

NEWS WRAP

AGD

There has been an alarming depletion of groundwater in Punjab, caused by the Punjab state government's policy of providing free power to the farm sector. The rate of extraction of ground water has reached 145% of the recharge rate. The result of falling water table is serious, as Punjab now has 112 out of 141 blocks, described as 'dark' with an alarming rate of depletion of ground water. Free power to agricultural consumers is contributing to overdraw of groundwater, besides creating a huge power subsidy burden of more than Rs 3000 crores. Punjab's agriculture takes a 30% share of the total energy sold. The Planning Commission is trying to persuade Punjab of abandoning the policy of free power for agriculture, and charge an appropriate tariff for power drawn by agriculture.

BHOPAL DISASTER

One of the world's worst industrial accidents has been the December 1984 industrial accident at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal. A chief judicial magistrate in Bhopal, convicted one of India's top industrialists and seven others of criminal negligence over the devastating gas leak, that killed 8000 people within three days, and left thousands more suffering toxic after effects, more than twenty five years ago. Former members of Union Carbide's senior management in India were sentenced to two years in jail and fined Rs 100,000. As appeals are expected, the surviving defendants are years away from any imprisonment. The sentence indicates how expendable Indian lives can be, in the face of corporate negligence, and a fumbling judicial process. The area still throws up a high incidence of birth defects and chronic illnesses. Bhopal's gas disaster plight points to India's lax safety regulations and poor accountability.

The earlier \$470 million compensation payment agreed between Union Carbide and the Union Government of India has not yet been fully disbursed to the victims. USA has refused a request to extradite Warren Anderson, the 89-year-old, former chairman of Union Carbide corporation, now residing in the US. The Union Carbide has maintained that its officials are not subject to the jurisdiction of Indian Courts, since they did not have any involvement in the operation of the plant, which was owned by Union Carbide India Limited. Union Carbide is now a subsidiary of Dow Chemical. Even though the charges against Union Carbide officials have been light, and the court took too long to come to a decision, the court judgement is of watershed significance, as corporate liability is rarely proven in India.

US UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment in USA is about fourteen million, which is high by American and also by international standards. The number of US citizens looking for work, for more than six months, has risen to around nearly seven million. The figures indicate a sharp rise in long-term unemployment. The deterioration in the US job market during the economic meltdown, has been the worst for more than sixty years. A high turn-over marks the US labour market. A large segment of the labour force either quits or suffers laid-off each year. But these workers are rapidly rehired. Joblessness in the USA has increased

sharply owing to slow-down in hiring, than any surge in lay offs and people are quitting. Subsequent rates of hiring after the start of the recession, have declined and crashed. This has caused long-term unemployment to soar. The dramatic slow-down in hiring raise doubts on the rule, which states, “the sharper the downturn, the faster the recovery”. There are dangers that the lengthening spells of unemployment become self perpetuating, as skills erode or grow obsolete. Part-time workers, whose hours can be increased as an alternative to new hiring, loom long-term unemployment.

SMALL NUCLEAR

On the “Small Quantities Protocol” with Myanmar and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Myanmar is exempted from regular IAEA inspections, on the Myanmar government’s assurance that there is nothing to inspect. There is growing evidence that Myanmar is steadily veering to a nuclear and missile network, that links North Korea, Iran, Pakistan and Syria. North Korea is willing to sell missiles or help Myanmar build its own missiles. Documents and photographs being exhibited by a Myanmar army defector, appear to confirm Myanmar’s aims of enriching uranium. The only concrete evidence of the military junta’s nuclear ambitions is an agreement from Russia in 2007, to build a small research reactor for Myanmar.

Since 2002, there have been hundreds of Myanmar scientists, who took training in Russian nuclear institutes, including one institute which was earlier connected to the Soviet Nuclear weapons programme. There are reports that a Syrian-North Korean company, associated with the construction of the secret nuclear reactor in Syria, which was bombed by Israel in 2007 before completion, has been working in Myanmar.

CONGO REPRESSION

Since the UN-sponsored elections of 2006, President Joseph Kabila of Congo has been conducting arbitrary arrests and brutal repression of Political dissidents. Even with nearly 19000 UN peacekeepers stationed in Congo, human rights abuses cover murder with bodies dumped in the Congo river, torture of political opponents, and the imprisonment of thousands. On 02 June 2010, Floribert Chebeya, the head of a local NGO called ‘Voice of the Voiceless’, was found dead in his car, under murky circumstances. Chebeya was a long time critic of President Kabila’s increasingly authoritarian rule. Congo celebrated the 50th anniversary of independence from Belgium, last June.□