

NEWS WRAP

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Ever since President Felipe Calderon of Mexico had directed the army and police against the drug cartels and corrupt officials in early 2007, more than 4500 lives have been lost in the drug war. Mexican journalists reporting on the drug war are in growing danger. Decapitated bodies of local drug thugs have been hung on bridges on the airport roads of big cities; and severed heads wrapped in plastic bags found placed at the foot of statues, where newspapers are hawked. Armand Rodriguez, the top crime reporter of *El Diario* newspaper in Ciudad Juarez was shot ten times in his car, by a single gunman, in mid-Nov 08. Even though journalists continue to do their assignments, the coverage of carnages is limited. In the wider war the drug cartels have unleashed against Mexico's social and government institutions attacks on journalists, extending from threats on cellphones, to grenades lobbed into newsrooms, have become a virtual new front.

The powerful drug cartels in Mexico, compete for smuggling routes in USA, which is accepting all the cocaine, methamphetamine, and marijuana, the cartels can deliver. The increasingly independent press in Mexico is weakened by the drug war. The threats are stifling investigative journalism, and preventing Mexican journalists from identifying names. Around thirty journalists have been killed and eight others have disappeared (assumed dead) since 2000, in the war between police and Mexican drug mafia. Journalists are included among the casualties of Mexico's drug war. Only the basic news is printed, and journalist stories are being limited to the facts of a killing.

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Extensive welfare programmes have been continuing for generations in France, under rightist as well as leftist governments. Many criticise some of these programmes, as restraints on the French economy, as it seeks to modernize and become more competitive. In spite of competitive drawbacks and high taxes, the French people of all political colours have remained attached to their privileges of 40-hour work-week, paid vacations and timely friendly welfare measures, including long maternity leaves, child support payments, public schooling for toddlers and even nanny subsidies. In times of economic slump when deficits are growing with economic crisis, the generous government benefits have become a heavy burden on the French budget. Now France has overtaken Ireland, as Europe's most fertile country, with women having an average of more than two children each. A recent measure allows mothers of three children, to take off up to three years, while receiving about \$600 a month, in addition to the usual child-support payments.

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The misery of Gaza's 1.5 million people is increasing, as Israel continues the siege of the small coastal strip. Egypt has closed Gaza's only border, which is not under the direct control of Israel. The Palestinian Islamist group, Hamas came to power in Gaza in mid-2007, after winning the general election in Palestinian territories in 2006. The blockade was meant to force Hamas to give up violence, recognize Israel, and accept earlier peace deals made by Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority with Israel. Truce between Israel and Hamas ended on 19 Dec 08. Despite continued rocket and mortar fire by Gaza militants on southern Israeli towns, like Sderot, Ashkelon and Ashod, Israel on 26 Dec 08, permitted transfer of humanitarian aid into the Gaza strip, allowing about 90 trucks to deliver medicine, fuel, cooking gas and other vital goods into Gaza.

27 Dec 08 onwards, Israeli fighter jets bombed the Gaza strip, targeting Hamas complexes, security compounds and installations, and businesses that are sources of income for Hamas. The attacks were in retaliation to over 300 rockets and mortars fired at Israeli targets by Palestinian militants since mid-Dec 08, and ten times that number fired on Israel over the past year. Israeli offensive has killed over 600 Palestinians in Gaza, the majority belonging to Hamas' security forces.

Israeli infantry units backed by artillery, tanks and aircraft commenced a deadly offensive on Hamas in Gaza since 03 Jan 08. Over 100 civilians have been killed in the onslaught. Israel's ground offensive has aggravated the humanitarian crisis for the 1.5 million residents of Gaza.

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Even though there are only a few months left for the parliamentary committee on issue of women's reservation, to submit to report, a consensus still eludes the committee. Again the union government of India is lacking in will to bring the women's reservation bill, as it depends on support on political parties, that are strongly opposed to reservations for women in the legislature. The areas of dispute are over an increase in the total seats of Parliament, making it mandatory for political parties to declare 33% women candidates, and reserving one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies for women. The demand for a quota for backward caste women, within the overall quota for all women, is a major contentious issue. According to a section in the committee the issue of a quota for backward caste women, within the overall quota for women, should be left to each state.

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While India's growth rate has been 7% and public revenue growing by 8 to 9% every year, only 1.1% of the gross domestic product is spent on public health, every fiscal year. Inability to mobilize resources, lack of commitment, lack of organizational achievement, and wasteful expenditure have led to deficiency in the health care sector in India. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has recently emphasized that more funds should be earmarked for primary health care and tackling social problems, such as poverty, lack of basic education and gender discrimination, as they were interlinked with public health.

The demand and supply of beds in government hospitals is far from evenly balanced. There are many instances of patients either being refused admission or compelled to lie on the floor, due to shortage of beds. □□□