

NEWS WRAP

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Three decades after Pol Pot's "Year Zero", when possibly a quarter of Cambodia's population died, Cambodia achieved 10.5% growth. In the recent local commune elections the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won control of 1592 communes, out of 1621 communes, just about six less it won in the last elections of 2002. The Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) won only 27 communes, benefiting from splits in the declining royalist movement. Prime Minister Hun Sen who leads the CPP, promises stability and progress.

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Islamic militants in the Magreb desert are calling themselves as Al-Qaeda's official arm. But there is no evidence to suggest that Al-Qaeda is activating a united North African front. Recent bomb explosions and scores of fatal casualties in Algiers, Casablanca and Tunisia raise questions of terrorist plots and their links to shootings in Europe. The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) has announced a formal merger with Al-Qaeda last September. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group is another ally of the Al-Qaeda. While many north Africans have joined Iraq's insurgency against US forces, many North African rebels are waging jihad in Franco-phone North Africa. The shooters and the bombers do not seem to have external links, as their attempts at explosions have been often amateurish. There are regional concerns that a core of several hundred potential terrorists could become a potent force in Islamic Maghreb.

Meanwhile, secular, liberal and radical Islamists have been fighting dominance of Arab governments on computer keyboards and the internet. Blogging and posting of video footage have been shaping political agenda in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

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The Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) Act has recently allowed private buyers to procure wheat directly from farmers. Low temperatures in Europe and a drought in Australia have resulted in a worldwide slump in wheat production. Whereas, a long winter and late showers have led to a bumper harvest of the clean, full and golden coloured grains in India, which accounts for 15% of the global harvest.

The Food Corporation of India offered price of Rs 850/- per quintal is less than the price of the cheapest quality of grain, obtainable in open auctions at the buying centres. Private companies like ITC, Australian Wheat Board, Cargil (US) are offering higher prices through direct buying via licensees, and through the existing traders in Rajasthan, Pubjab, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh. The farmers are receiving higher prices they have never obtained earlier. Farmers are discouraged by government pricing which does not discriminate by wheat varieties. Private buyers offer higher prices for New varieties like 'Dorum' wheat and non-Dorum wheat like 'Sharbati'.

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State assembly elections are due in Jammu and Kashmir in the second half of 2007. During the seventeen years of insurgency in the state, government sources acknowledge about 40,000 deaths, while local opponents claim more than 100,000 deaths. But since the last elections of 2002, violence has steadily declined. This is leading to demands for troops reduction, as demanded by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which is a ruling coalition partner, with the Congress. PDP demands also include repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which can provide legal cover for the security forces' human rights abuses.

The army cannot protect the lives of 300,000 Hindus dispersed in the Muslim-majority state. The cease-fire along the "line of control" has been honoured for the last three years. India-built fences and tighter Pakistani controls on the Muslim separatists on its side have reduced infiltration of militants. Presently, only about 1000 to 1200 militants are fighting the government rule. Human rights activists claim that hundreds of Kashmiris have vanished. There are on-going investigations into the killing of innocent civilians by soldiers. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

