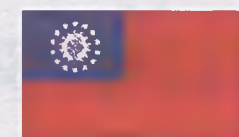


## NEWS IN BRIEF

STORIES BY ALEX MILLER

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### BURMA

AFTER NEARLY 50 YEARS IN POWER, BURMA'S MILITARY RULE HAS COME TO AN END. Following a national election in late 2010, the country's first parliament in over two decades has convened and effectively initiated a new constitution, reports BBC News. Though critics claim power will remain in the hands of military officials, a president and two vice presidents will be elected in the group's first session, which will last approximately two weeks. The majority of seats are filled by members of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which is supported by the country's military government, while the major USDP-opposition party holds no seats after refusing to participate in the November election, and only a small number of seats are held by pro-democracy lawmakers or ethnic party representatives.



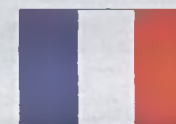
### UNITED STATES

IN HIS 78-PAGE RULING, FEDERAL DISTRICT JUDGE ROGER VINSON DECLARED that a stipulation within President Obama's much-debated health-care overhaul that requires Americans to purchase insurance is unconstitutional. Vinson's ruling claims the stipulation is so "inextricably bound" to other aspects of the law that it invalidates the bill entirely, reports The New York Times. Vinson stated that the federal government should adhere to his ruling and that all 26 states involved in the suite are henceforth free of any and all responsibilities dictated by the bill. Officials within the Obama Administration plan to appeal the ruling, which brings lower-level court rulings over the President's landmark bill to a tie, with two supporting its constitutionality and two declaring it unconstitutional.



### ECUADOR

IN 2007, ECUADOR'S PRESIDENT, RAFAEL CORREA, CREATED A PROGRAM CALLED "WELCOME HOME" that offers incentives for immigrants to return to Ecuador. With a struggling U.S. economy and high unemployment rates, Ecuador's offers of financial assistance to start businesses, one-way airplane tickets, and waivers on import taxes and fees on property they return with has been looking more appealing and the number returning is increasing, according to The New York Times. Although some Ecuadorians are motivated by the extra support, many are taking the opportunities to return home to their families or retire.



### FRANCE

LEGISLATION BANNING SAME-SEX MARRIAGES WAS MAINTAINED IN FRANCE on Jan. 25. The decision stated, "The principle of equality prohibits neither that the legislature regulate differing situations in differing manners, nor that it depart from equality for reasons of general interest," reports The New York Times. Although gay couples are given civil unions, advocates argue that gay couples are still not granted the same rights as heterosexual marriages.

## Kenya finds an off-grid answer in solar energy

By Meg Holden  
STAFF WRITER

Imagine walking two miles to catch a motorcycle taxi, then riding three hours into town just so you can pay to charge your cell phone. Most of us, raised in a developed nation where paved roads, cars, and cheap electricity are the norm, cannot fathom such a herculean undertaking. But until last year, this was the only way for Sara Ruto of Kiptusuri, Kenya, to charge her phone, reports The New York Times.

In February, however, Ruto's family sold some animals and bought a small solar power system for \$80, according to The New York Times. Perched on the tin roof of the mud-walled dwelling that houses Ruto, her husband, and six children, the solar panel provides enough electricity to charge the phone and power four overhead light bulbs.

"My main motivation was the phone, but this has changed so many other things," said Ruto to The New York Times.

With the benefit of electric light, Ruto's children's grades have improved, according to The New York Times. The younger children are safe from burning themselves on a kerosene lamp.

Ruto saves \$15 a month on kerosene costs and \$20 by not traveling to Mogotio, and is even able to charge neighbors 20 cents to recharge their own cell phones.

The New York Times reports that as small-scale renewable energy becomes cheaper and more available, it provides power to people living far from electricity grids and fuel pipelines.

"Renewable energy becomes more and more important in less and less developed markets," said Adam Kendall, head

of the sub-Saharan Africa power practice for McKinsey & Company, to The New York Times.

Evans Wadongo of Kenya recognizes the truth of this, having experienced life as a student without electric light, reports the international news agency, AFP. As a child, Wadongo struggled to study by the light of a kerosene lamp

**"This is a great example of using technology to liberate people in a way that gives each individual more choice and freedom with their lives."**

Kyle Dell, associate professor of political science

and permanently damaged his eyesight with the lamp's smoky fumes.

At 19, Wadongo created his first solar lamp using funds from a student loan to buy the supplies, according to AFP. Now 25, Wadongo has provided solar lamps to tens of thousands of Kenyans.

"I never thought it would take off on this scale," said Wadongo. "I just wanted to take one to my grandma."

According to AFP, Wadongo sees his lamps as "a way to

lift people out of poverty." Wadongo and his team from the "Use Solar, Save Lives" project identify a community that relies on kerosene lamps. The team provides solar lamps to the community, and even have easy-transport lamps for nomadic communities.

"This is a great example of using technology to liberate people in a way that gives each individual more choice and freedom with their lives," said Associate Professor of Political Science Kyle Dell in an e-mail interview. "There is also a tangible link between saving money in order to purchase a solar panel or cell phone and the ability to use that technology to then step further out of poverty."

"Off-grid is the answer for the poor," said Minoru Takada, chief of the United Nations Development Program's sustainable energy program, to The New York Times. "But people who control funding need to see this as a viable option."

According to The New York Times, investors are reluctant to fund projects that serve dispersed, poor, rural consumers. And the lack of a distribution network is keeping off-grid systems from spreading. The lack of a distribution network could be beneficial in the long run, though, according to Dell.

"By decentralizing energy generation, you essentially decentralize economic, social, and eventually political power," said Dell. "Distribution is no longer a means for a government or corporation to claim an unequal control over the lives of ordinary people in remote places in the world."

Wadongo told AFP that he believes Kenya's political class wants "people to remain poor so that they can stay in power." With off-grid solar power, perhaps Wadongo, Ruto, and other Kenyans can regain control and improve their lives.