

# NEWS WRAP

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The ethnic Indian and ethnic Chinese minorities in peninsular Malaysia descended from migrant workers, who were offered citizenship, on accepting that ethnic Malays and other indigenous groups known as 'bumiputras—sons of the soil' would derive higher quotas to state employment and education. During the fifty years of Malaysia's independence from Britain, all the diverse races in Malaysia, have benefited from strong economic growth. The ethnic Chinese comprise about one quarter of the population, and they are richer, better educated and more assertive, compared to ethnic Indians, who make up about eight percent of the country's population. The 'bumiputras' have higher poverty levels than the Indians and Chinese. The ethnic Indians who own lesser assets, are generally stuck in rented apartments, and urban jobs which require a low amount of skills. With official assistance, the majority population are racing towards the Chinese, in the ownership of property and shares.

Most of the temples in Malaysia have been constructed by Hindu migrant workers in colonial times, without any formal sanctions, on rubber plantations, or alongside roads and rail tracks, built by the migrants. Redevelopment of isolated land in Malaysia, has led to a drive to demolish temples. The government agencies are anxious to please rich land developers, and have scarcely settled any temple land disputes. Besides economic grievances, the Indians feel that their religious freedom is being curbed, by "creeping Islamisation". The radical protest group, Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) was formed out of the demolition of a number of "unauthorized" Hindu temples, by local governments, where the majority state employees are Malays, and generally Muslims. A temple in Shah Alam, west of Kuala Lumpur, was demolished before Diwali, in November 07. Indians assembled at the Batu Caves, and were preparing for a Hindraf street march. The temple managers, having associations with the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), locked the temple gates, and summoned the police. Many ethnic Indians were arrested. The next day, 10,000 Indians took part in the Hindraf march, which had to face tear gas and baton assaults from the police. The MIC is part of prime minister Abdullah Badawi's coalition government.

Mr Badawi tried to assuage Hindu anger, by assuring that one of the biggest Hindu festivals, Thaipusam, would henceforth, be a public holiday in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country. On 23 Jan 08, thousands of ethnic Indian Malaysians gathered at the Batu Caves, to celebrate Thaipusam. Malaysian elections are expected shortly. Mr Badawi has also constituted a cabinet committee to investigate poverty amongst all the races, in Malaysia. Following the Hindraf protests, five Hindraf leaders have been imprisoned without trial, under colonial-era security laws. The government accuses Hindraf of having ties with Sri Lanka's LTTE, which the Hindraf denies.

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Sources of controversy between Russia and USA and the EU, include oil pipelines, dependency on Russian gas, and NATO expansion. With the pro-Russian nationalist Tomislav Nikolic winning the first round of presidential elections in Serbia on 20 Jan 08, Serbia has signed an energy pact for

distributing Russian gas exports to Europe. The oil division of the Russian company Gazprom, the state owned gas giant, will be receiving a controlling share in the national oil monopoly of Serbia. Russia and West Europe are competing for influence in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, and also in a few EU countries like Bulgaria and Latvia.

Matching Nord Stream, an oil bypass under the Baltic Sea, recently Russia and Bulgaria signed a new pipeline project, called the South Stream, across the Black Sea. South Stream, bypassing transit countries like Ukraine and Poland, will transmit Russian gas direct to Europe. The rival EU project, Nabucco, designed to transport gas from the Caspian and central Asia to Western Europe through the Balkans, not traversing Russian territory, is now threatened by the South Stream bypass. Nabucco would become uneconomic. Gas supply for Nabucco would require to be carried in a trans-Caspian pipeline, which has been blocked by Russia. USA opposes any trans-Caspian pipeline from Iran.

The NATO summit in Bucharest in April 08 is expected to discuss membership of Croatia, Albania and Macedonia, for building an opposition to Serbia's reluctance to grant independence to Kosovo.

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The union ministry of External Affairs and India's internal security establishment suffer from fears of Chinese goods and spices flooding West Bengal, and the vital Siliguri corridor. Even then the union commerce ministry hopes to seek approval for expanding the list of commodities traded, at the 14,000 ft Nathu La Pass, from the existing eighteen to six hundred, allowing China and India to build capacities to transport movement of 200 to 300 trucks. Presently, the value of trade at Changgu-Renqingang trade post is a paltry Rs 18 lacs annually, with exotic commodities, like yak's tongue, predominating. China has a trade surplus of over \$ 8 billion, via Indian ports. Each ship of Chinese goods is equivalent to 20,000 trucks. India and China have agreed to raise the trade target to a billion dollars by 2015-16. A holding point 2 km west of Nathu La will be built, with a capacity of 1000 trucks. □□□