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Walter Thurnherr



Over the last eight years, the Federal Council's chief of staff, Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr, has been at the centre of political power without actually being a member of the federal government. The Federal Chancellor has a direct line to the executive, which is why Switzerland's political parties regard the office as important. Thurnherr belongs to the Centre party. It was a surprise when he announced he would not be standing for election in parliament again. Thurnherr, 60, is well respected. Commentators agree that he threw himself into the role and exerted influence despite the purely advisory nature of his remit. Thurnherr always belied the assumption that you exercise such offices by being seen and not heard. He has an agile, analytical mind and is a popular and witty public speaker. Humour allows him a certain distance and reminds him that there is a world outside the Federal Palace, he once said. Thurnherr, a native of the canton of Aargau and son of a master builder, is no stranger to the world outside Switzerland either. After studying physics, he embarked on a diplomatic career that took him to Moscow and New York. The Swiss Abroad constituted his area of responsibility at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Many expatriates believe he was too slow in implementing e-voting later as Federal Chancellor. Thurnherr, who has plenty of digital savvy, countered by saying that e-voting needed majority backing, which took time in the Swiss political system. He has now stepped down of his own accord. The last legislative period had been difficult amid all the crises, he told the media. Thurnherr was non-committal on his future plans. He may now have more time to post on social media about strange mathematical and physical phenomena, as is his wont. SUSANNE WENGER

The Catholic Church covered up over 1,000 cases of sexual abuse

The Swiss Catholic Church is guilty of having systematically covered up or played down sexual abuse for decades. This is the conclusion of an investigation by historians at the University of Zurich, which has uncovered serious transgressions as well as “the most severe, systematic abuses that went on for years”. The inquiry was commissioned by the Swiss Bishops' Conference and its findings published in mid-September. The academics identified a total of 1,002 cases of sexual abuse, involving 510 accused and affecting 921 people from 1950 to 2022. But this was only the “tip of the iceberg”, they said, adding that not all Church archives have been examined yet. Many people in the Swiss Catholic Church were devastated by the findings, prompting a mass exodus of members. (MUL)

Federal Council considers banning Hamas after the attack on Israel

The reaction in Switzerland to the attack on Israel by Hamas and the resultant Israeli-Palestinian escalation was one of shock, with the Federal Council consequently deciding to explore whether Hamas can be listed as a banned organisation. Any formal ban would require a change in the law. In addition, the government said it was reviewing the development aid that it sends to the region, and Palestinian NGOs in particular. Switzerland also gives 20 million Swiss francs every year to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA). Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis said there was “no alternative” to UNWRA, and that no other NGO could do what it did with regard to health care and education. Around 28,000 Swiss nationals currently live in Israel. At least one Swiss-Israeli dual citizen has been killed in the violence. (MUL)

Swiss Olympic wants Switzerland to host a sustainable 2030 Winter Olympics in various locations

The Swiss Olympic Association (Swiss Olympic) believes that Switzerland is fit to host the Winter Olympics in 2030 – or 2034. It came to this conclusion in a recently published feasibility study, saying that the Winter Olympics in Switzerland would be a highly sustainable event held around the country at existing facilities – an antidote to the bloated, economically burdensome games of recent times. In the past, Swiss bids to host the Winter Olympics have mostly fallen foul of a sceptical public. Many have been rejected in popular votes, often due to concerns over the resulting costs and environmental impact. Swiss Olympic wants to avoid a plebiscite on the 2030 Games and believes the event can be funded almost entirely by the private sector. (MUL)