

NEWS WRAP

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The Arab nations for the last sixty years have been deflecting internal anger at corrupt and incompetent administrations by blaming Israel or the “Zionists”. The Palestinian cause has been adopted by the Iranian government with cynicism, as it wants to challenge the Sunni regime of Saudi Arabia, for leadership in the Middle East. A number of Iranians helped to save Jews during the Holocaust, and Iran remains home to the largest Jewish community in the Middle East, outside Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Jews fled from riots and retribution in countries like Egypt, Iraq and Syria, following the failure of the Arab armies in their attempt to destroy Israel at birth in 1948. The people of Iran were never involved in the Arab-Israel conflict. On the eve of Israel’s Holocaust memorial day and also at the 120th anniversary of the birth of Adolf Hitler, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran called Israel a “cruel and repressive racist regime”, at a UN conference (April 09) on racism in Geneva. The Iranians equated the star of David with the Nazi Swastika. Iran supplies the openly anti-Semitic Hezbollah of Palestine and Lebanon, with its missiles. Tehran has clear intentions to develop nuclear weapons, while Israel has scores of nuclear warheads.

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The last Lok Sabha elections (April/May 09) in India saw the further consolidation of demography and democracy. India’s one billion citizens composed of 40% being under 18 years of age, and 70% under 35. With concerns over “moral policing” attacks on modern women in public, employment, business opportunities, and inadequate response to terrorism, urban youth emerged as a key electoral group. Electricity power, water supply and roads remained more immediate concerns for the masses in India’s villages. Many villages became battle grounds of Maoist Naxalite groups who attacked several polling stations, killing scores of security personnel. Demands for “visible development” and better governance, culminated in a decisive mandate for the Congress Party’s United Progressive Alliance.

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The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reports that 45% of Indian women, belonging to the age group of 20 to 24 years were married before they were 18 years; 23% were married before they were 16 years; and 2.6% married before they were 13 years. The medical magazine *Lancet* warns that child brides faced a grave risk of health complications like death in pregnancy, and babies prone to sickness. It is common to find brides as young as ten years in Bararolo village, in the heart of rural West Bengal, where the literacy rates are among the lowest in India. In Sep 08, twelve-year-old Rekha of the village persuaded her parents to let her finish school and remain unmarried till she was at least 18 years. She has now become a national symbol of a campaign against child marriage. In the surrounding towns and villages, there have been similar protests by girls of her age.

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When a dam was constructed on Mahi river in Gujarat, thirty years ago, the adjoining areas in Kadana reservoir were submerged. The northern flank of the

reservoir with tiny man made islands, is part of the Dahod Lok Sabha Constituency after delimitation, reserved for tribals. For the last year, the tribals have not been issued scheduled tribe certificates, as they were not enlisted before 1962. Dahod is one of the 100 most backward districts of India. The Mahi dam is irrigated and powered by the central Gujarat region. But in its immediate vicinity the tribals are bereft of water and power generated from the dam. There are five school teachers who regularly visit the islands on the Kadana reservoir, located in Panchmahals district. The small primary school on Rachada Bet islet has fifty students, but without electricity or water supply. Hillocks have become islands, with just one or two acres of rocky soil for farming. Once in six months a government official could visit. Emergency services could arrive till the end of a pucca river. During monsoons, some of the islands drift from Gujarat to Rajasthan. During the April / May 09 Lok Sabha elections, a polling booth with Electronic Voting Machine was installed on Rachada Bet island, for the first time.

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The Vembanad wetland system, which originally measured 2195 sq kms, covers coastal backwaters, lagoons, marshes, mangroves, and reclaimed lands, intercut with natural and man made channels. Six rivers in Kerala (Namely Periyar, Muvattupuzha, Meenachil, Manimala, Pamba and Achenkoril) flow into the complex network of waterways comprising the Vembanad wetland system. The Vembanad lake is the second largest wetland in India, and the largest tropical wetland ecosystem on India's south western coast. Presently Vembanad lake has been reduced to 37% of its original size during the last 150 years, primarily due to reclamation of fertile land at its perimeter for farming. Farmers keep salt water out of their agricultural systems, as the farmers grow crops on land that is below sea level. Pollutants carried by the six rivers are drained into Vembanad lake. Fish stocks dwindle, as the lake eco system is increasingly being damaged with various pollutions. The problem becomes critical with the limited flushing of the system by salt water. Plastic and solid rubbish are spread on every shore and canal, which regularly clog motorboat engines. In the slurred water, visibility is restricted to an inch or two inches deep. Water hyacinth carpets the lake and chokes oxygen. Paddy fields and coconut husks pour chemical fertilizers and herbicides. 1.1 million people who live around the lake and hundreds of tourists exercise relentless pressure on the lake.

The closure of a barage (built in the 1950s) during summer has led to marine fish and prawns failing to migrate upstream. With the weed growth increasing, the natural flushing of pollutants has been severely restricted. Hundreds of houseboat tourists have created stagnant waters in surrounding canals. Solid waste treatment facilities are absent. The draft regulatory Framework for Wetlands conservation, drawn up by the union government has been opposed by the Kerala state government since it is an infringement on the rights of the state on its resources. The Community Environmental Resource Centre (CERC) at Alappuzha feels that the most effective approach to save Vembanad Lake is to work through the panchayats, and involving students, fishermen and farmers. Constant monitoring of water quality in the Vembanad lagoon is essential, as the lake is now one third of its original size and half of its former depth.

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The amount of illicit Indian funds overseas in Swiss tax havens varies from \$500 to \$1450 billion (Rs 25 to Rs 75 lac crores). The Swiss Bankers Association claims that foreign private Clients account for only 671 billion Swiss francs (\$585 billion), of the total managed assets worth 3,822 billion francs. India would require tax and fund information sharing, as part of bilateral agreements with tax havens.□□□