

NEWS WRAP

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The “Orange revolution” in Ukraine, brought anti-Russians to power in Kiev, in 2005. Ukraine had supplied arms to Georgia during the Russia-Georgia war of August 08. There is political rivalry within Ukraine, between pro-Russia Ms Tymoshenko and the Ukraine President, Victor Yushchenko. The energy intermediary consortium, Ros Ukr Energo is part-owned by certain Ukrainian businessmen, and by Russia’s Gazprom. European Union obtains a quarter of its gas from Russia, mostly through Ukraine. A court ruling in Kiev, recently annulled the transit agreement of 2006, separating the gas contracts between Russia and EU countries, and the one between Russia and Ukraine. On 05 Jan, 09 Russia has ordered Gazprom to reduce gas supplies to Europe through Ukraine, by the amount Ukraine has been allegedly stealing from Russia, an accusation denied by Ukraine. In the cold weather, the gas freeze affected Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania severely, and also hitting Germany, France and Italy. Ukraine considers unreasonable the Russian demand that Ukraine compensate EU customers for the loss of gas, out of its own reserves. No contractual agreement exists between Ukraine and the EU customers, though Ukraine has ratified EU’s energy charter, which Russia has not yet agreed to ratify. As Russia’s gas reserves are full, Gazprom will have to resume pumping soon, to avoid burning gas.

Market prices for gas are not clearly defined. Russia has been insisting that Ukraine should pay at market prices, which are double than Ukraine’s payment of \$179.50 for 1000 cubic metres of gas. In Oct ’08, Russia and Ukraine had agreed to a gradual move to market determined prices, and long term direct contracts. Ukraine affirms that the gas transit fee to Europe of \$1.60 for 1000 cubic metres per 100 kms, charged to Russia’s Gazprom, is 50% of what is charged for transit, by certain other countries. Gazprom is striving for alternative pipelines bypassing Ukraine, while Ukraine seeks further integration with the EU. Germany supports the planned Nord Stream pipe line. The planned Nabucco gas pipeline aims to supply gas from Azerbaizan and Central Asia, via Turkey, bypassing Russian territory.

Following fresh negotiations, Ukraine will pay 20% less than the European price for gas in 2009. Gas prices are expected to drop later in the year. Russia’s Gazprom and Ukraine’s Naftogaz are preparing documents.

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In Beijing’s outskirts, 90 kms north-east of the city centre, a group of villagers from Tawa village, had put up a bill board in late Oct ’08, announcing China’s first auction of rural land. 670 hectares, stretching up to the peaks of a beautiful mountain range, were offered for creating a weekend idyll for the urban middle classes. Parking lots and clusters of single storey buildings already exist, alongwith bill boards of Maoist slogans and open-air dinning halls. Softer controls from the Chinese Communist Party are now expected on the trading of rural land and housing, which has been subject to more stringent controls than those that cover urban property. “People’s communes” broke up thirty years ago, when in the eastern province of Anhui, villagers secretly decided to parcel out their village land, to individual households. Tawa’s land auction plans were published over Beijing newspapers, and advertised on Beijing buses.

However, there is less land available at Tawa, than advertised. Some of the land is forest area, which cannot be transferred. As in Cities, the ownership cannot be traded, only “land use” rights can be transferred, and the present users do not possess all the legal documents. Processing of the papers could take some time. Swathes of Tawa’s mountain slopes are “waste land”, and auctions are common. Local officials, representing the collective, take big cuts, leaving paltry amounts to land users. Mortgaging rural land and selling one’s own house to non-villagers is prohibited. Unlocking of peasant spending power will take more time.

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Under the Raman Singh BJP state government of Chattisgarh, the distinction between anti ‘Salwa Judum’ (peace march) and ‘pro-Naxal’ has blurred. The police allege that in the last eight years, the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist) have killed about 1000 tribals, and 350 policemen; and rendering positions of numerous districts inaccessible and ungovernable. Tribal society is split, as the Salwa Judum and Naxals of Chattisgarh are tribals. Accompanied by looting, burning, beating and torture, Salwa Judum has forced displacement of about one lac tribals. Under a state government aided programme, the Salwa Judum, has incited and armed

about 47,000 tribals to fight the Naxals. There are nine districts out of eighteen districts in Chattisgarh where the CPI (Maoist) have a strong hold. The nine affected districts, like Bijapur and Dantewada in south Bastar, have a literacy rate of one-third the National average.

Under the Chattisgarh Special Public Safety Act, about 200 individuals have been charged, but only nine of those charged are listed by the police as 'hardcore Naxalites'.

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Besides being a religious congregation, the Ganga Sagar mela in Sagar Islands (West Bengal), has turned into a political medley. At the Bajrang Dal stalls, loud speakers play recorded speeches of Shankaracharya denouncing the communist parties and their allies, for promoting "anti-Hindu" sentiments. The CPI(M), which is avowedly atheist, has set up a large number of stalls in Ganga Sagar, for selling party literature. The stall owners collect Rs 12 as membership fee from the construction labourers seeking employment, for having them authorized under CITU. The CPI(M) takes care of their needs, during the religious fair. Ideology is promoted at the fair grounds, where religious as well as non-religious communities congregate. Red flags flutter at the CPI(M) stalls, the Bajrang Dal stalls are conspicuous with saffron flags. The CITU has enlisted about 2000 labourers and earned around Rs 22,000 in the current mela. Last year the CPI(M) earned about Rs 27,000, on enrolling 2300 construction workers. The sharp fall in enrolment is explained by losses suffered in the last Panchayat elections. Depending on the colour of the fluttering flags, the stalls sell religious pamphlets or Marxist literature.

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Nepal suffers electricity load shedding, up to sixteen hours a day. Seven towers of the Kosi-Kataiya transmission lines, through which India supplies electricity to Nepal, were uprooted, with the Kosi river bursting embankments in floods of Aug 08. Nepal would soon be repairing five of the 50 MW power towers located in Nepal, and India would be repairing two of the towers situated in Bihar. India has been pressing for high dams across rivers originating from Nepal, which would augment power in Nepal, and reduce floods in Bihar.

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