

News roundup 06/02/09

Contributed by Samantha Kett

Five-day inferno has wiped out 1,000 hectares
FIREFIGHTERS took five days to extinguish the inferno that engulfed the Marina Baixa area ten days ago, causing 14,000 people to be evacuated on their homes in 25 urbanisations. After the gale-force winds blew over a pylon on Saturday, January 24, the fire took hold threatening the safety of residents in Alfaz del Pi, Polop, Finestrat, La Nucía and Benidorm. Given that wind-speeds reached over 100 kilometres per hour, emergency services were unable to send out hydroplanes until around the following Wednesday. They also had to evacuate theme park Terra Natura and the hotels on the Villaitana complex, together with a nursing home in La Nucía. Over 1,000 hectares of land were wiped out by the flames, including around 700 hectares of the Puig Campana nature reserve. For most of last week, the whole of the Comunidad Valenciana was on red alert after a state of emergency was declared due to the increased risk of forest-fires presented by the gales. Miraculously, nobody was hurt in the blaze, and most people were able to return to their homes on Monday of last week. Finally, the fire brigade managed to put out the last of the flames at around 20.00hrs on Thursday, January 29. Environmental experts commented this weekend that the cause of the fire was 'bad urban planning'.

Worst 'flu epidemic since 2006

INFLUENZA has been rife in the Comunidad Valenciana this year, exacerbated by unusually low temperatures. Health authorities say the region has witnessed its worst 'flu epidemic since 2006. A total of 231 victims per 100,000 inhabitants have been recorded this winter. Whilst this is only a quarter of a per cent of the population, more than 150 cases in 100,000 is classed as an epidemic. This is particularly the case when considering that over-65s are generally vaccinated against the condition. In fact, the ministry of health says the worst-hit age-group are between 25 and 44, with women suffering from 'flu more than men. In the winter of 2006 and early 2007, the number of sufferers reached 26 per 1,000 inhabitants, but until now the incidence has been much lower. Accident and emergency departments have been full to bursting this winter with patients suffering particularly severe symptoms attending.

But the real figures are likely to be much higher, since those reported do not take into account cases of 'flu that are not treated by the medical profession.

Topical port expansion plans to be investigated by Brussels
EUROCRATS are investigating whether claims that the controversial port extension in Jávea will damage the environment can be upheld. Residents and local traders have been fighting the proposals for some years, leading to the plans being temporarily suspended.

But now it seems they may go ahead. President of the Petitions Committee of the European Parliament, Marcin Libicki, has written to protestors to say he has called for a preliminary investigation. Along with his application, he included a petition sent by the pressure group, containing 7,200 signatures against the plans. In the meantime, Jávea's mayor, Eduardo Monfort, has sent a petition to Brussels calling for the port expansion proposals to be dropped. The plans include creating 300 new moorings for yachts next to a new pier, and to demolish the old one. Residents fear this could cause irreparable damage to the La Grava and Tangó beaches. The latter is an important marine reserve which is home to numerous endangered species of sea life.

Xeraco 'stripper' sentenced

A **YOUNG** man who ripped off his ex-girlfriend's clothes during a heated argument and left her naked in the orange groves in the middle of the night has been sentenced to a year in prison.

In the beginning, the girl, who is from Xeraco, attempted to drop the charges, saying she had exaggerated. It later transpired that she feared her former boyfriend would take away their eight-month-old daughter. A court heard that the youth saw his ex-girlfriend walking along the beach in Tavernes de la Valldigna in June last year, wearing a bikini and accompanied by a female friend. He accused her of being scantily-clad so that 'other men could admire her assets'. Then he ripped off her bikini, but threw her a towel to cover herself up with. Two days later, the girl and the accused were travelling to Xeraco beach in his van in order to discuss access to the baby when an argument broke out.

Police say he then tore off her skirt, top and underwear and threw her out into the orange groves, where he left her. His sentence for domestic abuse was reduced to one year since he did not cause her injuries. He was also exonerated from charges of false imprisonment.

The accused has been awarded an injunction preventing him from being within half a kilometre of the girl for the next two years.

Beetles can count, scientists reveal

A **STUDY** at the University of Valencia reveals that beetles know how to count.

This ability has only so far been seen in mammals, birds and the odd amphibian, say researchers. Beetles apparently use the same number system as humans do.

