

NEWS WRAP

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Consequent to a bomb attack on an army bus in Colombo, the Sri Lankan government abrogated the six-year-old truce ceasefire with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, on 02 January 08. The six-year-old ceasefire agreement witnessed scores of skirmishes. Now the twenty-five-year-old war has been resumed. With the withdrawal of the ceasefire monitors, led by Norway, the Sri Lankan civilians would be less protected, and continue to suffer. The Tigers have been taking advantage of the truce for rearming and recruiting fresh rebels, and to execute attacks on government security forces and civilians. The LTTE rebels have violated the truce more than 10,000 times, since February 02, by conducting assassinations, terror attacks and kidnappings of children. During the truce, the Sri Lankan government has conducted ruthless campaigns, utilizing aircraft and artillery. Thousands have been killed, and over 300,000 minority Tamils and Muslims rendered homeless.

There are no indications of a peaceful solution to the disputes between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, over political autonomy. The armed struggle for an independent "Eelam" (homeland) in the north and east of the island continues. During the last two years of the "ceasefire", 5,000 people have lost their lives.

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Political leaders in three Andean countries of Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela have recently tried rewriting national constitutions, that would increase difficulties for future administrations, to reverse official policies, instituted while in office. President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and his allies in Bolivia and Ecuador hope to build New National identities, and awaken hopes among the poor citizens. They advocate a stronger state role in their respective economy, and less reliance on global markets, which invariably favour more developed countries. While electoral politics is being safeguarded, the three countries are experimenting with Chavez's "21st century Socialism". Chavez and the Bolivian President Evo Morales propose changes that aim to remove the current term limits for presidents. Ecuador's President Rafael Correa advocates permanently dissolving the opposition controlled legislature. While large scale constitutional reforms can be popular in countries with huge economic and social exclusion, critics of constitutional reforms fear the end of democracy.

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The H5NI virus bird flu has affected Hoogly, Birbhum, Cooch Behar, South Dinajpur, Murshidabad, Nadia, Burdwan, Bankura and Malda districts of West Bengal, during January and February 2008. There have been reports of chicken deaths from north 24-Paraganas and Howrah districts also. The West Bengal government delayed the notices to the districts by a week. About 2.5 million chickens were to have been culled. The World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines require the creation of a containment zone, immediately after the bird flu outbreak is reported. No perimeter control has been set up in the affected areas. WHO guidelines specify immediate health survey of the people. The fifty health teams set up by the state government for conducting door to door health

surveys, consist of mostly school drop-outs and members of local youth clubs, who have no medical knowledge nor experience. WHO guidelines demand isolation wards. The few isolation wards opened do not have specialized doctors, equipments like ventilators, and quarantine zones.

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Government of India had planned to double the credit flow to the ailing farm sector in three years, from May 04. Against the credit target of Rs 225,000 crores for 2007-08, Rs 120,062 crores have been disbursed till Decembe 07. But official data indicates that the number of farmers being provided credit by the banking sector, has actually declined. Continued rural indebtedness and suicides by farmers make the trend disturbing. The "mismatch" between the number of farmer accounts financed and the credit disbursd, points to a sharp fall in farmer accounts, which will be hurting small and marginal farmers hard. The majority of the decline in accounts has been in the co-operative banks, which extend small loans to small borrowers. Such small loans amounted to 2.25 crores accounts in 2004-05, falling to 1.89 crores accounts in 2006-07, whereas the loan amount increased from Rs 31,231 crores (2004-05) to nearly Rs 42,500 crores (2006-07).

The share of co-operatives in total agricultural credit has been declining over the last few years. Even then, they have more than double the number of rural outlets of the sum total of scheduled commercial banks and regional rural banks. The number of farmer accounts financed by commercial banks has stagnated at 1.46 crores since 2005-06. While banks are fulfilling financial targets, the physical targets of involving more farmers in the formal credit system are not being completed. Doubling the credit to the farm sector without improving the farmers' absorptive capacity is adversely skewing the rural indebtednes situation. The share of distressed marginal farmers in the total number of farmers has been increasing at a faster rate, than their share of land. Their share in agricultural credit declined,while their share in land area increased.

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The report on State of Worldwide Child Survival released by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) points to the average annual rate of decline in malnutrition in India since 1990, which has been 0.9% only. Malnutrition in India is the fundamental reason of up to 50% deaths of children under-five years. Underweight children, under the age of five, is 43% in India, which is the highest in the world. 19% of the deaths are accounted for by Neo-Natal causes, anaemia in mother and pneumonia. □□□