

NEWS WRAP

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In spite of US involvement in the distant Afghanistan war in a fractious, alien locale, Afghanistan continues to slide into increasing violence and instability. Afghanistan is now a “Narcotics state”, rampant with corruption. The Taliban has retaken growing swaths of the mountainous countryside of Afghanistan. The rapid influx of the additional 30,000 troops being sent by the Obama administration to Afghanistan, will in the short run “Americanize” the Afghanistan war and the Afghan casualty figures. During 2008, Taliban attacks and US and Nato casualties, including 155 US deaths, reached the highest levels of the seven-year old Afghanistan war. Extremist groups have launched terrorist attacks in major Pakistani cities, after expanding their hold on western Pakistan.

War related civilian Afghan deaths, caused by Taliban insurgents and US air strikes, increased by nearly 40 percent to 2118 in 2008. The rising civilian casualties are the source of deep resentment among the Afghan public. The “anti-government” elements have been responsible for 55% of last year’s civilian deaths. Even though the Taliban controls little actual territory in Afghanistan, they hold a permanent presence in 72% of Afghanistan. A mid-February ABC/BBC poll displayed that only 4% of Afghans support a Taliban government. Besides Taliban, the engulfing insurgency of Afghanistan and Pakistan is accounted for by a dozen groups, including the Haqqani Network, led by Pashtun militant Jalaluddin Haqqani; mujaheddin leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami; Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi; al-Qaeda and many-others.

The insurgent groups are united by a common hatred of US and allied forces, as well as opposition to President Hamid Karzai’s government, which they consider as a puppet regime run by Western infidels.

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Acting as neutral arbiters, the American CIA has been overseeing back-channel intelligence exchanges between India and Pakistan, following the aftermath of the Nov 08 Mumbai terrorist attacks. The arrangement has allowed India and Pakistan to share highly sensitive evidence. The exchanges gradually helped the two sides overcome mutual suspicions, and led to Pakistan’s announcement of Feb 08, that some of the planning for the attack had occurred on Pakistani soil. Going beyond the media revelations about the ten Mumbai terrorists, the intelligence covered sophisticated communications intercepts and physical evidence describing the manner in which the gunmen and their collaborators planned and executed their three-day killing rampage in Mumbai. The findings of the Indian and Pakistani intelligence agencies were separately shared with the CIA, which relayed the details, after corroboration with gleanings from its own CIA covert networks. The intelligence sharing arrangement is ongoing, and could continue after the settlement of the Mumbai case. The unparalleled intelligence co-operation contributed to Pakistan’s decision to pursue criminal charges against nine Pakistanis, who stand accused of involvement in the attack. Pakistan’s recent aggressive moves against *Lashkar-i-Taiba* and allied terrorist

groups signal an intention to work more closely with India, and a thawing of tensions on the Indian subcontinent.

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Religious activity, especially the banned Falun Gong Sect, is tightly regulated in Communist China. However, wide latitude is allowed to many law-abiding Catholics and Protestants, who meet in unofficial house churches. With the Tibetan Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama blamed for encouraging the bloody riots in Lhasa of March 08, Chinese who practice Tibetan Buddhism worship under the radar, because their number are comparatively small, and their movement is not well organized. Chinese followers of Tibetan Buddhism meet in private homes to recite sutras and compare knowledge. Some wealthy benefactors have installed elaborate shrines in apartments where devotees gather.

Aided by the volumes of information available on the internet and driven by society's spiritual vacuum, growing numbers of middle class Chinese are turning to Tibetan Buddhism. The Han Chinese, which includes Communist Party officials and celebrities, who have embraced Tibetan Buddhism, worship at home, meet Tibetan Lamas at night and attend officially unauthorized events, such as the fish release and "fire sacrifice" at Huangsongyv Reservoir, about 55 miles north of Beijing. The incantations chanted are against evil.

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Signs of a slowdown in the Indian economy have been visible long before recession hit USA, which became evident in Sep 08, with the collapse of Freddie Mac and Fannie May and the Lehman Brothers. Around 25 lac jobs were lost in India's Textile industry in April 08. During 2008-09, about Rs 1,30,000 crores, which were not accounted for in the budget was spent on the VI pay commission, petroleum subsidy and debt waiver schemes by the union government. Populist schemes like the NREGA have also been a great financial drain on state resources. Nearly three months after oil PSU executives went on strike demanding higher wages, the union government improved the previously announced hike in emoluments of all public sector companies, allowing a 20% additional increase.

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Assam's Karbi Anglong (almost the size of Tripura) and the North Cachar Hills districts are Autonomous Districts. Fifty-seven years of autonomy has failed to remove backwardness from the two hill districts. Grant of Autonomous district constituency for the Lok Sabha polls has raised demands for carving out an autonomous state, covering the two hill districts. The area has nine insurgent groups currently active, of which only two have reached a ceasefire agreement with the union government. □