

This week in history: July 20-26

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

19 July 2026

25 years ago: African Union sponsors peace talks on Burundian civil war

On July 23, 2001, the African Union and warring parties to the Burundi civil war met in Arusha, Tanzania for a peace summit mediated by former South African President Nelson Mandela. The gathering resulted in a transitional power-sharing deal aimed at ending the fighting in order to restabilize the wider region, including mineral-rich areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for imperialist plunder.

In attendance were: Pierre Buyoya, representing the Tutsi-led government of Burundi; Domitien Ndayizeye, secretary general of the Hutu opposition party; Tanzania President Benjamin Mkapa; Kenya President Daniel arap Moi; and leading politicians from Zambia, Rwanda and the DRC.

The deal's public highlights centered on establishing a timeline for a three-year transition to democracy and fixing an 18-month leadership rotation between Tutsi and Hutu presidents to foster the illusion of ethnic unity under capitalist rule. President Buyoya remained in office as did his deputy Ndayizeye. Buyoya also agreed to the deployment of a peacekeeping force and promised to integrate Hutus into the predominant Tutsi army.

Buyoya had been warned that sanctions would be imposed if he refused to ink a deal. With the landlocked country's economy near collapse—compounded by war-induced food shortages, drought, rampant malaria and hundreds of thousands of displaced people—he had little choice. Behind the official curtain, Western imperialist forces controlled the peace process. They focused on restoring access to the Congo's vast mineral wealth—high-grade copper-cobalt-tantalum deposits in southern Katanga—a location deeply intertwined in the ethnic civil war. Rebel Hutu forces used the area as a strategic reserve base to launch attacks into Burundi.

But fighting continued to intensify. The major rebel forces opposed to the Burundi regime—the Forces for the Defence of Democracy (FDD) and the Forces for National Liberation—had no representation at the negotiating table. Even as peace negotiations proceeded, a coup attempt took place in the capital, Bujumbura, organized by hardline Tutsi army officers who considered Buyoya too conciliatory, for agreeing to negotiate with the Hutu opposition. The officers eventually surrendered, but the plotters had passed through army checkpoints unchallenged—a sign of their widespread support within the military.

50 years ago: First photographs taken from surface of Mars

On July 20, 1976, NASA's Viking 1 successfully touched down on Mars, becoming the first spacecraft to safely land and transmit long-term data from the Martian surface. Minutes after landing, its camera captured and relayed the first close-up photograph of the Martian landscape, revealing a rocky, windswept desert.

Initiated in 1968 under NASA's Langley Research Center, the Viking program was an immense cooperative effort mobilizing some 10,000 scientists, engineers and technicians across NASA, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) and private industry. Together, they developed two identical, fully automated spacecraft, each comprising an orbiter and a sterilized lander.

This historic achievement of Viking 1 was built upon more than a decade of pioneering exploration by the scientists and engineers of both the American and Soviet space programs. NASA's early Mariner missions mapped Mars' massive geological features and provided the atmospheric measurements crucial for designing Viking's heat shield and parachute systems.

The Soviet Union's Mars program provided invaluable data on planetary landing dynamics. Despite facing harsh environmental hazards and frequent mechanical failures, Soviet descent probes successfully gathered real-time atmospheric data. The combined lessons from the two space programs allowed NASA to calibrate Viking's deceleration algorithms, identify safe landing zones and automate its landing sequence to withstand dangerous Martian winds.

Viking 1 launched on August 20, 1975 and entered Martian orbit on June 19, 1976. The landing, originally scheduled for the July 4 US bicentennial, was postponed when orbital imagery revealed the target zone was too hazardous. After selecting a safer site, the lander separated from the orbiter on July 20, using a heat shield, parachute and terminal retrorockets to complete a flawless descent.

In addition to the photographs, the probe's direct sampling of the atmosphere confirmed it is dominated by carbon dioxide, with trace amounts of nitrogen, argon and oxygen. The lander recorded extreme daily temperature fluctuations, tracked seasonal wind shifts and measured atmospheric water vapor in a hyper-arid climate, documenting active planetary meteorological cycles.

On the surface, soil analysis revealed a composition rich in iron, silicon and sulfur, proving that the planet's red color is the result of iron-rich clays oxidized over eons. The geological data also confirmed that Mars once possessed abundant liquid surface water before drying into its current frozen, hyper-oxidized state.

While initial tests detected puzzling chemical reactions, a series of biology experiments ultimately confirmed that no metabolic life can exist naturally on Mars. The absence of organic molecules, combined with intense solar ultraviolet radiation, confirmed that the surface is

continuously sterilized by highly reactive chemical oxidants.

