

NEWS WRAP

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The summit of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the last week of July '07 in Manila, issued a final communique which did not reflect any commitment to establish a regional human rights watchful body, even though all ASEAN ministers had persuaded Myanmar not to veto discussion of the proposal, at the next ASEAN summit of heads of government in November, 07. The next summit celebrates ASEAN's birthday, and a new charter is expected to be signed, which would provide greater integrated economic and political grouping within ASEAN. Myanmar has been ASEAN's worst human rights violator. India and China maintain strategic connections with Myanmar's junta, which eases pressures on Myanmar, caused by policies of sanctions and isolations, pursued by western countries.

With just five member countries, viz Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Singapore, ASEAN was formed at the crescendo of the cold war, and was considered as a barrier against communism, besides avoiding wars amongst the member countries. Before the Asian economic crisis of 1997, the economic boom of ASEAN countries caused great excitement. Plans for a Free-Trade Zone over the last fifteen years, have been obstructed with exemptions, special cases and non-tariff barriers. While ASEAN countries conduct three-quarters of their trade with non-members, between 2000-06, trade within ASEAN grew by 129%. ASEAN has not achieved much success in negotiating trade deals as a block, on behalf of member countries. Many ASEAN members continue to strike bilateral trade deals. Members of ASEAN have not been wholly willing to pool sovereignty in important economic areas.



In USA, tensions between Blacks and Spanish speaking Hispanics/Latinos have been increasing. Rivalry between Blacks and Hispanics in North Carolina and California has been at the working class level. Latinos are entrenched in certain manual trades. They account for a quarter of the National Workforce in the construction industry, and outnumber Blacks, by almost five to one. But in white-collar jobs like public administration, education and health, 36% of managers are black, 29% are white, and just 20% are Hispanic. Reports indicate that over time, Hispanics have progressively occupied high-echelon employment, from both blacks and whites. Building booms since 2000, have drawn workers from Mexico, in US southern states. Former ghettos are turning bi-racial, leading to race-hate crimes and interracial prison riots. Earnesto Alearez and Jonathan Fajardo are Hispanic, and standing trial in Los Angeles for the killing of a black, 14-year-old Cheryl Green.

Racial resentment is sharpened, as the Latinos live in areas, where the Blacks hold political power. The black civil rights struggle in the USA, grew from assertion of legal rights and permitting voting, to those already-enfranchised. The Latinos aim for selective, non-enforcement of the law, particularly on immigration. The Latino vote is negligible, as a result of their youthful age, and status of non-citizens. In California, the Hispanics account for a third of the population, but only a fifth exercise franchise.

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Raul Castro has been exercising powers of head of state and government in Cuba for a year, ever since his elder brother, Fidel Castro, had temporarily handed over powers, following intestinal surgery. There has been scarcely any changes in the communist island state, except for a lesser number of government organised mass rallies and television schedules on Fidel's lengthy speeches. On the occasion of the official anniversary of the Cuban revolution on 26 July '07, Raul Castro's hour-long speech, contained sharp pointers to Cuba's own deficiencies. Raul stated that the standard wage of about \$15 a month was "insufficient to satisfy all needs", and was the main cause of "social indiscipline", which led to the black market. He elaborated that to raise productivity, "structural and conceptual changes will have to be introduced". Calling for increased foreign investment, Raul called for the next US president to "talk in a civilized manner", in dialogue with Cuba.

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Starvation and suicides by farmers continue in Orissa, Vidarbha / Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. A year earlier prime minister Manmohan Singh had announced a Rs 17,000 crore package, for ameliorating the acute agration situation, in thirty-one impoverished districts. An expert group on rural indebtedness has found that there was no co-ordination between different agencies, implementing the schemes. In the absence of physical targets and periodic evaluation, there was no information available on the impact of the schemes, on the people. The implementation of the package till 2008-09, is "universal" in nature, without identifying separate causes of distress, like "crop failure" or "price collapse". Extension services have fared poorly in Karnataka. Kerala achieved only 54% of targets for waiver of interest, and only 43% of targets for loan rescheduling. Credit flow targets have not been based on credit needs of farmers. Implementa-tion of watershed projects, rainwater harvesting, constructions of check dams and major irrigation schemes are delayed. □□□