

NEWS WRAP

AGD

Forecasters predict that economic growth in Vietnam will slow from 6.1% (2008) to just 3.2% (2009). Investor confidence was shaken in April '08 by fears of a currency crisis. Vietnam's export of manufactured goods has fallen. Global credit shortage is discouraging foreign investment. The economic decline in Vietnam is the sharpest in the last twenty five years. Thousands of Vietnamese may lose their jobs, and there could be rising risks of social unrest.

Economic liberalization has accompanied gradual political softness since the 'dai moi' (renewal) reforms of 1986. Vietnam has 700 newspapers in circulation, all of which are government controlled. Some carry relatively stronger analysis and views. Now the Vietnamese government is reasserting authority by quashing criticism. Journalists, of newspapers 'Thanh Nien' (Young People) and 'Tuoi Tre' (Youth Daily) who exposed corruption in a transport-ministry road building unit, in 2006, have been jailed by a Hanoi Court. The editors of the two newspapers have been recently sacked. New rules of Dec '08, restrict politically sensitive content on the internet. The young population voraciously reads opinion on the internet blogs, written pseudonymously.

After a twenty-five year old civil war, the Sri Lankan army recaptured the whole of the Northern Jaffna Peninsula from the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). On '08 Jan '09, gunmen on motor cycles shot dead Lasantha Wickrematunge, a Sri Lankan Newspaper editor, who was on his way to work in the capital. Before his death, the deceased editor had written an article, where he foretold his own murder and implied that it would be the work of the security forces. The late editor had described the Tigers as "among the most ruthless and bloodthirsty organizations". He also criticized the conduct of the war by the Sri Lankan army, and the curtailment of civil liberties even among the Sinhalese majority. A dozen journalists have been killed in the past two years, and many have suffered harassment and intimidation. Press people in Sri Lanka have been largely excluded from the main battlefields located in the North. Not much information percolates about the condition of the 250,000 civilians displaced by the civil war.

America is arranging an additional 30,000 US troops into Afghanistan, raising the total to 62,000. Some 20,000 US troops will be heading to South Afghanistan. The present 5,400 British troops in Helmand could rise to 8,400, if Prime Minister Gordon Brown sanctions reinforcements. From May '09, a British general will take command of southern Afghanistan. Accompanying the Afghan "surge" in Helmand province, the USA has finalized a command structure in Kandahar, that will sideline the British control. The US command centre in south Afghanistan is bomb-proof and rocket-proof. The control of south Afghanistan presently rotates between the British, Canadians and Dutch. By autumn 2010, USA will assume permanent control of the south, covering Helmand, Kandahar and Lashkar Gah. The Americans view seriously the British military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the lack of reconstruction without sufficient troops. Germany and Spain have been reluctant to provide troops for a more "European" position.

Marine conservationists are attempting to set up marine reserves, similar to wild life parks, where plants, animals and fish could live and breed freely, without interference or pollution by man. USA established in 2006, one of the largest marine protected areas, the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, in north western Hawaii. 7000

species, including the monk seal and spinner dolphins, found a haven. Towards the end of his administration, President George Bush authorized three new marine protected areas, around Mariana Islands, Palmyra Atoll and Rose Atoll, covering more than 500,000 sq kms, in the Pacific Ocean. This marine conservation extends over vast areas of ancient reefs, containing large animals like reef sharks and giant clams, which are severely depleted in other seas. Lobby groups like the Pew Environmental Group, the Environmental Defence Fund and the Marine Conservation Biology Institute in Washington, deserve credit.

The Maharashtra Ekikaran Samity (MES), formed in 1948, has been agitating for over six decades, for incorporation of Belgaum and 865 adjoining villages, in Maharashtra. 43% of the population in Belgaum district is Marathi. The MES was the majority party in the Belgaum City Council (BCC), during the 1980s, and continued to retain control, till the Karnataka government dissolved the council in 2005. On the borders of Maharashtra and Goa, Belgaum became part of the Bombay Presidency, after independence. The Belgaum municipality had requested in 1948, that the district, with a predominant Marathi speaking population, be merged in proposed Maharashtra state. Belgaum was made a part of Mysore state by the States Reorganization Act (1956). Since then the Maharastrian government has been lodging protests with the union government. The Justice Meher Chand Mahajan Commission (1966/1967) recommended that Belgaum, Karwar town, and 300 villages in Karwar, Supa and Haliyal taluks, be transferred to Maharashtra. The Commission's report has never been implemented. In a move to evade criticism that Karnataka was neglecting the Northern areas of the state, the Karnataka state government convened a five day Assembly session in Belgaum, for the first time.

