

NEWS WRAP

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While Europe continues to be dependent on Russia for oil and gas supplies, there are no indications of a new cold war, over energy supplies. USA and Europe are annoyed over Russian arms sales to Iran and Syria, and Russian links to Myanmar, Russia's repressive handling of domestic opposition is also another cause of rift. Shrewd utilization of natural resources allows Russia to wield power in Europe. Putin's diplomacy has led to higher gas exports from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, through Russia, though Russia is unlikely to oppose the independence of Kosovo. The American missile defences will be placed in eastern Europe unhindered. Russia has been negotiating bilateral deals with the major members of the European union, like Germany. It has also completed literal agreements with smaller and weak governments in Hungary, Latvia and Bulgaria. But USA and west Europe would like Russia to treat its Baltic, Balkan and central European neighbours as fully independent.

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President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan had restored democracy in 2002, but claimed huge dictatorial powers for his office. The last elections were manipulated in favour of the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid's (PML-Q) party, even though the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Benazir Bhutto, won the majority of the votes. The constitution was amended with the support of the Muttahida Quamis Movement (MQM). Chief Justice Iftikhar Choudhary of the Pakistan Supreme Court had been giving critical rulings against the government. He had ordered investigations into alleged 400 cases, where individuals had disappeared, a large number from his own province of Baluchistan, which is insurgency hit. In March 07, Gen Musharraf ordered Justice Choudhary to resign, and brought charges of abuse of powers, Justice Choudhury has refused to resign, and there have been wide spread popular protests against Gen Musharraf. About forty people have been killed and dozens injured, in Karachi, in two days of gun battles on 12 and 13 May 07. The violence was perpetrated by the MQM, Karachi's ruling party, which comprises an ethnically-based mafia, with close ties with President Musharraf. The anti-government rally called by lawyers and opposition supporters was the target of the violence. The opposition parties, comprising the parties of exiled Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, and a coalition of Islamists, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), called for a national strike on 14 May 07, condemning the bloody killings.

There is an election due in Pakistan at the end of 2007, and democratic parties are becoming active, Gen Musharraf wants to get re-elected by the current parliament. He would like the next parliament to allow him to continue as army chief, an office which has been constitutionally conferred, with validity till end 2007. Gen Musharraf wants the PPP to support his policies. Mrs Bhutto has been in exile due to the corruption charges brought against her by the former government of Mr Sharif. Now she wants Gen Musharraf to exonerate her of the corruption charges, and also cancel the two term limit imposed on the office of prime minister. Liberal reforms by Gen Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, along with huge capital inflows, have contributed to Pakistan's economic growth of 7% during 2006-07. A state of almost peace has prevailed between Pakistan and India. But a low intensity war against Al-Qaeda activists along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, has created numerous series of jihadist terrorism in Pakistan. While Pakistan requires democracy, the war on terrorism demands continuity and stability. The opposition in Pakistan will widen if there are no free elections, and if Gen Musharraf does not adhere to the constitution.

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The Regional Centre for Exploration and Research, which is under the Atomic Minerals Division, has been exploring uranium deposits in the West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya, since 1991. Initial surveys indicated that Domasait had deposits of about 10,000 tons of uranium. The Khasi Students Union (KSU), the Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement and the Hill State People Democratic Party are opposed to uranium mining and open cast mines, for fears of radiation and health hazards. The union government is placing attention on Meghalaya's vast uranium deposits, following the Government of Australia being unwilling to sell uranium to India, until India signs the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. The Uranium Corporation of India Ltd has promised an investment of Rupees one thousand crores on roads, schools and hospitals in the proposed mining areas. While the West Khasi Hills Students Union (WKHSU) is in favour of mining, the situation in Wakhaji-Mawthab of West Khasi Hills continues to be tense, with the KSU opposing uranium mining. The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council feels uranium mining will develop the area.

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Supply of food and other essential commodities in the north-east have been affected, as a result of numerous bomb attacks on Guwahati's wholesale and retail business centre. Repeated bomb blasts by ULFA leading to insecurity, have reduced business transactions from Rs 100 crores to Rs 50 crores, per day, in Fancy bazar, Guwahati. Ancestors of the Marwari traders in Fancy bazar came to Guwahati, long before Assam was annexed to British India in 1826. □□□