

NEWS WRAP

AGD

In Peace River country of British Columbia (Canada), new drilling technology has released two vast pockets of shale gas, with recoverable reserves of about 70 trillion cubic feet (2 trillion cubic metres). Large number of energy companies have obtained exploration rights, drilled over 700 wells in 2008, and built pipelines. The energy companies have produced a huge number of jobs and wealth to the placid fertile farms of Peace valley. The provincial government earned C\$ 2.66 billion in sales of land and drilling rights, and C\$1 billion in royalty payments, during 2008. But the local way of life has been disrupted. While much of the benefits of the energy boom go to the cities, there is extra traffic on the roads, and property rights are trampled.

Some landowners are angry. More than 160 sabotage attacks occurred in Alberta, next-door, a decade earlier. The energy companies' alleged disregard for farmers, and their practice of flaring gas to eliminate toxic impurities led to protests. Rural resentment blamed the energy companies for causing stillbirths in animals and humans.

There have been numerous bomb attacks on natural-gas pipelines near Dawson Creek, with demands that the operator En Cana dismantle them. The risk of a big explosion is great, though nobody has been seriously hurt, and the damages have been minor. The bomb attacks of July 09, caused a leak of over 500 metres in the pipelines. The police have mobilized the national counter-terrorism squad. Community work schemes are being introduced to tackle angry landowners and disgruntled En Cana employees.

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Funds allotted to Jammu and Kashmir under the Prime Minister's Reconstruction Plan have remained unutilized. The Plan was to have been implemented between 2004 to 2007, but has been extended several times. Out of Rs 29,954.85 crore received by J&K state under the scheme, only Rs 6,367.53 crore have been utilized on the various schemes and projects. The funds were allotted for restoring damaged infrastructure, creating new infra-structure for delivery of basic services, and initiating strategic interventions to remedy the shortfalls and imbalances in the J&K state economy. The plan sanctioned Rs 634 crore for the Srinagar-Leh route, but the money is unspent. The state failed to spend Rs 1470 crore for Greater Jammu, and Rs 1741 crore for Greater Srinagar, on sewerage and drainage projects.

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Since 18 June 09, the drive against Maoists in Lalgarh has been spearheaded with 17 companies of central and state forces each. Even with two thousand forces, the operation to clear Lalgarh of Maoists has failed. The West Bengal state administration admits that they have not succeeded in flushing out armed cadres from the 50 sq km area; and the state government insists that it is not wavering in its objective, nor in a hurry to withdraw the security forces. The Maoist cadres have returned to the villages targeting and killing CPI(M) activists, and enforcing heir writ. The top police officials have been "unofficially" instructed to restrain from opening fire. For even a lathi-charge, prior consent has to be obtained from the state secretariat. Though the police have evacuated Lalgarh police station, they never attempted to enter the villages in Lalgarh, and they have been disinclined to arrest people with criminal records.

The villagers have remained opposed to the presence of security forces in remote areas. Demanding removal of police camps from schools, villagers have held demonstrations. There have been instances where the local tribals have confined police parties inside schools for twelve hours. The state government has been shy of taking strong action against any political group, ever since the Nandigram police action and its

political fallout. The police force is demoralized. The top Maoist leader, Kishenji had issued an ultimatum to Mamata Banerjee, leader of Trinamool Congress, to speak out against police intervention, or face a boycott from the people of Lalgarh.

The Maoists having flourished in Lalgarh since Dec 08, have declared the area a "free zone", and at least 150 cadres are currently operating in Lalgarh.

The Maoists run medical camps and schools, provide drinking water by setting up tubewells, and participate in social work. Since the government welfare schemes are non-existent, the widening of the civic and social facilities by the Maoists allows them a strong base in the area. The villagers are willingly sheltering them.

Following the setbacks in the Lok Sabha Elections (May 09), the CPI(M) has shut down several of its zonal and local committees in Nandigram and Khejuri. Some local committee offices have been relocated to Haldia and Tamluk, as the party cannot find enough cadres to operate the offices. Many of the CPI(M) leaders, secretaries and members of zonal and local committees have not succeeded in returning to their homes. Trinamool Congress hoodlums have been forcing CPI(M) sympathisers to leave the party. The restructuring of CPI(M) party offices has occurred in trouble-torn places.

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During 2008 global food prices were abnormally high caused by high transportation costs due to galloping crude oil prices, shifts in crop cultivation from foodgrain to bio-fuel, and lower production. During 2008, sixteen economies reported more than 10% increase in food prices. Now only five countries Mexico, Poland, Canada, Nepal and India, continue to experience declining food prices. In India the poor monsoons of 2009, will replicate the lower agricultural production of 2008; and the country will continue to suffer high double-digit food inflation. India is importing lentils, edible oil and other staples to off set a possible shortage in essential food items, owing to a weak monsoon. □□□