

NEWS WRAP

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Cambodia accepted the free market mechanism in the 1990s. In those early days, Khymer Rouge coloured thinking and a hostility to outsiders, discouraged tourism. But some western travellers, risking their lives; did explore Cambodia. The country appeared safe, and became a tourist destination by 2006. With three general elections till date, Cambodia is a democracy. It has a nominal opposition party. President Hun Sen and his ruling Cambodia People's Party (CPP) are remote, and not very communicative with the people they govern. Cambodia has been a debtor Nation, under the burden of more than \$1 billion of aid from the international community. It has suddenly become a refuge for cash and speculators, escaping the damaged western financial markets. 1.5 million tourists visited the Angkor Wat temples in 2006, erasing western capitalism's memories of Cambodia's Khymer Rouge past. The tourism boom has prompted the Cambodian government to permit investors to form 100% foreign-owned companies in Cambodia, that can outright purchase land and real estate, or at least on 99-year plus 99-year leases.

Rich speculators from Britain, France, Switzerland and Russia have invested for profits of more than 30%. \$2 billion in foreign finance was invested in 2007, a 1500% rise, over the previous four years. By March 08, all of Cambodia's accessible forests, lakes, beaches, reefs and sandy coasts, have been in private hands, either Cambodian or foreign. Those who live in the coastal areas have been evicted, without any meaningful compensation, and some being jailed or beaten up. Tourist resorts, consisting of hotels, villas, dolphin aquariums, golf courses, shopping centres and marina, are being constructed along the coastal areas. Beaches and islands are being connected with 900/1000 metres suspension bridges. With the Cambodian economy growing by more than 24% over the last eighteen months, land values have increased in some cases by more than 100%.

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Disagreements on how to restore sixty senior judges, dismissed by President Parvez Musharaf during martial law in 2007, has led former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), or PML-N pull out of the federal cabinet of the governing coalition, whose other member is Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Asif Zardari, widower of late Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister. There are rising fears of more confrontation and instability.

The PML-N party has decided not to vote with the opposition. Previously Mr Sharif's election papers had been rejected. The Electoral Commission has now permitted Mr Sharif to contest a by-election. Mr Sharif's party insists that by an executive order, based on a parliamentary resolution, the judges removed by Mr Musharraf be re-appointed. This could be unconstitutional, resulting in a clash with the president and the current Supreme Court, leading to army involvement. Mr Zardari's party would like a constitutional amendment, that would restore the judges. If the old judges return, the PML-N party like the Supreme Court declare

the Nov. '07 presidential election as unconstitutional. Mr Sharif would like the judges to set aside his personal conviction for Terrorism and kidnapping in 2000. A stable and legitimate government in Islamabad is required to tackle inflation, food subsidies, unemployment, power shortages, capital flight, and terrorism within Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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In the Asian weapons black market, China has replaced Cambodia and Thailand, as the main supplier of weapons to insurgent groups in India's North-east and Myanmar. In 2004, over 1700 assault rifles, 400 Uzi submachine guns, 150 rocket propelled grenade launchers and a large quantity of ammunition originating from Hong Kong had been seized in Chittagong, by Bangladesh authorities. The Chinese origin weapons were meant for North-east insurgent groups. Most weapons are routed through China's Yunnan province. Between Chinese arms manufacturers and insurgent groups in India's North east, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) rebel group in Myanmar plays the role of middleman. A Chinese automatic rifle that costs \$ 500 in eastern Myanmar, can be sold for \$2500 in North east India. Frequently, consignments of several hundred Chinese assault rifles are recovered, while being smuggled to Tamu, an Indian border town; and destined for Manipuri UNLF and other rebel factions. Besides being seized from north east insurgent groups, Chinese weapons are arriving at the illegal arms markets in Uttar Pradesh.

The weapons' designs indicate that they are of Chinese origin, even though there are no markings on the weapons to establish the country of manufacture. While China has increased bona fide export of weapons to Myanmar and Sri Lanka, an illicit arms trade with rebel groups like LTTE in Sri Lanka, and the Kachin Independence Army in Myanmar, has been growing rapidly. China has an increasing influence in the weapons black market. In India's north-east, a Chinese T56 assault rifle (developed from AK-47) is available for Rs 2.5 to Rs 3 lacs. The cost of a used rifle is Rs 1 to Rs 1.5 lacs. Bullet magazines priced at Rs 100 a piece. The M20 or the 30 Marcos pistol, manufactured in China, costs Rs 1 to Rs 1.5 lacs, a piece.

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The Zilla Parishad is a phenomenon of administrative decentralization in India. Over the years the Zilla Parishad, the Panchayat Samiti (middle tier) and the Gram Panchayat (lowest tier) have become institutions of power play and corruption. Political control of a Zilla Parishad is crucial, as it decides which gram panchayat will be allocated which government scheme. The Parishad controls funds from the union government and the state government, which combined could touch about Rs 300 crores annually. The District Magistrate is only ex-officio chief executive of the Parishad. The Zilla Parishad is the nodal agency for implementing all government schemes. The members of a Parishad elect the Sabhadhipati or Chairman, who heads each Zilla Parishad. The May 08 elections for the Parishad were marked by violent inter-party clashes, resulting in 25 fatal casualties.

Of the 17 ZPs in West Bengal the Left Front lost four and retained control over the rest. Nandigram and Singur became conflict zones, between those who favoured industry and those who were opposed to land acquisition. Sections who

opposed the industrialization map of the West Bengal government remained united at the grassroots level. Observations by the Justice Sachar panel over the plight of the minority community in West Bengal, consolidated the Muslim vote against CPM and Left Front. □□□