

NEWS WRAP

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Every 1% increase in unemployment in USA leads to an increase of one million in the number of unemployed, with repercussions of 1.1 million in the numbers that join US medicare and health insurance SCHIP. President Barack Obama has included a few health measures in his recent big stimulus package. Health insurance has been temporarily extended to the unemployed. On 04 Feb 08, a law has been signed, which enlarges SCHIP, a health scheme that covers children in poor families. There are expansion programmes for the government's health plan for the poor Medicare. More money has been allotted to state governments, for fulfilling health tasks. The Republicans are denouncing the new president's health care efforts as "socialist medicine by stealth".

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The UN Relief and Works Agency, founded in 1949 to aid Palestinians displaced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, was designed as a temporary programme. The Palestinian refugee camps have been sustained for decades. The lengthy feud between aid groups and Israel has worsened since the Israel-Hamas war of Dec 08. Israel's 18-month economic blockade of the Gaza Strip, worsened the scarcity in food, fuel and medicine in the Gaza strip, even before the war commenced on 27 Dec 08. Since the beginning of Feb 09, the Israeli military ceased combat operations for three hours every day, to allow relief workers to move around freely. Since Jan 09, Israeli military have fatally shot a driver in humanitarian aid convoy, and fired at two other UN employees in Gaza. An Israeli mortar has struck a UN school, which served as an emergency shelter. In two separate incidents, Israeli military fired on ambulance crews, even after Red Cross officials, had been provided permission, by the Israeli military, to travel on specific routes.

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Illegal trafficking in weapons technology has been going on for over half a century. New documents released by the US justice Department describe recent trading as nearly all Internet-based and increasingly technologically sophisticated. Despite sanctions against several Dubai-based Iranian front companies in 2006, made effective by USA, the technology pipeline to Iran, is flowing fast. Though briefly disrupted the deadly trade resumed with changes in shipping routes and company names. Iran opened new front companies, and transferred operations from Dubai to south-east Asia, like Malaysia. Iranian businessmen shop for high quality American electronics like sensors, inclinometers, circuit boards, software and Global Positioning Devices. In the Past two years, Iran has acquired a large number of banned items of bomb circuitry. The lethal Technology helps Iran in manufacturing roadside bombs that kill US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran has interests in purchasing tungsten and other materials used in guidance systems of long range missiles.

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Eight provinces in Northern China have parched fields and nearly four million people without proper drinking water. It is the worst drought China has

experienced in the last fifty years. The Chinese government has declared a state of emergency. And Beijing has been without rainfall between Nov 08 to mid Feb 09. The summer grain harvest is in jeopardy. Losing jobs in coastal factories and cities, twenty million out of work rural migrants threaten social instability. Workers who have returned to farms to grow harvest fail to find water for irrigation. Central Henan, the most populous province in China, is one of the worst hit.

2009, the year of the Ox is full of important anniversaries in Beijing. It is the 50th anniversary of Dalai Lama's flight into exile. Thirty years ago Deng Xiaoping started economic reforms which propelled three decades of industrialization and double digit growth. But the past quarter Oct-Dec 08 has posted economic growth at 6.8%, which is half the double digit trend of recent.

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During 2007-08, the West Bengal state government had received Rs 177 crores, for slum development projects, under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) scheme. This amount remains unutilized. For the aim of more slum development projects, the union government has sanctioned an additional Rs 321 crores on 30 Jan 09. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) has succeed in spending only about Rs 60 crores, as part of the project for Basic Services for Urban Poor (BSUP) under JNNURM, in two places, viz Garden Reach and Rajarhat. The balance of the total budget of Rs 500 crores (approx.) remains unspent. The time span of a year for executing the initial allotment of Rs 177 crores for slum development expired at the end of Dec 08. Even then the West Bengal Left Front Government continues to allege lack of central funds for urban development projects. Land disputes and political intervention have obstructed slum development projects at Hatgachia, Kacharipara, Jalpara and Anandanagar.

A private construction company has captured about four acres of land, earmarked for an urban basic services project in Anandanagar (ward 59), on the eastern fringes of Kolkata, for a storehouse. The company is not paying any rent to the KMC, nor have the civic authorities accorded any official permission. Local councillors, mostly CPI(M) leaders, have settled illegal occupants in Hatgachia, Jalpara and Kacharipara. The envisaged Rs 321 crores projects include four integrated housing projects (4936 dwelling units) in Topsia, Pagaldanga, Canal South Road and Behala Banerjee Colony. All the projects are on KMC land.

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The interim railway budget proposed a 2% cut in fares, and promised 43 new trains. The cash surplus before dividend for 2008-09 is estimated at Rs 19,320 crores, compared to Rs 25,000 crores of the previous year. Economic slowdown, rise in diesel prices and salary hike following VI Pay Commission have reduced the railways cash surplus. It was ironical that on the railway budget day, the Howrah-Coromondal Express jumped the rails and derailed near Jaipur Road station, killing at least 25 passengers. The Coromondal train, which derailed in Orissa, was running on a line, used intensively to transport iron ore to port cities, resulting in wear and tear. Increased capacity loading in goods trains and wagons, adversely affected the condition of the tracks. Renewal of railway tracks are overdue, throughout India. □□□

