

Hello. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. On our program today, fuel prices are about to take a big increase in Indonesia. We'll hear about a mixture of politics and economics. Then diplomacy of a musical kind in Moscow. But first, new scientific details about how the Earth is changing.

Under normal conditions, NASA, the United States Space Agency, looks out there for new information about our universe. But lately researchers have been aiming complex devices at Earth. They hope to find out how healthy, or unhealthy, our planet is.

These scientific tools were designed to learn about water on the moon, and rocks on Mars. Now they can help us understand how volcanoes, wildfires, and even the severe lack of rain affect our home. The instruments gather information called a "spectral fingerprint" about how light interacts with the land. Robert Green is the NASA scientist in charge of the project.

"We can see the interaction of the molecules that are present in the earth's atmosphere, such as water vapor and carbon dioxide, and on the earth's surface in plants such as cellulose and leaf water and the other constituents of plants."

The scientific instruments were tested in high flying airplanes over the state of California. NASA plans to put them in a permanent Earth orbit, about 700 kilometers high, after the testing is complete. Mr. Green says the devices

help scientists discover a great amount of information that the human eye cannot see.

"We can map the species type. We can look at the biogeochemistry of the plants. What is the state of the chemicals in the leaves of the plant to tell us about their health and productivity? We can look at the different mineral signatures, which tell us the molecules in the rocks to know exactly what those minerals are."

Mr. Green's program is called the "Hyperspectral Infrared Imager Airborne Campaign." The testing will continue through next year. After the instruments are put into orbit around Earth, scientists will compare information from the last year to learn how the Earth is changing. This could allow policy makers to make better decisions, so we humans can learn how to adjust to new environmental conditions.

Indonesian officials are expected to cut fuel subsidies soon by 44 percent. If that happens, fuel prices will increase. Economists say the payments are a costly expense that adds to Indonesia's dependence on foreign oil imports. But these assistance payments by the government remain politically popular, and politicians are worried about the public's reaction. June Simms tells us more.

Rising gasoline costs are disliked around the world and especially in Indonesia, a nation that has been heavily dependent on subsidized fuel. Last year, the government planned to cut the fuel subsidy. But public anger caused it not to act.

This year, the proposed cuts no longer depend on a Parliament vote. On his official Twitter account, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono admits that it will be the toughest decision of his presidency. Political commentator Aleksius Jemadu says the president's decision is both political and economic.

"They want to achieve two goals at the same time. They want to achieve their economic goals to decrease the deficit of the state budget. "But at the same time they also (want to) take care of their popularity,"

In a nation where more than one million people live on less than two dollars a day, cheap fuel is good politics. But critics say the fuel subsidy is poorly targeted. They say it unfairly aids the middle class. And some economists say the subsidies place too much demand on the state budget and create dependence on foreign oil imports.

Officials have provided about 20 billion dollars for fuel subsidies this year. That is 15 percent of the total budget. But that is not expected to be enough to cover the cost. Fuel subsidies are a strong issue. But a top economist at Standard Chartered says Indonesia is still doing well compared to financial deficits in the United States, Europe and Japan. Fauzi Ichsan says that

economically, it is good to raise fuel prices. He says Indonesian fuel prices are lower than international prices by about 30 to 40 percent.

But he says that has created a lot of unwanted activities like smuggling and hoarding. Yet Mr. Fauzi also says there is no financial crisis. The change in fuel subsidies is expected to save Indonesia more than an estimated 2 billion dollars yearly. I'm June Simms.

In recent months, United States and Russian relations have reached what some people think is their lowest level since the end of the Soviet Union. But now, some Americans and Russians are attempting to build better relations through music. Christopher Cruise tells us more.

In the early 1960s, during the Cold War, a singing group from Yale University traveled to Moscow to improve relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. Fifty years later, Americans and Russians are, once again, using music to improve conditions between the two countries. Here is ILLStyle and Peace Productions. The American hip hop group tests their instruments as they prepare to make music in Moscow.

Mikhail Prokhorov brought the group to play in Moscow and Siberia in April. The Russian businessman and opposition politician also owns an American basketball team, the Brooklyn Nets. He wants to build bridges between the two countries.

He says culture, art, and sports can help build mutual trust and good relations between the two peoples. He has organized and is supporting a cultural exchange between Russia and the United States called Transcultural Express. Karen Hopkins is president of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. She helped to organize the musicians' visit to Russia.

“I think the IllStyle troupe is going to be a huge success in Russia. They're so talented. They're so young. They're so athletic. They're so urban. They're so American.”

A few days earlier, Irvin Mayfield and his New Orleans Jazz Orchestra played to a crowd in the house of the United States ambassador to Russia. The band played in the same room at the American embassy where the Yale Russian Chorus sang to Soviet guests half a century ago. I'm Christopher Cruise.

And I'm Jim Tedder in Washington, reminding you that world news follows at the beginning of each hour on VOA.