The article, published in *Animal Cognition* magazine, suggests that basic mathematical ability is innate, not learnt. It means that babies of over six months of age are capable of evaluating the number of objects in a set or pattern, meaning they are later able to count when taught. Scientists have often wondered whether humans share this 'approximation system' with other animal species. It has been seen mainly in rats, monkeys, pigeons, doves, hens and parrots, and in certain fish, to date. But scientists from the evolutionary biology unit of Valencia university have found that beetles also have this type of brain.

Together with a recent study by investigators from the University of Queensland in Australia showing that bees have the same inherent calculation system, this suggests insects have similar mental capacities to humans and that mathematical thinking may be much more ancient than mankind has always believed.

Teen hackers sentenced over blackmail charges

A PAIR of teenage hackers have appeared before Alicante youth court this week after they reportedly introduced a virus into the computers of three people. This allowed them to manipulate their webcams at a distance and take pictures of them, which they used to blackmail the computer-owners. Investigations began after a company, whose computer system had been pirated by the hackers, reported the matter to the Guardia Civil in Alicante. The youth prosecution service was unwilling to reveal the identities of the boys, who were 15 and 16 at the time of the offences, or the nature of the blackmail and content of the photos. They have been awarded a 13-month suspended sentence during which their moves will be monitored. This is because the judge said they confessed to the deeds and he no longer considered them a risk to society.

Jail for dad and son for refusing to pay for 850-euro taxi-ride

A FATHER and son have been jailed for refusing to pay a taxi driver who took them from Alicante to the Basque Country. The driver warned the son when he called the taxi that the journey would cost him 850 euros in total. But the son said his father would pay it. To be sure of this before setting off, the taxi driver rang the man's father in Pasaia, in the province of Guipúzcoa in the Basque Country where his son wanted to go.

The father assured the driver he would pay him on his son's arrival. However, when the taxi driver arrived at his destination to drop off the son, his father was only prepared to pay him 250 euros. The case has only just come to court this week, even though the incident occurred at the end of May 2006. Both men pleaded guilty and were sentenced to six months in jail. They are also required to pay the taxi driver the missing 600 euros, plus his court costs and out-of-pocket expenses.

Bus driver on mobile phone makes 'dangerous manoeuvres'

A STUNNED bus passenger videoed the driver speaking on his mobile phone whilst on the road. The video shows the driver on the Valencia- Paterna bus getting into difficulties at a roundabout because he was driving one-handed. Despite being against the law and carrying an on-the-spot 300-euro fine as a minimum, the driver of the 140 bus on the Edetania line is said to have been speaking on his handset for almost the entire journey. The clip, now also posted on YouTube, shows the driver swerving all over the single-carriageway road and nearly catching the wings of passing cars. He then took a second telephone call just as he was entering the built-up area of Paterna. By this time it was already dark. The driver was travelling one-handedly along a narrow urban street with cars parked on either side. According to the passenger who filmed the incident, the driver appeared to be speaking to someone from the bus depot or coach company, receiving instructions.

Spanish arrests in multi-million UK stock market fraud

SIX people from Elche, Madrid and Barcelona have been arrested in connection with a 600-million euro fraud involving the UK stock market. The fraud squad in Cataluña and Madrid, and the National Police in Elche, carried out raids on six houses and seized a considerable amount of documents and various computers. Via complex market operations, the arrested parties are said to have made the values of their shares increase without their being any deposits as guarantees. They then sold the shares at a falsely inflated value. The Serious Fraud Office in Great Britain started investigations back in 2005 when the massive-scale scam, which took place in October 2003, came to light.

A company that figured in the Alternative Investments Market of the London Stock Exchange had to suspend the sale and purchase of its shares two years after the events, which led to authorities' suspicions being aroused. The company claimed to have 219 million euros in shares when it began floating on the stock market. It later advertised various financial operations, including a guarantee in the shape of International Credit Certificates from a Brazilian bank, in order to increase the value of its shares.

But in 2005, it revealed that it was unable to verify the existence of its rights to hold International Certificates of Deposit for the 370 million pounds involved in two banks.

False advertising to create interest in its shares was uncovered later. This led to buyers acquiring shares for phenomenal sums of money that they later discovered were effectively worthless. Last week, it was announced that six people had been arrested in Spain in connection with the scam.

