

NEWS WRAP

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South Ossetia and Abkhazia are small sepa-ratist regions in Georgia, that have enjoyed de facto independence, since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Rising tensions have now escalated to war. The Caucasus is the only route for Centreal Asian oil supplies, that do not cross Russia. Russia has fought wars to control the region, throughout the 19th Century. The area is a key part of Russia's "spheres of influence". Inhabitants of South Ossetia speak their own language, and feel closer to the Russians, than the Georgians. Being absorbed into Georgia, after the fall of erstwhile Soviet Union, the 70,000 South Ossetians demanded independence, similar to Kosova, the separatist Serbian province. Russia has opposed the recognition by NATO and European Union countries of Kosovan independence from Serbia, a client state of Russia. The independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is being promoted on similar arguments made for Kosovan independence.

The Georgian army is being trained by US military advisers. Certain former Soviet satellite states in east-central Europe have joined NATO. Earlier integral parts of USSR, Georgia and Ukraine are also seeking entry into NATO. Ostensibly as part of an anti-Iranian shield, Poland and the Czech Republic have agreed to host US missile sites. In the post-cold-war scenario, NATO has expanded into the vacuum, left by the Soviet Union. Now Moscow insists that if Georgia joins NATO, South Ossetia and Abkhazia will not be a part of it. In August 2008, the border war in Georgia was widened. Russian air force attacks have killed civilians in Georgia. Separatist leaders in South Ossetia claim over 1500 have been killed, including many civilians, in the initial Georgian assaults. Russian air force jets bombed military installations, and also hit civilian buildings in Gori, 25 miles from South Ossetia. Among the first targets bombed by Russian jets were the Georgian military installations flanking the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which runs through central Georgia, south of the breakaway region, about one hundred miles from troubled south Ossetia. Abkhazian rebels claim to have driven out the Georgians, from a key position, in the Black Sea enclave. Hundreds of Cossacks and volunteers from across the Caucasus have crossed into South Ossetia enclave, to help the separatists. Russia has halted the "Georgia offensive" since 13 Aug '08, and a traditional ceasefire holds since 14 Aug '08, between the warring groups.

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Seeking to cut tariffs and farm subsidies, as well as liberalizing trade in services, the Doha round of global trade negotiations, was launched by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Negotiations at a summit in Geneva at end July 08, failed to reach any agreement. India wanted to increase farm tariffs far higher than agreed ceilings, in response to a modest increase in imports. Responding to high food prices, China moved closer to agricultural autarky, than to free trade. USA insisted for higher sale of its agricultural produce to coutries like China, which purchases about 40% of its soyabeans.

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The Jammu Versus Kashmir agitation in India's J and K state, has taken a toll of over thirty human lives, since the second week of July 08. The Hindus in Jammu want the restoration of the 39.88 hectares of land allotted to the Amarnath Shrine Board. The J and K government has withdrawn the allocation in face of muslim backlash. There has been a ban on delimitation of constituencies till 2026 in J and K, following a 2001 National Conference government legislation. Jammu region has more area and population than Kashmir Valley; and inhabitants of Jammu region feel they are entitled to more seats in the state assembly. Muslims in Kashmir Valley are against restoration of land to the Amarnath shrine board. Kashmir's Muslims maintain that diversion of land to the shrine board, implies settlements of non-Kashmiris in the Valley. People in the Valley are against the blockade of the Jammu-Srinagar highway by scores of Hindu protestors. Month long agitations and non stop fortnight long 'bandhs' have led to acute shortages of essential commodities.

The escalating violence led to thirteen people shot dead in the Kashmir region, by security forces on 12 August 08. The state authorities imposed curfew in all ten revenue districts of Kashmir Valley, for the first time in thirteen years. The Hurriyat Conference leaders and other separatists, taking advantage of road disruptions, have been insisting for access to the Muzaffarabad road, and pressing for transit through Pakistan.

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Violence continues to be perpetrated on the fisherfolk of Tamil Nadu in India, and Sri Lanka. Over the last fifteen years, more than 300 coastal fisher folk have been shot dead in the South Asian seas, many more injured, and more than 25,000 arrested and detained. Military insecurity and terrorism have led India and Sri Lanka to recognize a single demarcated border form of coast. The absence of rights to coastal spaces beyond national borders and neglect of the aspirations of the coastal communities has led to subjugation and suppression of the needs of the coastal communities. Fishermen from Rameswaram sail to Sri Lankan waters beyond Kachchativu, up to the Delft Island off the Jaffna coast with the sole objective of catching more fish, even in dangerous waters. Exploitation of resources and degradation of the ecosystem has reduced the fish catch, in the Gulf of Mannar. □□□