotti had denounced Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini for electoral fraud in parliament and several days later was kidnapped by Fascist henchmen, almost certainly with the knowledge of Mussolini. Matteotti’s murderers, all veteran Fascists, abducted him and stabbed him to death in a car.

Mussolini justified Matteotti’s death as necessary in a speech in early 1925, and newspapers uncovered the role of leading Fascists in the assassination. The trial was followed widely throughout Italy and Mussolini distanced himself from the assassination. While the period soon after the murder saw mass street protests, by the time the trial was over, Mussolini had established press censorship and there was little public outcry.

But the verdict had an afterlife. Dumini, on his release, attempted to blackmail Mussolini for the Matteotti affair. He was arrested and tried for “offending Il Duce” (the Leader, the title by which Mussolini was now known) and jailed for eight years.

On release he fled to Italian Somaliland where threats of bribery led to an increase in his state pension. He then left for Italian North Africa, where, during the war, the British shot him as a spy. Despite being hit by 17 bullets, he survived the execution, made his way back to Italy, and participated in the German puppet regime known as the Italian Social Republic. After the Allied invasion of Italy, he was arrested and tried again for the murder of Matteotti, sentenced to 30 years in prison, but finally released in an amnesty in 1956. He electrocuted himself in 1967 while changing a lightbulb.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)