

NEWS WRAP

AGD

The Kurds have suffered decades of repression and poverty in eastern Turkey, comprising Kars, Hakkari, Sason and Diyarbakir areas. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) had launched a violent campaign for independence in 1984. Around 44,000 people, mainly Kurds, have died in the bloodshed conflict. The Turkish government claims to have spent about \$300 billion, fighting the steady stream of terrorists. The violence continues, even after the capture of the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, and several ceasefires. Turkish aircraft have been bombing PKK targets in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, after the Turkish parliament extended the army's mandate to bomb PKK strongholds in northern Iraq. At the beginning of Oct 08, about 400 PKK rebels raided a military outpost in Hakkari province, near the Iraqi border, and killed 17 Turkish soldiers. PKK rebels, also killed four policemen in Diyarbakir. Two people died in Altinova, in Western Turkey, when a Kurdish youth rammed a truck into a group of Turks, who were taunting Kurds, by playing recorded loud nationalist melodies.

Ever since the Turkish government succumbed to army pressure to resume cross border operations against the PKK in northern Iraq, Kurdish support for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been declining. Earlier there were steps to ease bans on Kurdish broadcasting, and there were education subsidies for the poor, especially for girls, in Kurdish regions. But in 2008, over thirty people have been killed, in alleged police violence, occurring in the Kurdish region. Recently Engin Ceber, a left-wing activist was tortured and beaten to death by security forces, in an Istanbul prison.

The 25 million ethnic Kurds of the world have long dreamt of an independent state, that would encompass parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Except Iraq, all the other regional countries oppose Kurdish autonomy and a Kurdish state. Under the 2005 Iraqi constitution, a Kurdish regional government is recognized in the autonomous regions of Dahuk, Irbil and Sulaymaniyah. While insisting that they are not seeking independence, the Iraqi Kurds have unilaterally expanded the territory they control in Iraq. Stationing thousands of Kurd soldiers in ethnically mixed areas, Kurdish leaders have expanded their authority over roughly a 300-mile-long stretch of territory, comprising Sinjar, Nineveh, Mosul (both banks of the Tigris river), Tamim, Kirkuk, Jalawla and Khana-quin; beyond the borders of the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq. Since the US war in Iraq, the assertion of greater Kurdish control has gradually taken hold, resulting in thousands of Arabs to flee from their homelands. In recent weeks the predominantly Arab majority government of Iraq, has despatched the Iraqi army to drive Kurdish troops (*pesh merga*) from some of the areas of expanded Kurdish control. More than 100 people have been killed in the ethnically mixed, oil rich city of Kirkuk, in political violence.

The global financial crisis, soaring fuel prices over the last one year, increased capacity in proportion to falling passenger loads due to a rise in ticket prices and the sharp downturn in the aviation business led to a dramatic and sudden layoff of 1900 employees by Jet Airways, on 15 Oct 08. The laid off workers were from a total strength of 13,000 personnel, comprising cabin crew, ground staff, as well as cockpit crew. The retrenchment was aimed to economise the airline about Rs 60 crores per annum; and was to have been supplemented by other cost-cutting measures, such as returning leased aircraft and curtailing flights. But within a day, Jet Airways announced re-instatement of all sacked employees. The revised decision on the part of Jet Airways was consequent to political pressure, and threats by Raj Thackeray of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena to stop the airline's operations out of Mumbai, unless the company re-instated all the Terminated employees. There were similar threats to suspend operation from Kolkata by the CITU.

Jet Airlines and Kingfisher Airlines account for about 60% of domestic aviation traffic. They had announced on 13 Oct 08, an alliance to share their resources and flying routes, to tackle the economic downturn. There are fears that the retrenched employees and other staff may face salary cuts. A larger portion of the sacked employees belonged to Jet Lite, a company that was created after the acquisition of Air Sahara by Jet. During the course of the two days, when the sacked Trainees and Probationers of Jet Airways were without jobs, they became friends of the CITU backed All India Airport Staff and Workers' Union. Hundreds of laid-off employees protested against Jet Airways on 16 and 17 Oct 08, at Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore and Kolkata.

The West Bengal IT Services Association, formed in Nov. 06, is a CITU-affiliated union for employees of the IT Sector. Downsizing in the aviation sector has created a fear of job losses, pay freeze and cancellation of bonuses in the IT sector of Kolkata's Salt Lake Sector V. However, employees in sector V are aware that affiliation with unions could lead to "action being taken", by the private companies. □□□