

NEWS WRAP

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Japan has the lowest number of children and the highest number of elderly, as a percentage of its total population. Birth rates in Japan have declined for twenty seven consecutive years. By 2060, Japan is expected to have two retirees for every three workers. This future crisis could render bankrupt the pension and health care system. But Japan has ranked near the lowest rungs in the percentage of foreign residents. UN estimates indicate that Japan would need 17 million foreigners by 2050, to maintain population levels of 2005. Japanese politicians now recognize the need to obtain "immigrants" and "nurture" them and their families with language and vocational training, for becoming naturalized citizens of Japan.

But with the global economic crisis and increasingly reducing demand for Japanese cars and electronic goods, thousands of foreign-born, young factory workers are losing their jobs. The fired foreign workers are withdrawing their children out of school, and returning to their countries of origin. The Japanese government is alarmed at the severe exposure of immigrant families in Japan to job losses and unemployment, and the immigrant workers suddenly abandoning Japan. Traditionally wary of foreigners, especially those without work, the Japanese government is now introducing programs that would make it easier for unemployed immigrants to remain in Japan. Japan has a shortage of workers, especially in health care and other services for the elderly. To enable immigrants finding work, throughout the Japanese economy, Japanese-language courses, vocational training programs and job counselling are being made available in an integrated manner. \$2 million has been allotted for these emerging programs, and additional economic stimulus packages are expected during 2009.

Changes in the immigration laws in 1990, made it relatively easier for foreigners of Japanese descent to live and work in Japan. In the past two decades, about 500,000 Brazilian workers and their families, who have Japanese forebears but often speak only Portuguese, have settled in Japan. Many Brazilian children are enrolled in private Portuguese-language schools. The Japanese government is now enlarging sponsored programs to teach foreign teenagers the Japanese language, or how to negotiate social life.

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The 45,000 strong paramilitary force, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) is responsible for guarding Bangladesh's borders. Renegade troops of the BDR, on 25 Feb 90, took 100 hostages and killed their commanding officers and many others. As the army moved in to suppress the mutiny there occurred a 20-hour siege of the BDR's headquarters, that left over fifty people dead. A posh residential area of Dhaka remained a battle zone. The mutineers began to surrender in response to an offer of amnesty from prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. The army took control of BDR border posts, and army tanks surrounded BDR head-quarters in Dacca. The Bangladesh government has agreed to consider the mutineers' demands for better pay and barrack conditions. The BDR's exclusion from lucrative UN peacekeeping missions is another source of grievance. Murder, arson and rioting left 148 people dead or missing, most of them army officers. The army is resisting

the amnesty, and demanding legal penalty for the mutiny; which is death by hanging. The Jamaat-e-Islami has been courting the rebels.

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India's Parliament had passed the Right to Information Act, nearly four years ago. Transparency is yet to emerge in the system of governance. Incentives to demand and ensure a collective apparatus of a corruption-free government office do not exist. The respective Chief Commissioners RTI do not have the powers to take any corrective action. Every case is individual, to be pursued by each individual. There is no class action to hold an entire organization responsible.

Several security agencies are beyond the scope of RTI. The Official Secrets Act (1923) prohibits the flow of information from the government to ordinary people. The government maintains a balance between civil liberties, privacy and national security. The present conduct rules for government servants prohibit disclosure of official information to ordinary citizens. The RTI Act has remained under-publicised since the beginning. There is a huge rural-urban divide in the RTI applications. The RTI Act is overshadowed by the threats of parliamentary amendments. There has not been any significant progress in accountability and institutional reforms. In the last four years, only 150 penalties have been imposed on government officials at fault, totalling Rs 22.79 lacs, of which only Rs 7 lacs have actually been recovered so far.

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Chennai is offering toilets for transgenders, besides the "ladies" and "gents" public lavatories in the city. Chennai Municipal Corporation is building there such lavatories for transgenders in the city, on a pilot project costing Rs 45 lacs. There is a considerable transgender population living in south and central Chennai. Saidapet will have the first transgender lavatory, which will cover those residing in Kothamede, Theedeeer Nagar and Athuma Nagar. More such toilets are expected to be built, depending on the response. The transgenders who feel women at heart, consider the separate toilets as a way for discrimination. 99% of straight people do not want to use the same toilets as transgenders.

Tamil Nadu has a population of about 30,000 transgenders. The TN government has created welfare boards, separate voter identification cards and ration cards, and free sex correction operations for transgenders. The state government recently allocated Rs one crore for a group housing project for the benefit of the transgender community.

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The outgoing Lok Sabha had representatives from twenty constituencies, worst affected by criminalization of politics. Elected MPs face serious charges like murder, attempt to murder, extortion, rape, kidnapping, robbery and dacoity. Bihar has five such constituencies followed by Uttar Pradesh with four. There are three MPs from West Bengal. □□□