Jobless man sets himself on fire

NATIONAL Police are investigating the death of a man who set himself on fire because he could not get a job. The Ukrainian national was discovered naked and with 70 per cent burns by a woman walking through the La Cova industrial estate in Manises, near Valencia airport, last Wednesday. Before the ambulance arrived, the woman said the man attempted to speak to her. From his slurred speech, she heard the words 'fire' and 'work is bad'. Police believe it was a suicide attempt.

They say there were no signs of any criminal activity, and have ruled out an attempted murder. A worker in a nearby service station was asked by officers whether anyone had asked to buy a vat of petrol, but he said no. The victim was taken to Valencia's La Fe hospital, but died from his injuries on Thursday. Police say the deceased lived in Alboraya and are attempting to trace his family.

The tragedy bears an eerie resemblance to a case in September 2007, when a Romanian set himself alight outside the provincial parliament buildings in Castellón.

His action was a protest over lack of help to allow him and his family to return home to Romania, since they were unable to find employment in Spain.

He died in La Fe hospital two weeks later and regional authorities paid for his wife and children to fly back to Romania, and for the repatriation of his body.

Tous family son-in-law faces jail for shooting burglar

THE son-in-law of the couple behind the famous jewellery and handbag firm Tous is facing 11 years in prison for shooting a burglar. Lluís Corominas, who is married to the Tous family's daughter, had received a call from the security guard at their home in Sant Fruitós del Bages (Barcelona) in December 2006 to say that two armed burglars had broken into the house. Corominas rushed to the scene and shot at the intruders, one of whom died from his injuries. This was the second attempted burglary on the Tous house in four days. The prosecution service have brought a murder case against him, aggravated by what they describe as an abuse of authority but mitigated by the fact he acted out of fear on the spur of the moment. However, he has been cleared of the attempted murder of the second man, since he did not shoot him again but pinned him down until the police arrived. He could also be ordered to pay 90,000 euros in compensation to the dead burglar's wife and 150,000 euros to his young son. Corominas was released in February 2007 after paying 150,000 euros in bail. He is due to stand trial shortly.

Nationwide net paedophile ring uncovered

A MASSIVE nationwide child porn network has been disbanded following 14 months of police investigations.

Two arrests were made on Spain's east coast, in Lorca (Murcia) and Quart de Poblet (Valencia). Another man from Benidorm and an individual from Sedaví (Valencia) are among 18 people thought to be implicated, but not held in custody. The third detainee is from Hinojos (Huelva province) and another 16 are being questioned from all over Spain, including the Canary Islands. This week, officers raided 22 properties across the country and took away substantial amounts of computer equipment including 400 CDs and 37 hard drives. They have been on the case since the end of 2007 when a member of the public accidentally downloaded a site bearing graphic photographs of children, and reported it to the police.

CAM to pay dividends and La Caixa and Santander still lending

CAM Bank has become the first financial institution to pay dividends, in defiance of the credit crunch. Its figures reveal share profits of 390 million euros for 2008.

The bank has announced that it will pay shareholders 0.0438 euros per share, having registered a growth of 3.2 per cent over the last year. This means the CAM is the first Spanish savings bank to pay dividends. But it is not alone – La Caixa and Santander have since revealed they will also pay dividends and will continue to lend funds to solvent businesses and individuals. In the meantime, Santander has pledged to pay out the multi-millions lost by its investors as a result of the Madoff fraud. Overall, the main high street banks, including the above three and the BBVA, earned a total of 46 million euros a day in 2008. This comes as refreshing news in the current precarious economic climate, particularly taking into account the troubled situation of banks in the UK.

Motorway will ruin Sierra de Mariola, say residents

A MOTORWAY between Muro d'Alcoi and Villena would destroy an entire valley in the beautiful Sierra de Mariola if it went ahead, nearby residents complain. People living in Banyeres de Marinola, Bocairent, Alfafara, Agres, Cocentaina, Alcoi and Muro have formed a pressure group to fight the move. The Agres valley, an area of outstanding natural beauty within the Mariola mountain range, will be torn apart, they say. One woman whose family comes from Banyeres says: "This road will not benefit any of us.

"All it will mean is that tourists coming to Benidorm from Madrid for their holidays save about eight minutes on their journey." They have convinced the authorities behind the new motorway to stall for time after pointing out "a number of loopholes" in the plans.

The group, Salvem la Valleta: No a l'autovia Villena-Muro has accumulated over 2,000 signatures on the internet, and residents in Bocairent have presented nearly 200 more to the local council. A nature reserve that crosses the L'Alcoià i Comtat and Vall d'Albaida districts, spanning five villages, is dotted with numerous endangered species of flora and fauna and is popular with walkers and nature-lovers. Those who would like further information on supporting the protest can email plataforma.vallagres@gmail.com.

