

# NEWS WRAP

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Every year during March and April, around 1500 and 1800 Mexicans typically die of flu. This year the first person to have been afflicted by swine flu was a small boy in a village in the eastern state of Veracruz in Mexico, on 2nd April '09. The first confirmed death was of a 39-year old woman in the southern state of Oaxaca, on 13 April '09. Till 22 April '09 the Mexican authorities failed to send samples abroad for genomic analysis, the process that identified the new virus. It took a week for the Mexicans to acquire the technology to test for themselves. The Mexican government imposed a shut down of schools, concerts, businesses, football stadiums, festivals and church services. As panic over swine flu abated, schools reopened and restrictions on businesses were lifted, after a five-day shutdown. About 42 Mexicans died of swine flu. There were two fatal casualties in USA. In more than 23 countries, there were almost 1400 cases of swine flu.

The business shut down has hit hard Mexico's economy. Mexico has been in a deep recession, owing to its close links with the US economy, and especially its association with the crippled car industry. Compared to the previous year, Mexico's industrial output had reduced by 10.8% in Feb '09. The swine flu outbreak is expected to reduce Mexico's GDP by 0.3% this year. To assist offsetting these losses, the government has announced \$1.3 billion in tax breaks and spending, which is expected to be financed with borrowing. Mexico's tourism industry and food exports could suffer long term damages.

A large number of patients in Mexico's poor rural areas received inadequate care, or no care at all, pointing to inequalities in Mexico's health services. Issue of drugs from the public-health bureaucracy has been long drawn. There were numerous cases of ambulance drivers refusing to transport patients, and of hospitals lacking anti-viral drugs.

Even while swine-flu has not reached Egypt, and international health officials maintain that eating properly cooked pork is safe, the government of Egypt had ordered that 250,000 pigs in the country, were to be slaughtered. This has upset Egypt's six million plus Coptic Christians who own most of the pigs.

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With 35 million people, Nepal occupies a strategic position between India and China. The earlier peace process had concluded a bloody ten-year civil war in 2006. In the elections of 2006, the Maoists had won 38% of the seats in the Constituent Assembly. The parliamentary parties in Nepal have failed to take immediate steps for the integration and rehabilitation of Maoist combatants. The peace agreement had assured that the Maoist guerrillas were to have been integrated in the proper Nepal army. The Maoist fighters are still holed up in the United Nations supervised cantonments. The army opposes 'integration' and the Maoist leader and prime minister, Pushpa Dahal, alias Prachanda, resigned as prime minister on 04 May '09. Prachanda was keen to dismiss General Katawal, a devotee of Nepal's deposed King, Gyanendra, whose office was abolished in 2008.

In Nepal's southern Terai region, a militant group of Tharus, claiming to be the region's original inhabitants and representing 42% of the population, protested against their official classification as Madhesis, and demand Tharu control of an autonomous Terai region.

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Coimbatore, the industrial city in western Tamil Nadu, is famous for its textile mills, automobile spare parts factories, and gold jewellery. Now the global economic meltdown has severely affected flourishing businesses and small-scale industries. Notices of "rebates" and "sales" clutter most of the retail shops, especially those selling garments, the narrow by-lanes of Big Bazaar area in Coimbatore has about 1.5 lac goldsmiths. But now a large number of machines in the small shops are lying idle. With the current recession, there has been a sharp hike in gold prices. Purchasers are waiting for prices to fall, before placing orders on jewellery. The jewellery artisans now have very little work. Whereas earlier a worker had an assured monthly income of Rs 8000, now there is no steady income. The barely three hours work per day, has supplanted the earlier fifteen hours work daily work schedule, several goldsmiths of Coimbatore have committed suicide. Similar to farmers in Vidarbha, the goldsmiths who have taken small loans from money lenders and banks, now find it difficult to pay monthly rent for their shops, or repay interest on the loans, with shop owners resorting to widespread cost and labour cutting measures, a large number of goldsmiths are jobless, and drifting away from their hereditary profession. With income falling by about 50% since Nov '09, goldsmiths are seeking employment as agricultural labourers or small-time building masons.

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Locating new industrial units in West Bengal remains difficult, as less than 2% of the land is non-cultivable. Small holdings and low productivity have removed much of the benefits of land reforms, introduced by the Left Front State government since 1977. There is no land bank nor co-operative farming. Over 65% of West Bengal's cultivators are small, and marginal farmers, have less than two hectares. Farmer's distress has been caused by the rising cost of cultivation, low prices for farm produce, high risk of frequent crop failure, declining agricultural growth and mounting debts. Food grain production growth declined from 6.9% (1980s) to 2.4% (1990s) in West Bengal. While the rest of the economy is growing at 7 to 8%, agricultural growth is around 4%. Purchasing power or per capita consumption expenditure in rural Bengal, is the lowest in India. Farmers are in perpetual poverty in the absence of an alternative to agriculture. 27% of the rural population live below the poverty line. □□□