

NEWS WRAP

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It was not to build a new and democratic Afghanistan that western nations intruded into Afghanistan. Punitive retaliatory strikes by western powers against the hosts of the perpetrators of 9/11 attacks achieved immediate success in 2001. After seven years in Afghanistan, USA, Britain and their NATO allies have failed to prevent Afghanistan from being converted to a sanctuary for Al-Qaeda training camps. A NATO international coalition has not proved to be better than a US unitary command. Intervention has not removed the poppy crops, sealed the Pakistan borders, assassinated Taliban leadership, eradicated corruption in government, and won the minds of local Afghans. The long low-intensity war has resulted in western forces killing civilians and alienating tribes with crude air power. Under outside pressure, the Taliban leaders have been progressing from their "student" origin mania for extremism, and even curbing the harvest of poppy. The present NATO policy of killing the older Taliban leaders, has led to younger Islamist radicals in charge. Despite Bin Laden being provided safe haven by Taliban's Mullah Omar, the Pashtun Taliban are not natural friends of Arab Al-Qaeda. The Taliban is focused on Pashtun Nationalism, while Al-Qaeda is set on world domi-nation.

Drawing on a vast supply of young Islamist militants from Pakistan and other countries, Al-Qaeda has formed a lethal alliance with the Taliban, as in the 1980s, when battles were fought against Russian interven-tion. The Taliban pursues a share of power in Afghanistan, and not world domination. Al-Qaeda supplies the Taliban with a destructive arsenal of suicide bombers. Erstwhile Soviet Union had first combat-tested thermobaric weapons or vacuum bombs in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Russians have used these weapons against civilians in Chechnya in the 1990s. Now British Apache attack helicopters have been firing the thermobaric weapons against Taliban fighters, taking shelter in buildings and caves in Afghanistan. The bombings create a pressure wave that sucks the air out of victims, shreds their internal organs, and crushes their bodies. Hellfire AGM-114N weapons will now be fired from RAF Reaper unmanned drones, controlled by "pilots" at Creech air force base in Nevada. Condemned by human rights groups as brutal, the enhanced blast weapons are striking enemy forces hiding in caves, bunkers and hardened multi-room complexes. The laser guided missiles make it impossible for civilians to take shelter.

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Rwanda was left with a population of 60% female and 40% male, after the 1994 genocide and the follow-up retributions. Though at first by default, women in Rwanda increasingly assumed leading roles in business and politics, in a social scenario where thousands of men were in prison for war crimes, or living as refugees in neighbouring states. Women in Rwanda were enjoying a comparatively higher social status for a long time, than in other African countries. In the post-conflict era, women were forced to take over farms, even though women had weak property rights. Foreign organizations trained and empowered women in Rwanda, for transforming the economy and fighting

poverty. Before the genocide women were relegated to field work. The post-conflict situation offered women opportunities in the fertile lands, inherited from departed male members of the family. In southern Rwanda, women learnt new techniques to improve quality and profit, as measures to rebuild the coffee plantations. Female farmers constitute 50% members of the coffee co-operatives, and produce 90% of the finest quality beans for export.

The Rwandan economy is being rebuilt by female entrepreneurs in industries, ranging from agribusiness to tourism. Women have been spending more than men in investing profits in the family, renovating homes, improving nutrition, increasing savings and enhancing children's education. Huge financial benefits have occurred from gender equality. Women in Rwanda have been provided new legal status. Reforms in 1999 enabled women to inherit property. Women are holding 48% of seats in Rwanda's parliament, which is the highest in the world. The cabinet of president Paul Kagame has 36% women. The female business women own 41% of Rwandan business. The ratio of female entrepreneurs in Rwanda, is the second highest in Africa. The Rwandan economy is growing at 6% since 2004, and has tripled in size since 1994. Women constitute 55% of the workforce, with the Rwandan population steadily balancing out.

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The National Trust, an autonomous statutory body under the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, is launching a scheme by end 2008, which assures a minimum quality of care-related service, throughout the life of children with autism, cerebral palsy and multiple disabilities. The scheme aims to provide "lifelong care and shelter" for such children and individuals. Services provided by the scheme would be affordable, and parents will have to bear the cost. The Trust will be reserving 25% of the total beneficiaries for children, who belong to "below poverty line" parents. The Trust would sponsor services provided to such children. The scheme in India aims to make the individual beneficiaries self-reliant.

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India's National Medicinal Plants Board is adopting a cluster approach, to improve the productivity of medicinal plants, during the 11th Plan period. The clusters comprise growers and sellers of medicinal plants. About 100 districts have been tentatively identified all over India, for the establishment of clusters. Rs 600 crore has been earmarked for the cluster development operations. In each cluster, subsidy is being extended for establishing common processing centres, quality testing centres, ware houses and common dryer facilities. For protecting medicinal plants grown in the wild, the Board has finalized a Rs 320 crore project. Assistance of local tribes is being obtained to boost conservation, development and sustainable management of medicinal plants, found in forests. The resource base of medicinal plants is expected to be strengthened, as many species are destructively harvested. □□□