

# NEWS WRAP

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Trade between the European Union and Russia has more than tripled since 2000. The outdated Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA), signed in 1997, governs the relationship. The next EU-Russia summit is scheduled for June 08 in Siberia, and western diplomats hope to launch negotiations on a new PCA. Russia has a string of bilateal relations with Germany, Italy, Austria, Bulgaria, the Netherlands and Greece. Bilateral ties are getting in the way of multi-lateral negotiations. Russia has emphasized that it would not ratify the energy charter, it had signed in 1994, which would have allowed third parties' access to its gas pipelines. Greece has formally signed upto South Stream, a Russian backed Black Sea pipeline, that rivals the EU's plans in the region.

There have been numerous obstacles to the redrafting of the PCA. A Russian embargo on Polish meat exports, provoked a Polish veto in 2007. An oil pipeline to Lithuania's refinery, has been blocked by Russia, since 1996, on grounds of needed "repairs". Lithuania is uncomfortable with Russia's support for the breakaway enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. Claiming that Georgia was planning to invade Abkhazia, Russia has stated that it would increase peacekeeping forces, as a response to a Georgian attack. Georgia has threatened to obstruct Russia's application for joining the World Trade Organization. Russia has not co-operated in tracking the leaders of a Soviet supported revolt in Lithuania, at the beginning of 1991, when 14 people were killed, and eight border guards executed. There has also been lack of co-operation from Russia in British investigations over the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian exile with British citizenship, in London. National governments are justifying bilateral deals with Russia, in view of the lack of progress on a new PCA.

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On 02 May 08, Cyclone Nagris devastated huge areas of Myanmar, leaving over 100,000 dead and millions homeless. Survivors of the cyclone are threatened by water-borne illnesses, compounding a humani-tarian catastrophe. Bamboo homes have been ripped off, or washed away in the flooding. Emergency teams, have been despatched by the UN and international agencies to the worst hit areas, in the low-lying Irrawardy delta. Piped water supplies have been cut in Yangoon and other affected towns, and people without wells are in desperate need of clean drinking water. Vast tracts are without effective sanitation, precipitating the spread of disease and fatal diarrhoea. A storm surge in low lying area, in the southern delta, along with high winds flattened towns like Bogalay and Laputta, and several villages. Yangoon power station is dysfunc-tional. Prices of basic commodities like food, bottled water and petrol have been spiralling.

Suspicious of international aid, the military regime of Myanmar has belatedly accepted help from the UN and other aid agencies, already having a ground presence. However, the scale of aid operations is limited. The UN, EU, Thailand, India, Japan, USA and Australia have despatched aid and assistance teams. In spite of the disaster, the military regime conducted the referendum on the draft

constitution, on 10 May 08, throughout Myanmar, except the worst-affected areas. Refugees who had taken shelter in school houses, were forced to vacate, so that buildings could be converted to polling points. Restrictions continue on foreign aid shipments, and the aid being distributed is a fraction of what is needed.

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On 11 May 08, eight labourers of a private firm, engaged in railway constructions in Assam's North Cachar Hill district, were gunned down by militants belonging to the Jewel Garbosa faction of the Dima Haram Daoga (DHD). DHD(J) militants, also known as Black Widow, had killed a railway pointsman at Wadingdisa railway station, on 10 May 08. Fire from the guns of militants had killed two labourers in Haflong on 12 May 08. The Jewel Garbosa is opposed to the Northeast Frontier Railways' project of laying a new broadgauge track, between Lumding and Silchar, for replacing the metre gauge track. The militant outfit has also been targeting the National Highway Authority of India's (NHAI) East-West corridor, through the autonomous hill district's difficult terrain, connecting Silchar (Southern Assam) to Saurashtra (Gujarat).

Since January 08, at least 55 persons have been killed by militant groups, mainly the DHD (J), in the North Cachar Hills district. 25 persons have been kidnapped for ransom. The NHAI and NEF Railways have been demanding more security. The Chief Minister of Assam has pointed out that the companies working on the road and rail projects, have failed to provide accommodation to the security personnel.

Meanwhile, Railways have suspended running of Night Trains on the Lumding-Silchar hill sections, for an indefinite period.

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The Tamil Nadu state government has permitted the Transfer of 164 acres of magnesite-rich land, along the Salem-Bangalore National highway, 6km from Salem city and about 10km from Salem airport, to the Electronic Corporation of Tamil Nadu (ELCOT) for erecting an Information Technology park. The land is rich in magnesite, which has a global demand, for manufacturing quality basic refractory bricks for industries. One lac tons of high quality magnesite deposits, are available on the land, which could be mined for another 70 years. The Salem unit of Burn Standard Company Ltd. accounts for 90% of the rare mineral mined in India. Of the mineral rich land, Burn Standard has been engaged in open cast mining on 31.37 hectares. The request for extension of mining lease for another 20 years, from the company, has been turned down by the Tamil Nadu government. □□□