Massive blaze in Vall d'Albaida extinguished
FIREFIGHTERS have been working against the clock to put out the massive forest fire that has wiped out 90 hectares in the Vall d'Albaida and La Costera.

The flames started in the evening of Saturday, January 24 in Genovés, quickly spreading into Barxeta and Benigànim. Due to gale-force winds, emergency services were unable to send out hydroplanes to help with controlling the blaze until late on Sunday.

Gusts of up to 100 kilometres per hour meant that the flames spread rapidly, forcing the forestry brigade to work through the night. Even the army was called in to lend a hand.

In the end, some 225 rescue workers were on the case. Although the fire was brought under control within 24 hours, it was not finally extinguished until the middle of last week. Fortunately, nobody was hurt in what transpired to be the second-largest forest fire in the Comunidad Valenciana in the same week. The largest took hold in La Nucía, leading to 25 urbanisations being evacuated in L'Alfàs del Pi, Polop and Finestrat, and the Benidorm theme park, Terra Natura.

Fiesta-goers brave the rain RAIN and cold weather did nothing to prevent thousands of fiesta-goers and paraders from turning out onto the streets in Sax on Sunday to enjoy the traditional Entrada of the Moors and Christians fiestas. The Christian teams Garibaldinos, Alagonenes, and Caballeros de Cardona, and the Moorish parades Arab Emirates, Turks, and Moroccans showed off their flamboyant, colourful costumes to a standing ovation from the people of Sax.

Notary worker shot by masked intruders AN employee of a notary's office was shot in the leg during a mystery attack in Llíria this week. María José F., 48, said she was baffled as to why two masked individuals broke into the office in broad daylight. "They never have more than about 200 euros in cash on the premises," the victim explains. She says her attackers had parked their motorbike some 20 metres from the office and entered carrying guns. They shouted "this is a hold-up" and "like in the movies," the woman reveals. At the time of the attack, her husband and son were also in the building, since they were signing for a property. The notary himself was in the boardroom with six customers, and a further seven employees and five staff-members were in the offices. They all rushed out into the reception area when they heard the shouts. "We thought it was a practical joke at first," explains Julio, María José's husband. "It all happened so quickly and there was a lot of confusion. They firstly threatened and pushed an elderly gentleman, who had suffered a heart attack in the past." During the scuffle that followed, the victim's husband and son pounced on one of the men and attempted to remove his motorbike helmet, whilst the other tried to steal María José's handbag. Shots rained out, before the men succeeded in escaping, chased by Julio and his son. As a result, María José sustained a shotgun wound to the femur, close to the groin. She was taken to La Fe hospital by ambulance, and remains there at the time of going to press. Luckily, her injuries were not life-threatening.

Youth breaks man's glasses for refusing to give him money A 50-YEAR-OLD man suffered facial injuries and broken glasses when he refused to give a Moroccan money. The man was in the bar El Llop on C/ Dos de Maig in Ontinyent when he was approached by the immigrant, 20, who asked him for cash.

When he refused this request, the youth hit him in the face, smashing his glasses.

Both parties were taken to accident and emergency at Ontinyent hospital for treatment.

Human excrement leakages into hospital strongroom

A LEADING Spanish union has complained about the insalubrious state of Xàtiva hospital's archive room as a result of a leaky toilet system. The general workers' union, or UGT, says the strongroom at the hospital is full of cockroaches and that periodically, raw sewage floods it out. As well as being a threat to workers' health, the leaks could cause irreparable damage to patients' files. Many are already soaked with dirty water.

UGT representatives complain that there is no investment in the hospital's maintenance.

They also say the files should be held on computer to avoid valuable information being lost. But to do this, more administration staff are needed and health authorities have not fulfilled their promise to fund these jobs, reveals the UGT. They say the mains drainage installation is around 25 years old. UGT leaders have complained about the poor maintenance of health service buildings in La Costera in general, including the doctors' surgery in Ontinyent. There are no toilets in the consultancy rooms, meaning doctors have to wash their hands in the bathrooms in the waiting room intended for members of the public. Ontinyent hospital, although not flooded out with raw sewage, suffers similar maintenance problems to those of Xàtiva hospital, says the UGT.

