

NEWS WRAP

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Apart of Israeli-occupied West Bank is known as Area C, a designation which has links to the Oslo era accords, and implies that Israel has full control. 60% of the West Bank, falls under Area C, which is the ancestral home to about 70,000 Palestinians. Most of the Jewish settlements, have been constructed in this area, and are illegal under international law. In order to construct any building in Area C, a Palestinian must apply for a permit from the Israeli authorities, that is the civil administration of Judea and Samaria, the Israeli defence ministry department, responsible for the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Between 2000-08, 94% Palestinian permit applications for constructions in Area C, were refused. However, 18,472 housing units were built in Jewish settlements, while the Palestinians were sanctioned 91 construction permits. The Palestinians have control in Area B, but frequently new precincts are being added to Area C, from Area B. Demolition orders have led to 1663 Palestinian buildings being demolished, compared to only 199 in the Israeli settlements. The 'silent transfer' of the Palestinian population from Area C is rising, as 29 demolitions of Palestinian buildings between Oct-Dec 07, have increased to 138 demolitions for Jan-March 08.

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The new theology of liberation and its "preferential option for the poor" had inspired young priests in Latin America of the 1970s. Political awareness was widened by indigenous movements for radical change. Pope John XXIII had summoned an ecumenical council fifty years earlier, referred as Vatican II, which became a revolutionary gathering, for reviving the social doctrine of the church, particularly in Latin America. But in the 1980s, Pope John II considered "revolution theology" bordering on communism, and almost excommunicated all its adherents. Many priests continued in their faith in "liberation theology", and steadily rose in hierarchy, to become bishops. Fernando Lugo of Paraguay, is a "red bishop", and former bishop of the Northern Town of San Pedro, who has become President after polls of April 08.

Lugo had abandoned priesthood in 2007 at 57, and built the Patriotic Alliance for Change, a progressive opposition movement. The rule of the Colorado party and its six decades of dictatorship and corruption has ended. Lugo has promised to fight corruption, and has been persuaded two million economic exiles to return to Paraguay. Similar to other leftist leaders in Latin America, Lugo lays emphasis on the needs of the rural poor. Lugo's policies attack Brazilian landowners and their ruthless schemes of replacing forests with fields of soya. He also plans to acquire more economic prices for Paraguay's abundant electricity being sold presently to Brazil and Argentina, at extremely low prices. The Patriotic Alliance for change is a coalition of labour unions, Indians and poor farmers. The prosperous elite own the vast majority of farmland and cattle ranches; now agrarian reforms can be expected. Fernando Lugo is expected to take office on 15 August 2008.

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The "below poverty line" (BPL) survey is conducted, every five years, for the actual identification of the poor. Conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development in the first year of every plan period, the survey should have commenced in 2007, that is the beginning of the 11th Plan in India. Leading plans of the ruling government target the BPL list. But the survey is yet to take off, as the expert group of the National Statistical Commission, to evaluate acceptable measures of poverty and evolve new definitions of poverty, is yet to submit its report, even after two years. The BPL survey is unlikely to be completed before 2009, which is the 11th Plan's third year. States like Punjab, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat have been raising doubts on the procedures of poverty estimation, at meetings of the National Development Council.

Different criteria have been used to identify the poor, in the last three plans. While income was the basis in 1992, consumption pattern was treated as the base in 1997. A 13-point questionnaire, grading households on a scale, was utilized by the door-to-door census of the 10th Plan. The Supreme Court had raised queries on the faulty questionnaire methodology. The questionnaire had treated children of households going to school, as "not being poor". Again, households having toilets or "pucca" houses were excluded from the "poor". While the actual number of poor has not reflected any major change, the ratio of poor in India has declined from 54.8% of total population in 1973, to 27.5% in 2004. The current poverty line of Rs 356 monthly per capita expenditure for rural areas, and Rs 458 for urban areas, as of 2004-05, is extremely low. The government's present definition of poverty, fixed in 1993, defines poverty on the basis of calorie consumption levels in 1973-74, which were identified as 2400 calories (rural area) and 2100 calories (urban area), per capita per day. Consumer price variation in different states, led to variation of calorie estimates from state to state. Since 2000, calorie intake has declined by 15 to 20%, in both rural and urban areas. Available data points to a majority of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes remaining poor. The government feels that they are eligible for inclusion in the BPL list.



Reservations in "other backward castes" (OBCs) have been announced. Economic reforms have not created any sizeable section of beneficiaries for influencing electoral results, for any of the major political parties. Most of the smaller state level parties are obtaining substantial votes from the OBCs. These state level parties are confined to a specific caste for reliable support, and independent of social justice policies being pursued. The new quota policy may benefit the BSP alone. □□□