

NEWS WRAP

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Bermeja island, off Mexico's Yucatan coast appears on maps as early as the 1500s and as late as 1941. Mexico's Institute of Geography, in a book published in 1946, lists Bermeja's co-ordinates. Bermeja island has now vanished without a trace. The huge oil boom in the Mexican Gulf has fuelled the mystery of the missing island. Bermeja island would have allowed Mexico to advance its maritime border some 55 miles further north, assisting Mexico to confront American encroachment on its claims to potentially huge oil deposits in the Mexican Gulf. As Mexico and USA negotiate a new drilling agreement, British Petroleum announced in Sep 09, of a vast find in the Mexican Gulf. This is the latest in a series of discoveries that has converted the area into one of the most promising oil exploration regions.

The missing island is described as a sand bar or coral clump, or as a volcanic rock rising out of the sea. There are arguments that natural causes, from rising sea levels to earthquakes could have brought the destruction of Bermeja. Mexican nationalists accuse USA of destroying the island, to undermine Mexico's oil claims. There have been doubts about Bermeja's existence for more than a decade. For a 1997 treaty on maritime limits between Mexico and America, the Alacranes islets, much further south, were treated as point of reference. Gaps between American and Mexican territorial waters have provoked Mexico's maritime committee to probe four more possible sites, where Bermeja island might be situated.



The mid-2009 sentencing of Myanmar's democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who won Burma's last free elections in 1990, will ensure that Suu Kyi will remain under house arrest, during the 2010 elections. Myanmar's junta has also been targeting ethnic groups. At the end of July 09, junta soldiers burned down sixty two houses in Ho Lom village, in Myanmar's Shan state. Soldiers also burned more than 100 houses in Tard Mawk village, in the same district. During July / August 09, villagers have been forcibly displaced from 38 other Shan villages. Increased military activity in north western Myanmar as part of a systematic and brutal campaign, has caused large scale displacement of more than 10,000 Shan civilians. The latest round of attacks on the people of Kokang, an ethnic enclave of Chinese speakers in north eastern Shan state, not too far from the China border, has driven 10,000 to 30,000 Kokang into China. This has prompted a rebuke from Myanmar junta's long time trade and investment partner, the People's Republic of China.

During the summer of 2009, other ethnic groups, including the Karen in eastern Myanmar, have experienced intense fighting and huge human rights violations. Around 5000 Karens have fled into Thailand. In the heavily mined jungles, untrained new conscripts, including children, are being forced to fight their own people. Large numbers of land mine injuries are occurring in Karen state. Myanmar's eastern ethnic regions have witnessed the junta's systematic campaigns of torture, extra-judicial executions and rapes of ethnic minority women and girls. With the current assaults, the military junta is attempting to

force their ethnic opponents to convert as border patrol forces, participating in Myanmar's showcase elections of 2010. The larger ethnic groups and political parties like Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy have rejected the junta's offers and the junta's constitution, drafted during the referendum of May 08. As the junta creates humanitarian emergencies to grab power and control the Shan, Karen and Kokang civilians are losing their homes, livelihoods and lives. All progressive forces, like student leaders, journalists, independent humanitarian relief workers and the courageous clergy of different faiths, who oppose the military junta, are under attack.

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After the last Lok Sabha elections, doubts about India's Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) have been raised by various political parties, including the BJP. There are apprehensions that the EVM chips could be manipulated at various stages, of manufacturing, insertion and transportation. The Election Commission lacks control over the entire technical process, and there are no third party checks, inspections or guarantees on the programming of chips, used in the EVMs. The hardware and the software are never in the public domain. There is necessity for the chips manufactured by ECIL and BEL be allowed annual, random third party inspections, by NIC or IITs. To rectify errors in machines and discrepancies in results, the machines could be randomly changed from state to state within the country, for every election; and a verification tool should be developed.

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While there is no acceptable land acquisition process in India, the scarce resource of land is subject to wastage. In 1952, Hindustan Motors was allotted 750 acres at Hindmotors (West Bengal) but was utilizing only 300 acres by 2002. A factory does not need more than an acre to manufacture 1000 cars. Tatas could have produced 350,000 Nano cars on 400 acres, instead of the allotted 997 acres at Singur. 16,000 tribals were displaced in Koraput district of Orissa, for land acquisition. The land was allotted to the Hindustan Aeronauticals MIG factory. Today about 75% of the land acquired in Koraput district remains unutilized.

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Nine sites of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi, are reportedly less than half complete. Meeting dead lines and violation of labour laws have resulted in the loss of lives, of at least ten construction workers, while hundreds have been injured. This is one of the highest death tolls of any recent large sports event, caused by inadequate health and safety equipment, poor living conditions, and long working hours at the athletes' village and three city stadiums. While the Indian government deflects criticism of the Games, the Commonwealth Games Federation has denied any responsibility for safety. □□□