The winter session of the Karnataka legislature in Belgaum in Jan '09, was conducted amidst vociferous protests by the MES. The Shiv Sena has threatened to sever ties with the BJP, if the BJP state chief minister YS Yeddyurappa does not stop the "harassment" of Marathi people in Karnataka. The Congress has demanded that Marathi speaking areas in Karnataka be declared a union territory, till the Supreme Court decides on the issue. The Shiv Sena has been attacking buses from Karnataka, in Latur district.

Strangely there have been no protests from the Indian Left Front over US Senate Committee members conducting investigations into 26 Nov 08 Mumbai terror attacks. US security officials have observed that immediately following the shootings by the gunmen, there was a lack of coordination between "different levels of government". Members of the local police did not engage the attackers with effective firearms, and the alleged members of the Lashkar-e-Toiba inflicted severe casualties. The weapons in the hands of the local police were not sufficiently powerful, and the Maharashtra police force were not trained for that type of conflict. There was lapse of more than twelve hours for India's commandos to arrive at the scene. The police lacked training in heavy weapons. The attackers knew their targets, better than the responding commandos, and their tactics were of commando style military assault. □□□ in Rahasthan assembly poll in three seats with over 34 percent of votes polled in each and 9 to 22 per cent votes in half a dozen of other seats reflect an unmistakable impress of inroads made by the party in the hindi belt.

It took 30 years for the CPI(M) to get Organisational Plenum Resolution (Salkia, West Bengal, December-end 1978) implemented. CPI(M) led the *sangarsh samiti* comprising farmers, traders and workers in the Ganga-nagar and Bikaner districts to "mobilize people for the struggle, which was carried on for two months with tenacity and courage. They were met with brutal repression. In the course of the struggle two persons, a man and a woman have died due to the injuries by severe police beating in the lathi charges.

More than 200 were seriously injured. The army was deployed in the affected areas. Main leaders of the movement were jailed."

This way of penetration is qualitatively different from the opportunistic way the late Harkishen Singh Surjeet, the erstwhile CPI(M) general secretary or polit bureau member Sitaram Yechury ostensibly tried to push in by wooing Mulayam Singh Yadav or Amar Singh of Samajwadi Party to win one or two seats in UP Assembly and coalesce with Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal to produce a few legislatures in the Bihar Assembly at the cost of Left unity.

Salkia Plenum asked the party leaders to achieve a better rate of growth in the Hindi-speaking States. But in practice, party bosses looked forward for MLAs or MPs instead of party-building to heighten class struggle. In an interview to the pro-CPI(M) fortnightly *Frontline*, Surjeet defended the failure and discovered the difficulty of taking on the "impact of bourgeois-landlord ideology". Urban cadres couldn't work in the "peculiar cultural traits" and overcome the dominance of superstitions, Surjeet argued. Strange plea indeed. How could the party make inroads into the countryside in Rajasthan? The success story in Rajasthan proved the lack of seriousness of mandarins at A K Gopalan Bhavan, CPI(M) national headquarters, who mortgaged class consciousness to 'parliamentary cretinism'. Yechury's campaign against the CPI candidate in Bihar assembly polls to appease Laluji was infamous.

The same Yechury told on 9 December greeting the electorate of Rajasthan saying that people there waged a struggle from 'class outlook' which aroused optimism for winning a parliamentary seat. Words like class struggle and class outlook are sheer chicanery for CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat or Yechury, who were instrumental in drafting the 18000-plus word draft political resolution at the last Congress of CPI(M) where the word 'class struggle' failed to get an accommodation.

Lastly, the protest platform that CPI(M) had built certainly created an awareness among sections of people including traders who seem to get disillusioned with the BJP in Rajasthan—at least in rural areas such as Hanumangarh, Shriganganagar, Shikar and Jhunjhunu. But do traders belong to the same class as broad combination of peasantry? The issues that the Sangharsh Samiti took up in the new citadel of CPI(M) were electricity and irrigation-water. These are directly in the interests of marginal and small peasants, not landless peasants or agricultural workers whom Lenin defined as 'rural proletariat'. □