

NEWS WRAP

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A counter insurgency strategy of the US Army is to protect the population and engage moderate voices. This has resulted in over 100,000 prisoners held at Camp Bucca and other Iraqi sites, with few legal rights, and no oversight by the American court System. While the detainees at the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba have attracted far more attention, the Iraqi detainees in Iraq are not charged with crimes, permitted to study the evidence against them, or provided lawyers. The recently approved US-Iraqi Security agreement will soon require the American military to release the Iraqi detainees in Iraq, the vast majority of them held in Iraq's southern desert prisons; or refer them to Iraq's law courts. Now over the past one year, prisons in Iraq are being turned into American styled vocational schools. The Iraqi captives are offered religious, academic and vocational classes. The prisoners are allowed to meet relatives in person; or long distance, with the help of video-conferencing equipment. Violence has begun to fall in the Iraqi prisons, and the rate of recapture has dropped from 7.67 percent between 2004 and 2006, to less than 1.2 percent, during 2008. Earlier there have been numerous cases of Muslim extremists effectively controlling Camp Bucca, gouging out eyes and cutting out tongues of more moderate prisoners, who disobeyed them.

The process of transformation of prison conditions has improved the conditions of the prisoners, but there is no system to determine the guilt or innocence of thousands of Iraqi detainees. A complicated US-Iraqi joint effort is underway, to determine which of the detained men are safe for release, and which may be insurgents.

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Somali pirates are armed with Kalashi Nikor guns, rocket-propelled grenades, global positioning devices and Walkie-Talkies. In 2008, more than 100 ships have been attacked off Somalia, in the Arabian Sea-Indian Ocean Zone. Around 40 attacks have been successful. Reportedly, Somali pirates are still holding 14 ships and about 260 crew members. They have collected an estimated 30 million in ransom during 2008. The ships are anchored offshore from pirate boomtowns. The pirates from poor families, are building big houses, driving big cars, and indulging in lavish parties. The Somali government collapsed in the early 1990s. Foreign fishing fleets and polluters plundered the national fishery without obstruction. Mysterious European ships have dumped vast barrels of nuclear waste, in the ocean off coast of Somalia.

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Strikingly harshly at the dreams of establishing a separate state for ethnic Tamils, the Sri Lankan army took control of the Tamil Tiger rebels' administrative capital, Kilinochchi, on 02 Jan '09. The rebels have suffered a string of stunning losses in recent months, forcing them to withdraw from much of the de facto state, they once controlled in North Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government troops have taken control of Oddusudan Town, which is at an important crossroads, leading to the rebel town of Mullaittivu. There have been large total casualties on the side of troops and rebels. The rebels and hundreds of thousands of troops, displaced by the fighting, are now continued to a forest area.

India had been failing to stop LTTE's Pirbhakaran's arms smuggling operation through Tamil Nadu. The Palk Straits were not effectively patrolled and the LTTE has used Indian fishing vessels to transport lethal cargo.

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There is an acute shortage of vaccines in India due to stoppage of production. The union minister of health had ordered in Jan07, the closure of vaccine production at Pasteur Institute, Coonor, BCG Vaccine Lab at Chennai; and Central Research Institute in Kasauli. The closures were directed citing World Health Organization

(WHO) recommendations. The WHO had conveyed dissatisfaction on the standards of production. Earlier the Pasteur Institute was granted Indian Standards Organization (ISO) 9002 quality certification. The union ministry of health did not take any action on WHO's offer to upgrade the production standards at these units. There is a growing feeling of conspiracy by the powerful pharmaceutical lobby in India and abroad, to help the private vaccine manufacturers. Till the vaccine Park becomes operational in Chennai, in 2012, the government would be spending a huge amount to buy vaccine from private producers; whereas a mere Rs 50 crore is needed to modernize the three closed drug PSUs.

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Following an imposition of export cess in April '08 Indian basmati rice has become costlier by over US \$400 per ton, compared to Pakistan basmati rice. Over the past few months, Indian basmati has lost huge markets. Failure to find buyers for basmati rice traders with paddy worth Rs 5000 crore. Barely 10% of the usual quantum purchase of basmati at year end, has been actually bought by traditional buyers from West Asia and Europe. Generally export contracts are signed in Oct-Dec every year, to finance the paddy purchased from farmers, as basmati rice is a single crop. India's basmati exports have fallen by about 0.50 lac tons in the current fiscal year, compared to 2007-08.

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Calm in Orissa has returned with the massive presence of central paramilitary forces since Oct '08. The incidents of violence against christian minorities in Orissa during period Aug to Oct '08, forced about 50,000 christian to flee to the jungles for cover. Ancient churches have been razed to rubble, but the Orissa state government has been delaying payments of damages to churches, which were over fifty years old. The Orissa government has offered to compensate about Rs 45 lacs only, whereas the total losses amount to about Rs 6 crore. There are cases where the state authorities have opposed payment, claiming that the church or institution had been operating illegally. Christians in Orissa are still frightened to return to their native villages. □□□