Man, 50, dies in tractor accident A TRACTOR-DRIVER lost his life when his vehicle overturned in L'Oliveria on Saturday. Emergency services reveal that the incident occurred at around 18.40hrs whilst the 50-year-old man was working the fields. After the tractor tipped over, the driver became trapped there until the ambulance reached the scene. But when paramedics arrived, he had already died from his injuries.

Moors and Christians are 150 years old ONTINYENT has announced plans for a more spectacular show than ever at its Moors and Christians festival to mark the 150th anniversary of the popular fiesta.

Every effort will be made to make this year's event the most colourful, fun and memorable Moors and Christians that the town has ever seen. At a meeting of the fiesta society this week, members agreed not to let the credit crunch spoil the party but to do their best to cut unnecessary expenses. Ontinyent's Moors and Christians boasts the prestigious title of Festival of International Tourist Interest, a status that makes it stand out among all the others in the region.

Shop 'til you drop in Xàtiva XÀTIVA'S shopkeepers want to promote their town as a retail heaven in order to bring in customers from far and wide. During a recent meeting with the Xàtiva traders' association, ADEXA, this week, members discussed moves to put the town on the map as an "open-air shopping mall". This will include numerous advertising and special offer campaigns over the next few months. Optimistic in the face of the credit crunch, members say 2009 will be a year of bright ideas designed to get customers through the door. They also reveal that this year's Outlet Fair - where top-quality goods are sold off at rock-bottom prices - will proceed as normal in its usual location, Avenida Jaume I.

Carers given free course A GROUP of carers in Xàtiva have been attending a free course run by the local authority on how to look after their charges. They are being taught about health matters, feeding, hygiene, skin care, incontinence, mobility and handling dementia. Those who were given the chance to attend the course were among those continuing to attempt to claim a carers' allowance, as provided for by the relatively recent Law of Dependence. Xàtiva was picked as the pioneering town in the region to run this type of training, aimed at non-professional carers who look after elderly, sick or disabled relatives full- or part-time.

These people – statistically more women than men and more likely to be over the age of 60 – often go unnoticed by society and few have managed to obtain the benefits they are entitled to under 2007's carers' law.

Llíria school says pupils' parents 'pleased' with school uniform SCHOOL uniforms are likely to be rolled out to more centres across the region, given the popularity of the move since it was introduced last year. The Sant Miquel primary school in Llíria says the parents of its pupils are particularly keen on the idea.

'It was the parents' idea at the outset, and we're very pleased,' says PTA representative Roser Frontera. 'Uniforms are gradually being used more and more in the school.'

'The four items of clothing necessary come out at about 62 euros and last for the whole year,' Frontera reveals. Education authorities had initially predicted a spend of 100 euros per parent, and offers 20 euros towards it per pupil. The only parents who are less keen are those with children in the final year of primary school, since it means spending money on a uniform that the pupils will never wear again after the summer.

Mum of Down's boy threatens to sue school

A MUM whose son suffers from a heart condition has threatened legal action against his school after they announced plans to reduce the amount of home tuition they have been providing for him. Carmen C. Escutia says her son Ricardo Quesada, 12, had been receiving 12 hours of classes at home. The grant-maintained Santa Ana school in Llíria had also agreed to extend this to 19 hours when they boy was unable to attend class due to his illness. But now they have warned that from this week, they are cutting him down to five hours a week. Ricardo has Down's Syndrome, a heart complaint, and only one lung working. This means he is unable to go to school regularly during the coldest months of the year. Carmen says when he was born, doctors did not hold out much hope of his survival, but that his having lived almost into his teens was 'thanks to the care he receives at home'. She says if the school carries out its threats, she will take them to court. However, to date there is no law covering the education at home of children with chronic illnesses.

White weekend in the Sierra de Mariola HEAVY snowfall in the northern and inland parts of the region has led to roads being blocked and drivers trapped on the roads. Between noon and 14.00hrs on Sunday, the Sierra de Mariola between Banyeres, Alcoi, Ontinyent, Bocairent and Cocentaina was covered in a white blanket, as was the Font Roja and the Sierra de Aitana.

In these areas, however, the snow only reached around two inches in depth and mainly fell in higher altitudes. Although the worst of the weather was in the Utiel area and the province of Castellón, flights to Valencia and Alicante from Madrid were delayed as snowfall in the capital prevented their taking off.

