

# NEWS WRAP

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In order to bridge the east-west gap across the Baltic sea, following the end of communism in east Europe, the Council of the Baltic Sea States was established in 1992. The eleven-country body has a secretariat, a rotating president, working groups and committees. While Non-Baltic Norway and further away Iceland are members, Belarus on the Baltic sea is excluded. The summit in Latvia in mid-June 08 was preoccupied with "Balticness", which included social inclusion, health, lifestyles, work ability, common tastes in jazz and photography. The Russians insist that the planned Nord Stream gas pipeline to Germany, on the Baltic sea bed, will not be a threat to any country. Suspecting Germany to be excessively important in the Baltic region, France is keen to become a full member. While strategic conflict is not imminent in the Baltic, Russia is resurgent with huge spending power and energy resources. Some members of the Baltic Council are worried about waste of Tax payers' money and diplomats' time.

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Beginning June 08, M Nikola Gruevski, the prime minister of Macedonia, and leader of the centre-right ruling party, won the Macedonian elections. Ethnic Albanians comprise a quarter of Macedonia's two million population. Even though there was almost a civil war between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in 2001, presently there is no violence. Greece has stopped calling Macedonia by its name, and insists on territorial claims to Greek Macedonia, ever since Macedonian independence in 1991. Macedonia continues under the name of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), at most international conferences. Greece blocked Macedonia's bid for entry to NATO, after Skopje airport was renamed Alexander the Great. The Greeks now threaten to block Macedonia's joining European Union. New agendas for Macedonia may include 'Greater Albania' or a 'Greater Kosovo'.

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Without accepting western ideology, respected thinkers in the Islamist world have recently been speaking out against the justification of *jihad* in Al-Qaeda's strategy. As a consequence to certain recent events, radicals from the extremist milieu have been turning against the Al-Qaeda. On 02 June 08, a car had driven up to the Danish embassy in a suburb of Islamabad. The detonated bomb killed the driver and five others. Al-Qaeda claimed the attack as a revenge for the publication of cartoons, three years ago in a Danish newspaper that had caricatured the prophet Mohammad. There was outrage to the bombings, as the victims had all been Muslims. A similar reaction was provoked following an Al-Qaeda attack on a wedding in the Jordanian capital, Amman, in November, 2005, which killed 60 people, and injured more than 90. There are also daily reports of sectarian strife in Iraq. Sayyid Imam al Sharif, an Egyptian radical who is respected as the "ideological god father" of Al-Qaeda, and a former instructor of Al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy, has been leading the prominent attacks on Al-Qaeda's methods. Islamic extremists have targeted children as young as 13, in a bid to find new recruits. Al-Qaeda has compensated strategic setbacks in Iraq by building safe sanctuaries, in Pakistan's tribal areas.

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The area under cotton cultivation in Punjab is expected to fall to about 5.5 lac hectares (2008-09), compared to more than 6 lac hectares (2007-08), and 5.91 lac hectares sown (2006-07). The traditional cotton crop will lose its hectareage and productivity average in Punjab's Malwa region. The water soaking paddy, particularly basmati rice, will be replacing cotton crop. There has been an increase in the density of tubewells under the Punjab state government's Own Your Tubewell (OYT) scheme. The problem of water table depletion could become acute in Punjab, as farmers replace cotton with paddy.

Paddy promises a relatively more assured yield. Farmers hope that paddy would fetch better prices. As paddy growers dig very deep to obtain water for paddy cultivation, Punjab's water table may be affected severely beyond repair. Cotton requires lesser water than paddy. Prospects of cotton in Punjab has become discouraging with uncertain weather conditions, late release of water in canals, late harvesting of wheat, and above all threats from the mealy bug pests. A similar attack from the American boll worm, in the 1990s, led to a sizeable number of cotton farmers in Punjab, opting for paddy. Cotton had become popular from 2004, with the introduction of Bt cotton, which genetically modified the cotton harvest, against the boll worm. Haryana is likely to maintain cotton crops at current 4.75 lac hectares. Acute scarcity of water is likely to reduce Rajasthan's cotton crops from 2.85 lac hectares to 2.10 lac hectares.

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The Press in India is increasingly coming under physical assaults. The junior doctors of Patna Medical College and Hospital (PMCH) have been on strike. On 05 June 08, the agitating doctors brutally assaulted photojournalists, who had gone to the hospital, to cover the demands of the striking doctors. With multiple fractures, three photojournalists were admitted to private hospitals. Police had to rescue the journalists from the violent doctors. The doctors on strike had smashed the cameras of the press crew. Journalists who had gathered at the emergency ward of PMCH, were attacked with sticks, lathis and stones.

On 05 June 08, Shiv Sangram workers attacked the Thane residence of the Editor of a leading Marathi daily, 'Loksatta', Mr Kumar Ketkar. The right wing activists protested against Ketkar's sarcastic criticism of the Maharashtra Government's ambitious project to construct a Chatrapati Shivaji memorial in the Arabian Sea, off Marine Drive in Mumbai. Nearby 70 to 80 lathi-wielding workers of Shiv Sangram, a social outfit floated by a senior State-ruling NCP leader and former party MLC Vinayak Methe, hurled stones, broke window panes, and smashed doors and windows. The socio-religious outfit failed to break open the door of the Editor's residence. □