

NEWS WRAP

AGD

On the day of President Barack Obama's inauguration, the chief of US Central Command, General David Petraeus visited Pakistan. To receive substantial military aid, Pakistan must step up its efforts, against militants. The recent two remote-controlled US air strikes at suspected terrorist hideouts in the border area of Waziristan, was an advanced warning to Pakistan, of the era of "smart power" diplomacy under Obama. These US bombings killed 22 people. As US prepares an increase of 30000 troops in Afghanistan, the US pressure on terrorist groups rises. Military crackdown is accompanied with diplomatic initiatives. Obama had approved the air strikes under a covert programme. The new US president is offering no respite in the search for al-Qaeda and other Taliban leaders. At the same time non-military aid to Pakistan is tripled, and reconstruction in Afghanistan is being pursued. The air strikes have hurt the sentiments of the Pakistan people.

Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president is viewed by westerners as an obstacle to progress. He faces re-elections in 2009. Pressures are being exercised on Karzai, for a more effective government and a more pointed fight against corruption. USA wants the re-establishment of government control in the south and east of Afghanistan, and delivery of better services to the Afghan people.

¶.....¶.....¶

Gibraltar, with more than two square miles of land, was ceded to Britain by Spain, under the treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Extending 600 yards into the sea, a £2 billion eastside development of luxury hotels and a marina, is being erected on land, created on platforms at sea. The ambitious tourist project off "the Rock" is viewed as construction on land stolen from Spain by some Spanish politicians. Besides an alleged incursion into Spanish waters, tides on the Spanish coast opposite Gibraltar, have been affected by the scheme.

¶.....¶.....¶

The Karen National Union (KNU) has been fighting the Myanmar government comprising the State Peace and Development Council or junta, for the last sixty years. Desperate fighting is raging in the mountainous Thai border region, along the refugee camps at Umphang and Mae Sot. The region has vast resources of antimony, gold, zinc and tin. Earlier when Thailand used the Karen held territory as a buffer to Myanmar, the KNU logged the rich teak forests. When stray shells fired by SPDC battalions force the evacuation of Thai villages, the Thai army lob mortars. For transferring their produce to market, local farmers are "taxed" by both groups. In Jan 09, SPDC soldiers razed the base camp of one of the seven KNU brigades. The settlement was equipped with solar power, piped water, fish holding tanks and medical facilities. A coalition of KNU defectors, drug runners and freelance thugs, comprising a rival Karen militia, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) is assisting the SPDC. The armies mount attacks from Thailand, which is more navigable and not strewn with landmines.

¶.....¶.....¶

A muslim ethnic group, the Rohingya community lives in appalling conditions of poverty, on the borders of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Resembling South Asians, around 800,000 Rohingyas are entrenched in Western Myanmar. About 200,000 find an existence in squalid refugee camps and fishing villages across the border in Bangladesh. The military government of Myanmar denies the Rohingya citizenship and most rights. A tiny dispersed diaspora ekes out a living in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Indonesia. The Rohingyas are in a majority in the North Rakhine province of Myanmar. Amongst the Rohingyas illiteracy rate is 80%, and malnutrition hovers at 60%. Rohingya migrants, desperately trying to escape to the richer countries of Southeast Asia, go on a sea voyage in wooden boats, via the marshlands and jungles of eastern Bangladesh, helped by human traffickers who charge extortionate rates. At the end of Dec 08, about 100 Rohingyas were found drifting in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, in a state of starvation and dehydration. They were earlier detained by Thai security, and left in international waters in a motorless barge, in shark infested sea. Over 300 Rohingyas, who had accompanied those rescued, are missing or feared dead. The Rohingyas are downtrodden, and lack support groups who provide publicity and aid to Myanmar's other oppressed minorities.