Urbanisation director gets two years behind bars

A DIRECTOR who reportedly kept more than 37,000 euros for himself from a property development he was working for in Dénia has been sentenced to two years in prison.

He is said to have taken advantage of the access he had in his capacity as director to the bank account of the community of residents. The accused is believed to have written out cheques for himself periodically. In addition to a two-year prison sentence, he has also been ordered to pay a fine and to refund the 37,000 euros to the community of residents.

Cullera could enter Guinness Book of Records CULLERA wants to get into the Guinness Book of Records for its unique Hollywood-style sign, which is visible for miles from the motorway and the train to Valencia.

Created in the 1960s by Cullera resident Enrique Torres, each letter of the town's name, emblazoned across the mountain, is 40 metres high and three metres wide.

The length of the sign is around that of a football pitch. It is even visible on Google Earth. Often compared to the famous sign in Tinseltown, the difference is that Cullera's is painted onto the mountainside, whereas Hollywood's is on a huge metallic structure of individual letters planted into the ground. Local authorities are looking into fitting lights onto the letters, meaning it would show up at night. This could happen as early as next month. Although it may not be visible from outer space or even from an aeroplane, Cullera council believes it has a case for applying for the world record as the largest illuminated town-sign on a mountainside. Putting Cullera on the map in more ways than one, tourism councillor Manuel López says the sign bearing the name of this popular seaside holiday town is 'the best advertising board we could possibly have.'

Ferry passenger caught with marihuana

YET another passenger heading out of Dénia ferry port has been arrested for drug-trafficking. Almost every week, customs officers catch someone attempting to board for the Balearic Islands carrying illegal substances. This week, a 23-year-old Spaniard was pulled over and searched when port workers saw he was acting suspiciously as he was embarking the ship to Palma de Mallorca. They said he appeared nervous. Police checked his identification and discovered a plastic bag full of marihuana inside his clothing, and another in his bag.

He has been taken into custody pending further questioning.

Car park attendant beaten unconscious for mobile phone GUARDIA Civil officers have arrested three teenage boys over the violent mugging of a car park attendant. The employee was on duty in an underground car park in Calpe at around 02.00hrs on January 17 when he was approached by three masked individuals.

They reportedly punched and kicked him, leaving him lying on the floor nearly unconscious, and stole his mobile telephone. This week, police revealed that they had detained two men of Spanish and Russian nationality, aged 18 and 19, after 11 days of investigations. The third suspect, who has been taken into custody, is said to be underage and his identity has not been revealed.

Urgencias patients suffer 14-hour waits WAITS of up to 14 hours were suffered by patients attending A&E at

Dénia's new hospital last week. Following the department's move from the existing Marina Alta district hospital, patients have described the situation as 'chaotic'. A woman who brought her mother in with symptoms of a heart attack said she waited from 15.30hrs until 19.00hrs before she was seen as there was no doctor available. Outpatients attending cardiology since before Christmas have had their appointments cancelled and no new dates supplied. They were told they would need to continue to attend the La Pedrera centre, but a chance telephone call by one patient revealed all but one cardiologist has now moved to the new hospital near La Xara. Patients with minor complaints who attended Urgencias last week say they were waiting for up to 14 hours to be seen.

Some said they called the Local Police and the Guardia Civil, but Marina Salud, the company now managing the health service in the Marina Alta, said it is unaware of this situation. Any emergencies requiring treatment in A&E should now head for the new hospital. Those who are uncertain of where to go for outpatient appointments should ring Marina Salud on 96 642 90 00 or the old La Pedrera hospital on 96 557 97 00.

'Billy Elliot' banned from Spanish gym championships

A REAL-LIVE Billy Elliot says he has been refused entry to a rhythmic gymnastics championship – because he is a boy. Juan Pérez, 12, from Sueca, wants to try for the honour of Spanish champion, but only girls are allowed to take part.

The Spanish Rhythmic Gymnastics Federation says the rules have recently changed and 'there is no regulation that permits' boys to take part. This week, a meeting with the delegate commission of this body was due to take place with a view to allowing Juan and other boys to join in. They claim there is a 'legal loophole' left by the International Federation that currently prevents it. Juan's mother, María Jesús Navarro, says her son's situation is 'inconceivable, in a society that claims to seek equality.' She says there are lots of other boys in the region who practice the sport and cannot understand why the rules have changed to stop them. Proof of this is Rubén Orihuela, from Sedaví, who has previously achieved the title of Spanish Champion. Like Billy Elliot, the ballerina of the popular Julie Walters film, Juan and Rubén hate football but love dancing.

