

NEWS WRAP

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China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has been increasingly assertive in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. China claims the self-governed island of Taiwan as its own territory, and the 110-mile Taiwan Strait separates China and Taiwan. Recently an official military dialogue has been resumed between USA and China, which China had suspended in 2008, following an announcement of the Bush administration of arms sales to China. A serious Sino-US military encounter occurred in April 2001, when a Chinese fighter jet collided with a US Navy surveillance aircraft over the south China Sea. In March 2009 Chinese ships harassed a US Navy surveillance vessel, the USNS Impeceable, in waters off Hainan.

USA remains the dominant military power in the Pacific. The poor communications between the US and Chinese military, raises the risks of friction between the two Navies, which could escalate into serious clashes. The two countries are not reducing their surveillance activities in the Pacific.

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On 29 Sep 09, an 8.0 magnitude earthquake ripped through the Samoan islands in the Pacific. 20ft tsunami waves were unleashed, killing over 200 people. A series of tsunami waves struck the South Pacific islands of Samoa and American Samoa. Villages and holiday resorts were washed away, and thousands of people were left homeless.

Within hours of the Samoa quake, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake ripped through the island of Sumatra, reducing hundreds of buildings to rubble, and trapping thousands of people in the wreckage of their homes. The destruction of several large office buildings in Padang, whose population is nearly one million, pushes the death toll well above 1000. The distance between the quakes, which is more than 650 miles, and the orientation of the tectonic plates, makes a causal link physically impossible. The Sumatra earthquake of Indonesia occurred about 50 miles beneath the Earth's crust. The huge depth did not allow any movement on the ocean floor, and no consequent tsunami. At Indonesia's West Sumatra, there has been a conspicuous absence of activity at the provincial disaster response centres. Few people claimed to have received much official assistance. The lack of supervision of government construction contracts, has been exposed by the disaster.

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The Sri Lankan civil war ended in May 2009, after leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed along the northern sea coasts of Sri Lanka. Over 260,000 Tamil refugees were interned in 16 camps in Vanuniya, with poor food, overflowing toilets and rain water floods. Many refugees died when army shells hit makeshift bunkers. The Tamil Tigers also killed refugees, both in crossfire and trying to stop them escaping. The Sri Lankan government faces human rights probes from USA and the European Union. The government justifies the continued detention of Tamils in the refugee camps from fears that the surviving Tigers will regroup, and that mined areas of the north are unsafe for locals to return to. Though the Sri Lankan government is trying to recruit more

Tamil policemen, there is scant evidence of reconciliation between Tamils and Sri Lankans. Some of the 20,000 refugees released from the camps and who returned to the east, have been detained in ill prepared schools and temples. Muslims have been farming the land and now there are conflicts between Tamils and Muslims. Sinhalese are claiming lease holds to the farm land.

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The 810 tea estates in Assam employ 6.20 lac workers, of which 96,000 are temporary. The 310 tea gardens in West Bengal employ 2.60 lac workers, of which 29,000 are temporary. The tea workers in Assam earn daily wages of Rs 58.50, while tea labourers in West Bengal are paid Rs 62.50 daily wage. A shortage in supply of tea garden workers, confronts the tea industry in Assam and West Bengal, which accounts for nearly 75% of the National tea production, of 980 million kg of tea. During the peak season between July and October, when 60% of the total tea crop is produced the tea industry hires temporary workers. A large number of tea workers have availed the 100-day work scheme under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in 2009, resulting in a shortage in the supply of workers, during the peak plucking season of July to October. Many tea workers have joined the 100-day scheme, being attracted by the daily cash payment, which matters a lot to the poor labourers. This has created a shortage, in the ready workers pool, which the tea industry generally accesses. Certain pockets of Assam and Dooars are facing labour shortages. The problem is more acute in southern India.

Tea industry cannot adopt mechanization for plucking of tea leaves, as it would affect quality. Since the leaves vary from tea bush to tea bush, plucking is done with great care. The plantation workers carry a perception of being bonded labour, which discourages the less educated youth to join the trade. The number of optimum workers varies from tea garden to tea garden. The tea management is trying to convince the tea estate trade unions to allow the gardens with excess workers, to transfer some of the excess workers, in the direction of those estates, which are in need of a higher number of workers, to maintain productivity. □□□