

NEWS WRAP

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The shocks of globalization are being absorbed by all religions. With the flow of people, commodities and instant communications across borders troubling gender relations and family structures, Islam feels the most threatened. Videos airing on Pakistan's private television networks and circulating on the Internet, depict sobbing teenaged girls and young women being flogged mercilessly by the local Taliban commanders, while groups of men from the village, watch silently. The alleged transgressions of the women could range from possible violations of the Taliban's version of Islamic Law which ranges from stepping outside the house for a woman without a male escort, to having an illicit affair. Apparently shot on cellphones, the videos are given to human rights activists. The brief images are revealing. The western world is becoming increasingly aware of the brutal subjugation of poor, uneducated women in rural Pakistan and Afghanistan. US and NATO strategic reviews of the battles and struggles in the isolated Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier highlight fierce nationalism, ancient warrior culture, the failures of modern nation construction, and the spread of jihadist terrorism. Pakistani and Afghan men, who wish to deal with their womenfolk as they see fit, are becoming important recruiting tools for the Taliban.

Much of the Pakistan videos have been shot in the Swat Valley, a region which the Pakistani government had turned over to the Taliban in Feb 09. Since May 09, the Pakistan military offensive against Taliban fighters, near the Afghan border, has killed more than 4000 insurgents. Nearly one million people have turned refugees.

Fanatical Islamic sects have drawn their battle plans in holy terms, and are destroying Islam's mainstream values.

The Shia population in Afghanistan constitute 20% of the population, and have long pursued legal recognition of their religious beliefs. In March 09, Afghanistan's government enacted a sweeping law that restricts the rights of minority Shiite women. Proper behaviour of Shiite couples and families are codified in intimate details. While the law guarantees ample rights for women, especially in areas such as child custody, the law requires women to seek their husband's permission to leave home, except for "culturally legitimate" purposes, such as work or weddings, and to submit to the sexual demands of husbands, unless ill or in periods. The law has spurred formal protests by several Afghan cabinet members and leaders, besides being denounced by the major Western governments.

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On a day the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka said it was "time to silence the guns", a body, believed to be that of LTTE chief V Prabhakaran was found in the war zone. The three decade-old war, that claimed over 70,000 lives, concluded on 18 May 09. Since April 09, Sri Lanka's military victory was aided by active assistance and well defined naval deployment against the Sea Tigers, from India. The first army medical mission was despatched from India to northern Sri Lanka in April 09.

Three fast attack boats and a missile corvette was deployed by the Indian Navy in the Palk Straits. Specific tasks included patrolling the seas, search and arrest of LTTE fugitives and destruction of sea Tiger marine craft. India Navy maintained close co-ordination with Sri Lanka's integrated defence staff.

The International Grains Council (IGC) has projected an eight-year increase in stocks of food grain. Prices have fallen, and exports remain unviable. Better quality Indian wheat sells between \$185 a ton and \$220 per ton, against a free-on-board price varying between \$ 280 to \$250 per ton, at Kandla or Mundra. Surplus stocks, especially of wheat, is resulting in granaries bursting at seams, and prices plummeting. The Food Corporation of India, as on 01 April 09, was holding three times the minimum wheat stock requirement of 4 million tons. Wheat output is pegged at about 75 million tons, with existing wheat stocks being about 13.4 million tons. Prices have fallen to Rs 1020 a quintal in New Delhi, and to Rs 930 a quintal in Uttar Pradesh; against a national minimum support price of Rs 1080 a quintal.

The transportation cost per ton of wheat is around Rs 2400 a ton annually, which increases every month by about Rs 200 a ton. The already poor quality of wheat is expected to deteriorate rapidly, making it fit only for fodder. Food subsidy already stands at Rs 50,000 crore per year.

Global trade in rice is only a fraction of wheat trade. Rice stocks are surplus at 21.6 million tons on 01 April 09, against a buffer norm of 11.2 million tons. Mid-May 09, the Forward Markets Commission approved the removal of the two-and-a-half-year old ban on futures trading of wheat. The existing ban on rice, urad and toor futures continues. Signals of huge exports of grains could send global prices crashing. Option remains on unloading stocks through the public distribution system (PDS) and revising norms to increase buffer stocking.

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Even though the CPI(M) had strongly influenced the previous UPA government (2004-09), in adopting the NREGA, the Forest Tribal Act and other social welfare measures, the CPI(M) lost a vote share of 0.33% in the last Lok Sabha elections compared to 2004. In West Bengal the decline has been about 5.47% votes. □□□