Barack Obama launches 2012 reelection campaign

President Barack Obama formally launched his 2012 reelection campaign on April 4. News of his announcement came via the Internet, YouTube video, Twitter, and in an e-mail to supporters from Obama himself.

“Today, we are filing papers to launch our 2012 campaign. We’re doing this now because the politics we believe in does not start with expensive TV ads or extravaganzas, but with you—with people organizing block-by-block, talking to neighbors, co-workers, and friends. And that kind of campaign takes time to build,” Obama said in the e-mail.

The presidential election is still more than a year away. Yet, Obama’s 2012 campaign is expected to cost about $1 billion. So, this announcement allows him to start raising cash directly for the presidential contest.

On April 11, Mitt Romney, one possible Republican presidential candidate, declared his intention to run for the United States presidency in 2012. The former governor of Massachusetts formed an exploratory committee to challenge Obama, a Democrat. “It is time that we put America back on a course of greatness, with a growing economy, good jobs and fiscal discipline in Washington,” he said in a video posted on his new Web site.
Japanese doctor and mayor among 100 most influential people

Time magazine’s annual list of the world’s 100 most influential people for 2011 was released in April. Among the list are those ranging from U.S. President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle, to WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange, Myanmar’s pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, and pop music heartthrob Justin Bieber.

The list included Katsunobu Sakurai, the mayor of the nuclear crisis-hit city of Minamisoma in Fukushima Prefecture, Japan. In an English-captioned video posted on YouTube, he recounted the harsh situation of his city some 20 to 30 kilometers away from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station.

“His plea resonated across the world, leading many to ask how a country so celebrated for efficiency had failed its most vulnerable citizens,” Time magazine said. “The residents should be the ones selected,” Sakurai said after hearing the news that he had been listed. “I just passed on the city’s current situation and what the residents are really thinking.”

The U.S. magazine also listed Takeshi Kanno, a Japanese doctor at the Shizugawa Public Hospital in Minamisanriku, Miyagi Prefecture. He helped move patients at his hospital to the highest floor immediately after hearing tsunami alerts on March 11. Over the next two days, Kanno stayed with them until the last patient had been rescued.
Hosted by Britain’s Restaurant magazine, this year’s S. Pellegrino World’s 50 Best Restaurants were announced on April 18. For the second year in a row, Danish restaurant Noma in Copenhagen took the title of the best restaurant in the world.

Run by chef Rene Redzepi, Noma has two Michelin stars. It toppled a reign by famed Spanish restaurant elBulli last year at the awards, often referred to as the “Oscars” of the restaurant industry. The awards were judged by a panel of more than 800 chefs, critics, food journalists, and other food experts.

Spanish gastronomy remains prominent for judges. Three Michelin-starred El Celler de Can Roca restaurant in Spain came second. Another Spanish restaurant Mugaritz was named third. According to Restaurant magazine editor William Drew, this year’s list is notable for the geographical spread with the first sighting of restaurants in Peru and Russia.

Japanese restaurant RyuGin climbed 28 places to reach No. 20 in the list. Additionally, Les Créations de NARISAWA, a French restaurant in Tokyo, was named best in Asia for the third year in a row and is at No. 12 on the list overall.
Brain-dead boy under 15 becomes organ donor

For the first time in Japan, several organs were transplanted from a brain-dead child under 15 in April. The revised Organ Transplant Law paved the way for transplants from donors younger than 15 with the consent of their families unless the child had previously expressed that he or she was unwilling to donate his or her organs.

On April 12, a boy between the ages of 10 and 14 was pronounced brain-dead after suffering serious head injuries in a traffic accident. It is not known if the boy was willing to be a donor, but his family gave consent to donate his organs.

The boy’s heart was transplanted into a teenage male patient at the Osaka University Hospital. Other organs such as his kidneys, liver, lungs, and pancreas were also donated to patients in various parts of the nation, according to the Japan Organ Transplant Network.

“Our son told us he wants to do a job that would be of great service to society. His wish didn’t come true as his brain didn’t recover. Yet, his body hung in there with all the strength he had left,” the donor’s parents said in a statement read at a press conference by Juntaro Ashikari, the network’s medical section head.