Sueca town council has pledged to do everything within its power to 'stop this type of sexist discrimination from occurring.'

Ten degrees in the classroom PUPILS in La Font d'en Carròs suffer classroom temperatures of 10°C and eat lunch in the corridors, their parents complain. Mums and dads say they have been waiting for six years for a new school to be built. The existing primary school is too small for the number of students, and its installations antiquated. They describe it as 'the worst school in La Safor'. Temperatures that barely reach two figures in winter are even experienced in the reception classes, whose pupils are as young as three. Teachers have temporarily closed the music room and computer room, which are in a basement, because it is as cold inside as out. There is no form of heating in the school, meaning teachers have to plug in an oil-filled electric radiator which gives minimal comfort. In fact, the school's electricity supply cannot cope with radiators being on in all classrooms at the same time, meaning it often trips on cold days. During the recent gales, tiles fell off the poorly-maintained roof, putting children in danger of injury. Back in early 2003, the PTA complained to the education authorities that the school, built in 1961, was too cold and too small.

The regional government agreed to install central heating, but when they decided to build a new school a month later, the heating plans were dropped. Although the funding is there, no moves have been made to construct the centre. Teachers say they are expecting to be given some answers by the education authorities this week.

Residents protest over mobile phone mast JÁVEA residents are up in arms over plans to erect a mobile phone mast opposite their homes. Having been fighting the move for two years, 20 of the affected homeowners burst into a council meeting this week, demanding that the plans be called off.

Proposals have been on the table to install the mast since early 2007, but planning permission has only recently been granted. Those who live in the affected area, the Senioles district – which mainly comprises renovated country cottages – are worried about the health risks involved. Although nothing has yet been proven, it is thought that the radiation emitted by these masts can lead to cancer. One estate in Torreveija registered numerous cases within the space of a few years. Mayor Eduardo Monfort and town planning councillor Pepa Chorro say their hands are tied because the final decision comes from the ministry of industry.

La Xara pupils boycott school

SCHOOL'S out for kids in La Xara after their parents decided to keep them at home on Monday. The new prefabricated classrooms, due to be put in place pending the construction of a better school building, remain unfinished. After the old school was condemned due to its dangerous state, all equipment was moved to an old lighting shop which would be used as a provisional classroom for the 80 pupils. But parents are not prepared to let their children go to school until they have somewhere decent to take lessons. During a demonstration on the steps of the school on Monday, the PTA read out a manifesto pointing out the defects in the building that led to the drastic decision to evacuate the kids. They were forced to gather their belongings and leave class over fears that the building would collapse. To date, the prefab classrooms have no electricity, drips from the ceiling, and four anti-panic doors have not yet been installed. The aluminium doorframes are poorly installed and have dangerous sharp edges. They were told by the education authorities that the classrooms would be ready for the start of the spring term on January 7. Parents and teachers were then promised the rooms would be in full working order by January 12, and then by January 19. La Xara council has expressed its full support of the pupils', parents' and teachers' plight. They say they have demanded an explanation as to the reasons for closing the old school, but has yet to receive it.

The PTA thanked the council for finding the lighting shop to use as a classroom, but said the facilities remain insufficient with only one toilet for 80 pupils.

Fiesta character resembles mayor of Gandia

A SPOOF icon of Gandia's annual fair and festivals has been compared to the town's mayor. A poster designed for the international tourism fair, FITUR, which recently took place in Madrid featured Gandia's famous Tío de la Porra. The Tío, originally a send-up of Napoleon Bonaparte, traditionally visits all schools in the town on the day of the start of the annual Fira i festes in September to drag kids out of class and make them join in the celebrations. But numerous members of the public have said there is an eerie likeness between the Tío on the poster and Gandia's mayor, José Manuel Orengo. Luckily, Orengo is a laid-back gentleman with a great sense of humour, and when the likeness was pointed out to him he was said to be highly amused. "I'm used to seeing caricatures of me," Orengo commented. During the Fallas in mid-March, fiesta associations have no qualms about setting up ninots designed to resemble their mayor. He has been depicted in a wedding dress, marrying nationalist councillor Josep Miquel Moya – and even on the toilet. Fortunately, the Fallas do not have any limits imposed in terms of freedom of expression and public figures who are caricatured consider it a great honour.