

NEWS WRAP

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Oil and terrorism are USA's principal interests in Africa. More than 200 people were killed, when al-Qaeda terrorists had attacked US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. USA imports more than 15% of its oil from Africa, and the import volumes are increasing. There are also worries about China's growing presence and influence in Africa. In 2003, during the violence of Charles Taylor's regime in Liberia, the US Navy had anchored off the capital Monrovia. For added security to the US embassy in Liberia's capital, around 200 US marines had reached the shores of Monrovia, as gun toting rebels and panic stricken crowds, roamed the fire-lit city.

USA's planned Africa command (AFRICOM) envisages a higher military presence in the African continent, and becomes fully operational in October '08. The real emphasis is on security, while persuasions on African governments continue, with references to soft power and the humanitarian aspects of the Naval presence in the Gulf of Guinea. Local African economies are hurt by thefts of crude oil, illegal fishing and immigration, drug trafficking and piracy. When local economies are adversely affected, political stability is undermined, leading to fears of rising terrorism.

During the first four months of 2008, an amphibious US landing ship, 190m long and a smaller high speed US catamaran came to the shores of the Gulf of Guinea. US troops landed in Liberia to repair roads, renovate schools and health clinics, and transport medical supplies and provide free health care. About forty soldiers from the New Armed Forces of Liberia (AFZ) boarded the US ships, for military training in martial arts leadership. The six month cruise of the Africa Partnership Station, comprising two US navy ships, the USS Fort Macttenry, and the twin-hulled USS Swift, has covered seven countries of Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Liberia, Sao Tome and Principe and Senegal, in the Gulf of Guinea. Along with improvements in maritime security, US influence is being enlarged in the oil-rich littoral states. AFRICOM has a multinational, multi-agency partnerships and relationships, similar to NATO. Since November '07, more than 1200 African Troops have been trained on board the Fort Mac Henry. Naval officers from Britain, Cameroon, France, Germany, Ghana and Portugal were given commanding roles on the ship. But after AFRICOM was mooted in February '07, Nigeria, South Africa and a number of regional bodies felt that AFRICOM might challenge their own security forces, and they did not want a larger US presence in Africa. AFRICOM's headquarters continue to function from Europe, and \$127 million has been spent on AFRICOM. The expenditure would be another \$389 million in 2009.

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When Timore-Leste, the former East Timor separated from Indonesia in 1999, unionist armed mobs had killed hundreds. The special humanitarian court, set up by Indonesia to bring those responsible for the 1999 killings to justice, has absolved all the Indonesian army leaders, suspected of organizing the violence, including General Wiranto, a former presidential candidate. The leader of an anti-independence militia, Eurico Guterres was the only person jailed. Now Mr

Guterres has been faced, after the Supreme Court decreed on 07 April '08, that he was not responsible for the slaughters by his militia. While there are occasional factional fightings, the leaders of Indonesia and Timor Leste, pursue friendship, and are less keen on justice.

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The Forward Contract (Regulation) amendment Ordinance was given the President of India's assent in February '08. In the face of huge protests against rising inflation, the Bill could not be passed in Parliament, within the stipulated period of six weeks. 'Dabba' trading is unofficial trading, even though illegal. For trading in commodity futures, traders do not have to maintain any margins, and also do not have to pay any transactions fees and taxes. While the dabba trader takes the reference price from one of the recognized electronic exchanges, the clients conduct trade in "kachcha chitti". Clients do not have any recourse, if the trader defaults. The regulator, the Forwards Market Commission (FMC) is sometimes informed by the disappointed clients. Huge volumes of trade, of high significant value, is traded in the dabba market. In the absence of the Forward Contract Bill, and in face of the lapsed ordinance, the FMC would have to first approach police and the courts, leading to delays and compromise on secrecy. The proposed Ordinance had empowered the FMC, to impose penalties on fraudulent and unfair trade practices, of upto Rs 25 lacs, or three times the amount of profits made out of such practices, whichever higher.

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It was decided in July '03 by the Union Ministry of Health, that six additional All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) would be set up at Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Jodhpur, Patna, Raipur and Rishikesh. These places have been despatching the maximum of workload to AIIMS, New Delhi. In 2004-05, the financial approval was issued, and the work was to have been completed within three years. The projected approximate expenditure for each institute, has risen from Rs 280 crores (2004-05), to Rs 330 crores (2005-06), to Rs 450 crores (2008-09). The prices of construction material have been rising steeply. Till date there are no indications for the construction of the six additional AIIMS.

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Even though the union tribal affairs ministry had formulated a draft national tribal policy in June '06, the Standing Committee on Social Justice (Group of Indian Ministers) have not yet accorded approval to the proposed policy. Tribals are generally insufficiently aware of the various schemes being implemented, for their uplift.

Rural development expenditure plans in India have declined from 0.36% (2005-06), to 0.27% (2008-09). 32% of the poor have become landless over the last ten years, compared to 22% earlier. The landless and the migrant labourers are not entitled to minimum wages. A Bill for them was introduced in Parliament, twenty four years ago, but is yet to be passed. □□□