While designed to operate for just 90 days, the Viking 1 lander continued transmitting data for over six years, sending its final message on November 11, 1982. Its measurements proved that Mars is a cold desert containing the chemical building blocks of life, though its surface remains sterile.

75 years ago: Jordanian King Abdullah I assassinated by Palestinian gunman

On July 20, 1951, King Abdullah I of Jordan was shot dead at the entrance to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem as he arrived for Friday prayers. The 69-year-old monarch was struck in the head and chest and died almost instantly. His 15-year-old grandson, Prince Hussein, was standing beside him and narrowly escaped death when a bullet fired at him deflected off a medal pinned to his uniform.

The assassin was Mustafa Shukri Ashu, a 21-year-old Palestinian tailor. He was associated with Amin al-Husseini, the exiled Grand Mufti of Jerusalem—the highest Muslim religious authority in Palestine—and a bitter rival of Abdullah. The King's bodyguards immediately opened fire and killed Ashu on the spot.

Ashu had previously served in the “Army of the Holy War,” a militia that fought against Zionist forces in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. That conflict, triggered by the establishment of the State of Israel on Palestinian land, ended with the Zionist state seizing 78 percent of historic Palestine and the expulsion of some 750,000 Palestinians.

The killing was an expression of the hostility of Palestinians towards the complicity of Abdullah's regime in their oppression. At the time of his death, he was secretly negotiating a separate peace with Israel, having met with Golda Meir and the first director of Mossad. His annexation of the West Bank in 1950 had provoked mass anger among Palestinian nationalists.

The killing triggered a succession crisis. Abdullah's eldest son, Talal, was deemed unfit to rule by the British authorities who exercised decisive influence over the Jordanian state. The British Resident in Amman, Alec Kirkbride, managed the transition: Talal took the throne but was forced to abdicate within a year. Hussein, who witnessed his grandfather's murder, was proclaimed king in 1952 at age 16. A special tribunal sentenced six men to death for plotting the assassination, including the former military governor of Jerusalem, tried in absentia after fleeing to Egypt.

The assassination exposed the character of the Hashemite monarchy as a creation of British imperialism. Abdullah had been installed as ruler of Transjordan in 1921 by Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill to serve as a buffer for British interests. Western media mourned him as “the one man who might have brought peace to the Middle East”—a judgment that reflected only his service to imperialism.

100 years ago: French government collapses under impact of franc devaluation

On July 21, 1926, the French cabinet of Édouard Herriot fell after just two days in office—the seventh French government to collapse since the end of World War I. Raymond Poincaré then formed a “National Union” cabinet, serving as both Premier and Finance Minister. The immediate cause of Herriot's fall was the catastrophic decline of the French franc to 240 against the British pound, a nearly

tenfold decrease compared to the pre-war exchange rate. Treasury reserves had dwindled to 150 million francs, and capital flight was accelerating.

The currency crisis was a concentrated expression of the contradictions racking French imperialism after the colossal losses of the war. The great industrial trusts had amassed fortunes from war production, but the cost—1.4 million dead, devastated industrial regions and a mountain of debt owed to Wall Street—was borne by the working class. The French bourgeoisie sought to resolve this contradiction by squeezing the German working class through forced reparations, invading Germany's industrial Ruhr region in 1923, while simultaneously squeezing the French working class through inflation and austerity.

The reparations scheme had always been a fantasy. The Ruhr occupation yielded almost nothing but helped to spark a revolutionary crisis in Germany. The Dawes Plan of 1924, orchestrated by American finance capital, established a triangular system—US loans to Germany, German reparations to the Allies, Allied debt payments to Washington—with Wall Street as chief beneficiary. For France, it meant the end of the illusion that Germany would finance reconstruction.

Popular anger was directed at “Uncle Shylock,” and anti-American riots broke out in Paris. But this nationalist outburst was cultivated by the French bourgeoisie to channel working class anger away from the real culprits at home.

Poincaré's program was class stabilization in its purest form: indirect taxes that fell heaviest on workers and peasants, appeals to “voluntarily” prepay income taxes, and shelving the Bérenger-Mellon debt treaty as a tactical concession to nationalist sentiment while securing alternative loans from British and Dutch bankers. The “national effort” meant the working class would tighten its belt so bondholders could be made whole.

The Poincaré stabilization was not a triumph of fiscal discipline, but a temporary reprieve purchased at the cost of working class immiseration. The entire post-Versailles edifice—built on American loans, deflationary austerity and intensified exploitation—was destined to collapse in the economic cataclysm of 1929. For the French working class, the lesson remains: the crises of capitalism cannot be resolved through “national unity” but only through the socialist reorganization of society on an international scale.



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