

NEWS WRAP

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Concerned by a poor human rights record, western countries are shunning Myanmar. India's objective of developing the north-east region, and China's determination to raise the economic level of western interior of Yunnan region, have enabled Myanmar to nurture close commercial interests with its neighbours. India and Myanmar signed a \$ 150 million contract in August 07, for gas exploration, in the southern gulf of Martaban. There are plans to construct oil pipelines into the poor and remote north-eastern states, where insurgency abounds. India aims to purchase the Shwe ('golden') gas, by offering the Myanmar government, soft loans and other attractive packages. Thailand is Myanmar's biggest export market till the Shwe gas appears on stream. Thailand's electric-city authority purchases \$ 2 billion worth gas, from the Yadana and Yetagun fields in Myanmar.

In return for commercial advantages, as a member of the United Nations Security Council, China can veto threatened resolutions on Myanmar. To avoid western banking sanctions, Myanmar may conduct all its Chinese Trade, in the Chinese currency, yuan. Myanmar currency is not fully convertible, but the country expects to have a large trade surplus soon. Off the coast of Ramru Island, the Shwe gas field, has one of south-east Asia's biggest gas reserves. Soon a pipeline will be constructed to carry the Shwe gas to China, via Mandalay in Myanmar, and Ruili in China. It is expected that by the end of 2009, a parallel pipe line will transport Middle Eastern and African oil, from a new deep water harbour at Kyaukphyu, in Myanmar, bypassing the strait of Malacca, and ensuring fuel for China's south western economy. The gas lies below former fishing grounds. The harbour's location is out of bounds for locals. Farmers are scared of losing their land. Construction of earlier pipelines from Yodana and Yetagun in the Gulf of Martaban, to Ratchburi in Thailand, led to dispossession and human rights abuses on a mass scale, in Myanmar. At adjoining Baday Island, inhabitants have been directed to leave. Underground activists have generated a small poster campaign.

The old Burma Road, constructed by the British, transports timber, gold, gemstones, and other Myanmar raw materials, through northern Myanmar to China, and imports cheap manufactured goods. The new pipelines are expected to follow the Burma Road route. A variety of projects in Myanmar, like hydropower, mining and road building, oil and gas, have involved about twenty Chinese companies. The main border-crossing between Myanmar and China's Yunnan province, has developed into a boom town.

During the second world war, the winding and cracked Burma Road, was used by the Allied forces to supply arms and provisions to the Chinese army of Chiang Kai-shek, in its war with Japan. A new 'Southern Silk Road', linking India to China, is under construction, across northern Myanmar.



Boris Tadz, the moderate pro-western candidate, was re-elected as Serbia's president. Fearing that the European Union is preparing to recognize an independent Kosovo, the Serbian prime minister, Vojslav Kostunica, did not finalize an agreement on Trade and visas, with the European Union.



The Akali Party introduced free electricity for agriculture, between 1997-2002, in Punjab, when they ruled. There have been change of governments in Punjab in 2002 and 2007, and free electricity did not produce any electoral victories. As part of a government subsidy, free electricity is costing the Punjab state exchequer about Rs 2300 crores annually. But power is rampantly misused in Punjab. Affluent, as well as the above poverty line farmers, have LPG connections, while electricity heaters are being used to dry cowdung cakes. The Punjab rural landscape is dotted with hooks connected to main power lines, for stealing electric power. The subsidy is becoming a big burden, as Punjab's finance budget is far from huge.

Amarinder Singh government had revoked the subsidy, but re-introduced it in August 2005.

The subsidy is not fully beneficial in the cultivated fields. There is inadequate electricity power, and power is available for less than five to six hours a day, outside the state capital. Free power has generated more power thefts. Erratic power supply is also inconvenient, as the limited power supply of four hours a day, alternates between day and night. It becomes worrisome to switch on or off electric tubewells between midnight and 4 am. Direct electricity supply from the main lines ensures automatic functioning, at inconvenient hours.



Since 1987-88, Subhas Ghisingh has been the chairman of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). The union government and the West Bengal government had allowed participatory elections in the first five years, even though they were stage managed. Ghisingh was deflected from his demand for a separate state, by turning the inclusion of DGHC into the Sixth Schedule, as a half way solution. West Bengal permitted Ghisingh to ensure that there would be no open contests for seats in the DGHC, as an autonomous council, within West Bengal State. Ghisingh continued in office, without elections. The ethnic identity distinction of the Gorkhaland movement was temporarily covered up. But liberal release of funds, without proper accounting, has led to huge corruption and violations of the rules of governance.

Dissent has created a dissenters' coalition under the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, led by Roshan Giri and Bimal Gurung. Subhas Ghisingh is banned from Darjeeling, a territory which he supremely controlled. The state government accuses the GJMM of destroying the harmony between Nepalis and Bengalis. Indefinite bandhs, called by the Morcha have crippled Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. □□□