

NEWS WRAP

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Exports of hydro-electricity to India, have given Bhutan an average annual growth rate of 7%, for the last twenty-five years. During the reign of King Wangchuk, life expectancy has risen from forty to sixty-six, caused by huge investments in public health care. Primary school enrolment has increased to 72%, a jump of over a quarter, during the 1990s. Even though political parties in Bhutan prefer monarchy to democracy, Bhutan held its first ever elections on 24 March 2008, as ordained by its king, Jigme Wangchuk, who abdicated recently. About 80% of the 320,000 registered voters, cast ballot. The Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) won 44 out of 47 seats, defeating the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The DPT and the PDP are led by former prime ministers, Jigme Thinley and Sanjay Ngedup, respectively. Voting was conducted in an amicable atmosphere, with Buddhist prayer wheels in front of gates of polling stations. Through decrees which preserved the environment and the majority Buddhist culture, king Wangchuk had maintained control over 700,000 subjects. The ecosystem has been protected, and Bhutan's draft constitution guarantees that 60% of the country would be forested.

Monarchic decrees of "Gross National Happiness" in contrast to economic growth, have given the people of Bhutan, free medicine and education. But 20% of Bhutanese live below the poverty line. With severe checks on Bhutan's timber exploitation, relatively few jobs have been created. Capital Thimpu has 100,000 unemployed. The private sector is tiny, and there are new limits on government employment. In 2007, only 800 of the 1200 new university graduates, obtained state employment. There are plans to double the number of tourists from 20,000 to 40,000, for creating 100,000 jobs in the tourism sector. A New international airport would be required, since all national carriers avoid Paro with its hilly approaches, except Bhutan's Druk Air. Poor farmers require to be extricated from subsistence farming. More roads would have to be built through mountain forests, in order to transport agricultural goods to the markets. Nine of the DPT's winning candidates are Nepali-speaking. The newly elected democratic government would have to focus attention on the 100,000 odd Nepalis, residing in southern Bhutan. Thousands have been denied citizenship, because of their association with around 60,000 Nepalis in exile from Bhutan.



An increase of 28000 US troops in Baghdad, raises the US presence in Iraq to about 160,000. March 08 marked the death of the 4000th US serviceman to die in Iraq, since the US invasion in 2003. There are still no signs of a political reconciliation between Shia and Sunni Arabs. While Al-Qaeda elements have been driven out of the Euphratis valley, a violent insurgency continues between Baghdad and the northern town of Mosul, along the Tigris valley. Rival Shia groups are striving to gain control of the ruling government establishment, which has led to an increase in violence, since mid-March 08. Clashes between prime minister Nuri al Maliki's Iraqi army and the radical cleric-Muqtada al-Sadr's Shia militias in Basra, have caused Sadrist militias across central and southern Iraq to revolt unitedly in other cities like Kut, Hilla and Diwaniya, and in their

stronghold of eastern Baghdad. The militias hurled a barrage of mortars into Baghdad's Green Zone, which is the headquarters of the US and Iraq government. About 70 Sadrist militia-men have reportedly been killed in a fortnight's shoot-out. US and British advisers provided discreet air support for the Iraqi army.

The scale of violence is declining in the Sunni-inhabited Anbar province, west of Baghdad. Attacks and civilian casualties are alarming in Diyala province and Mosul which is a stronghold of Baathists, loyal to late Saddam Hussein. Muqtada al-Sadr's ceasefire of August 07, was renewed in March 08, is still technically valid. Some of the recent fighting may have been directed against renegade Sadrist groups. There have been a series of government agreements with Sunni sheikhs in Anbar and parts of Baghdad, called the "Sahwa-Awakening", resulting in about 80,000 to 90,000 "concerned citizens" being armed, and directed against insurgents linked to al-Qaeda. The Sunni Shia-Kurd three-man presidential council has passed a budget. A law allows all civil servants to return to public service or obtain pensions, excluding senior Baathists. Another law envisages holding of provincial elections in October 08, hoping that Sunni Arabs and Sadrists who had boycotted them earlier, would be empowered, for engagement in peaceful politics. Laws relating to the management and exploration of oil, and sharing of oil revenue are unpassed, owing to feuds between Kurds and Arabs.

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In a run-up to the Karnataka Assembly elections, there is annoyance in Karnataka, over the Hogenakkal water supply scheme of the Tamil Nadu government. The reservoir on the Cauvery river, falls on the border of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. With monetary assistance from the Japan Bank for International Co-Operation, the project costing Rs 1334 crores, is expected to supply 160 million litres of water per day, to 40.4 lac people, in the dry districts of Krishnagiri and Dharamपुरi. An agreement of 1998 with Karmataka allows Tamil Nadu to execute the Hogenakkal

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