

NEWS WRAP

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In 2006, Mogadishu was being ruled by militias for about six months, linked to the former Islamic courts authority. They are now fighting a guerilla war against the weak Somalia government, and against the Ethiopian troops, who had removed them from power. Several thousand civilians have been killed in Mogadishu since the beginning of 2007. The small African Union peace keeping force is a helpless bystander. A wider UN peace keeping mission is considered too dangerous. 700,000 people have fled Mogadishu in 2007. About 200,000 displaced people are concentrated in the 16 km road stretch, between Mogadishu and Afgooye. Somalis view Ethiopia as the enemy. Kenya's border remains closed. Yemen has offered Somalis automatic asylum, a destination, most desired. The migration involves travel by minibus towards Somalia's Northern coast, and then crossing through checkpoints, guarded by ferocious militiamen. Wading into the sea, from an isolated beach near the city of Bossaso, migrants wait to board Yemen bound wooden fishing boats, off the coast of Somalia.

Between January to April 08, about 14500 migrants, mainly Somalis, crossed the Gulf of Aden to Yemen. UN figures reflect that about 1500 people died or disappeared, trying to reach Yemen from Somalia in 2007, that is one of every twenty that attempted the journey. Victims generally drown after their boats capsize, or while attempting to swim, for reaching the shores. Often with boats overloaded, smugglers force the migrants into the sea waters. In spite of the dangers, the Somali migrants are desperate to escape. Yemen, which is the poorest Gulf state, is the first step in the migratory voyage. Promises to help relatives in Somalia are over-burdening. From the UN reception centres, the male migrants proceed to the Basateen slum in Aden. Smuggling Networks help the migrants from Somalia to journey to prosperous countries like Saudi Arabia.

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Pro-government Arab Janjaweed militias in Sudan's western province of Darfur are angered at not being paid by the Sudan government. The militias have been looting and killing, in main market towns of El Fasher, Kebkabiya and Tawila, over recent weeks. About sixty World Food Programme (WFP) Trucks have been hijacked since December 07 in Darfur, where government forces and rebels, are at war, for the last five years. Due to insecurity along the main supply routes, the WFP is to reduce food rations by half, for up to a million people from May 08. With the rations of cereals, pulses and sugar being halved, people living in Darfur will receive 60% of minimum daily calorie intake.

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The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) is a fully central government funded scheme, which had aimed to connect all habitations with a population of over a thousand people, by all weather roads, before the close of 2003. Sadly, barely 24% of the targeted 1.41 lacs rural habitations, have been provided connectivity up to March 05, since the scheme was introduced in 2000. Delays in launching the initial scheme phase, have forced the scheme's extension till 2009. At the initial stage, there were obstacle in the absorption capacity of the Indian

states, leading to delays in the launching of the scheme, by three to four years. Endemic corruption by the implementing agencies at the village and block level, seriously affects the PMGSY.

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Formulated around a network of 4.92 lac fair price shops, the Public Distribution System (PDS) was originally launched to protect consumers from food shortages, and producers from price fluctuations. A substantial segment of the poor have been excluded from the PDS, owing to chronic mismanagement, cost inefficiencies, poor quality of food grains supplied, and huge errors in the enumeration of beneficiaries. During 2003-04, out of 14.07 million tons of food grains issued to sixteen states in India, at below poverty level (BPL) issue prices from the central pool, only 5.93 million tons were delivered to poor families. Out of the remaining 8.14 million tons, 5.12 million tons were leaked out. There was a leakage of 75% in Bihar and Punjab. At the all-India level, there was an overall diversion of 39% for rice, and 53% for wheat. While food grain prices continue to rise, the government's food management policy is full of deficiencies and lapses. Diversion of food grains is one of the biggest irregularities. The illegal diversion of PDS commodities to the open market, through an institutionalized network of agents, and middlemen, severely hinders the PDS, to serve the needs of the poor. Also, there are significant irregularities, in the identification of BPL families. Actual identification of BPL families is being conducted by state governments, based on out-dated guidelines issued by the union ministry of rural development. A recent study indicates that 22% of surveyed BPL families cannot be traced, even though ration was being claimed against their names. The economic cost of decentralized procurement has been higher in many cases, than the corresponding cost of Food Corporation of India (FCI) procurement in the state.

The cost of movement of food grains, from procurement centre to godowns, and then to storage points, has been charged to the central government, by the state governments. During 2000-04, the FCI faced a loss of Rs 556.88 crores, on transit shortage of food grains. Pilferage and enroute thefts, caused a loss of Rs. 842 crores.

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Now exceeding twenty years, India's yield of pulses is stuck at 500 kgs to 595 kgs per hectare range. India ranks at 138th on the pulse yield index worldwide, even though it has 22 million hectares, under pulse cultivation, which is the world's largest. The record pulse production of 15.19 million tons (2007-08), was short of the demand for 17 million tons. Demand is higher than supply, by almost two million tons, every year. Retail prices of pulse in India, have increased by about 30% during the last year, which has resulted in forcing a large number of households, to reduce pulse consumption. Pulse remains the only source of protein for the not so well off. The area for growing pulses in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh has shrunk by 50%, as farmers prefer to grow wheat and rice. Pulses are being grown in marginal land, along with soyabean in Madhya Pradesh, and rice in Andhra Pradesh. □□□