In the same statement, the parents also said, “If parts of his body continue to live on in someone else, we feel a small measure of comfort in the grief we feel at losing him.”
Rescue robot Quince ready to probe nuclear plant

Researchers across Japan have developed a rescue robot called Quince that can probe hazardous sites after a disaster. As concern has grown over the impact of radiation exposure on relief workers, Japan is finally ready to deploy the robot at the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station.

Quince has been improved to carry thermal imaging devices, a radiation counter, a 3D scanner, and a camera capable of panning, tilting and zooming. This means that the robot can explore the inside of reactor buildings while being remotely controlled from a distance of up to two kilometers.

Quince was developed by Eiji Koyanagi, a deputy director of Chiba Institute of Technology’s Future Robotics Technology Center; Satoshi Tadokoro, a professor of robotics at Tohoku University; and other researchers. The robot has excellent mobility for moving through debris and going up and down stairs.

Tokyo Electric Power Co. has deployed PackBot robots, manufactured by U.S. company iRobot Corp., to measure radiation levels and take photographs at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. Yet, since Japan is recognized as one of world’s leaders in robotic technology, the ongoing crisis in Fukushima may provide the perfect opportunity to utilize Quince to gain first-hand experience and expertise in a real-life disaster situation.
Automakers unveil new vehicles at Shanghai auto show

In April, the 14th Shanghai International Automobile Industry Exhibition was held at the Shanghai New International Expo Center in China. The motor show brought together nearly 2,000 automotive companies from 20 countries and regions. It featured about 30 foreign vehicle brands. German automaker Volkswagen unveiled its latest incarnation of the iconic Beetle.

Several top executives from Japanese automakers attended the April 19 opening of the motor show. They gathered in Shanghai to outline the status of their recovery after the massive March 11 quake and tsunami and to reassure Chinese consumers, dealerships, and employees.

“I thought that our mission is to strive to continue to deliver better cars to customers around the world,” Toyota Motor Corp.’s President Akio Toyoda said in a speech at the event.

Japanese automakers showcased new fuel-efficient small cars and electric vehicles. Honda Motor Co. announced that it will begin producing electric cars in China in 2012, while Mitsubishi Motors Corp. said that in 2013, it will start manufacturing a new compact car in China named Global Small.

Nissan Motor Co. will start producing and selling its remodeled version of the popular Tiida hatchback at the end of May in China. The new Tiida features a redesigned body, improved driver visibility and increased knee room in the back seats.
After nearly 30 years of duty, NASA’s space shuttles will retire from service and be on display at facilities across the United States. On April 12, NASA administrator Charles Bolden announced where four shuttle orbiters would end up at the conclusion of the space shuttle program.

Space Shuttle Enterprise, the first orbiter ever built, will move from the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Virginia to the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum in New York. The Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center will get Space Shuttle Discovery, which completed its final mission in March.

Space Shuttle Endeavour will go to the California Science Center in Los Angeles. The Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Florida was selected to display Space Shuttle Atlantis upon retirement. Atlantis is due to blast off on July 8.

In total, 21 institutions across the country put in bids for one of the orbiters. “We want to thank all of the locations that expressed an interest in one of these national treasures,” Bolden said.

It was back in 1981 that Columbia, the first space shuttle, launched into space. Now there is one more shuttle flight left. Then, after 30 years and 135 missions, the space shuttle program will finally come to an end.
Ex-Sony president Norio Ohga dies at 81

Former Sony Corp. president Norio Ohga died of multiple organ failure on April 23 in Tokyo. He was 81. Ohga was named president of the consumer electronics giant in 1982. He remained a senior adviser to the company at the time of his death.

Ohga played a key role both in Sony’s move into the music business with the acquisition of CBS Records and in the 1989 purchase of Hollywood film studio Columbia Pictures. He also led the development of the Sony PlayStation video game player, which was introduced in 1994.

Born on Jan. 29, 1930 in Shizuoka Prefecture, Ohga studied to become an opera singer at what is now the Tokyo University of the Arts and the Berlin University of the Arts before joining Sony.

He was credited with spearheading Sony’s development of compact discs. His musical background led him to push for a 12-centimeter format because it provided enough storage capacity of 75 minutes to enjoy Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony on a single disc without interruption.

“It is no exaggeration to attribute Sony’s evolution beyond audio and video products into music, movies and games, and subsequent transformation into a global entertainment leader to Ohga-san’s foresight and vision,” said Howard Stringer, Sony’s chairperson and CEO, in a statement.

*All information is subject to change without notice.*