

NEWS WRAP

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At the end of Jan 09 and in the first week of Feb 09, Israel used unmanned drones to attack secret Iranian convoys in Sudan, that were trying to smuggle rockets into Gaza. Agents from Israeli overseas intelligence agency, Mossad had tracked the convoys in the remote Sudan desert, outside Port Sudan. The convoys were carrying Fajr-3 rockets, which have a range of more than forty miles, and were split into sections, to enable smuggling through tunnels from Egypt into Gaza. The missiles possessed the range to hit Tel Aviv and Israel's reactor at Dimona. Iranian Revolutionary Guards had planned the smuggling operation. The Israeli raids were conducted by Hermes 450 drones, accompanied by giant Eitan UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), stakes in the conflict between Palestinians and Israel could have been dramatically raised, had the rockets been delivered to Hamas, the militant Islamic group that controls Gaza.

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While USA and Britain believe that Iran is trying to build nuclear weapons, Iran maintains that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes. The Washington based Institute for Science and International Security claimed in March 09, that Iran had reached "Nuclear weapons breakout capability", and possessed enough uranium to make a nuclear bomb. Certain other observers believe that Iran still has a long way to go.

President Barrack Obama of USA believes that a roadmap forward is through diplomatic initiatives with Iran, on common concerns, such as Afghanistan. Mid-March 09 saw NATO's first official contact with Iran, when the Iranian ambassador to Britain, met NATO's assistant secretary-general, to discuss drugs and refugees. On 27 Mar 09, Iranian and US officials held their first talks about ending the war in Afghanistan, in Moscow. The meeting was held under the auspices of the Shanghai Co-Operation Organization, a six-member regional security group, which includes Russia, China and central Asian states, to discuss combating terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan. Ban ki-moon, the UN secretary general, the foreign ministers of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and senior British diplomats were present at the meeting. For almost three decades, USA and Iran do not have full diplomatic ties. Since the murder of a group of Iranian diplomats in 1998, Iran has no love for the Taliban. Now Iran has concerns over the proliferation of US bases in Afghanistan, and the Taliban has become "My enemy's enemy is my best friend". In 2007, NATO troops in Afghanistan had intercepted a convoy of weapons, provided by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, for the Taliban. In trying to get US troops out from Afghanistan President Obama has also expressed eagerness for talks with so-called "moderate Taliban".

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Economic recession that has hit western Europe, is now shaking east Europe. After escaping Soviet hegemony, east European countries that became capitalist success stories, are presently under a mountain of debt, as their currencies fall in value, and exports dwindle. Since the beginning of March 09, governments have collapsed in Latvia, Hungary and the Czech Republic, which is the holder of the European Union's six-month rotating presidency. After some years of a booming

economy and annual double digit growth in these countries, industrial output has plummeted, and unemployment is soaring because of declining demand from western importers. The astonishing growth of the past decade was fuelled by loans in foreign currencies such as the euro and Swiss franc. With the dramatic slumps, citizens and governments in east Europe can no longer service their foreign currency loans. 84% of loans in former communist countries are accounted for by banks from Austria, Italy, France, Belgium, Germany and Sweden. The insolvency of East European borrowers threaten lenders in West Europe with a domino effect.

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400 villagers of Rampura in Uttar Pradesh, India, did not have electricity till Feb 09. With the help of 60 solar panels and 24 batteries, Rampura has become the first village in India, to be electrified by solar power. Now children in Rampura can study after sunset, new businesses are springing up, and there is more milk from buffalos. Lives have changed by the system which links its 69 houses to the renewable energy solar plant. For women, electricity light means business opportunities as they could work later. The ₹950,000 project by Development Alternatives, an Indian non-profit organization, has been funded by a Norwegian company, Scatee. Half of the 600,000 Indian villages, which are without electricity, could be powered by solar energy. Greenpeace India feels that India could generate about 10% of its electricity from solar power by 2030.

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In the last five years, nearly 50% of the micro and small scale industries set up in India, have closed down due to various circumstances. Barriers to exit for entrepreneurs of sick industries are bank regulations on loans; statutory obligations such as Employees State Insurance, Provident Fund; and retrenchment compensation. When it becomes difficult for an entrepreneur to keep a unit working many of the schemes do not benefit neither the employee nor the employer. Without an exit policy, all guidelines framed by the Reserve Bank of India are generally violated.

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The Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI) had projected that 10% of the 375 million mobile customers would shift to 3G services, launched in Dec 08. The BSNL has garnered only 3000 customers in over 24 cities. The Mahanagar Telephone Nigam have roped in about 3200 customers in Delhi and Mumbai for the 3G services. □□□