

NEWS WRAP

AGD

Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mr Najib Razak does not have a strong bulwark. The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition suffered a resounding defeat in the March 2008 elections. While competing groups fight for influence, Najib's United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the main party in the existing coalition, is defending Malay-Muslim identity. The opposition parties are also heralding moderation. On 31 Dec 09, the Malaysian High Court ruled that a Roman Catholic weekly the 'Herald', could publish the term 'Allah' (meaning 'God'), in the Malay language edition. The High Court ruling set aside an existing ban on using the term 'Allah', but offended Muslims, who claim that 'Allah' is exclusive to Islam. In Indonesia the expression 'Allah' is used by other faiths. The High Court ruling has led to a series of attacks on churches, incited by Muslim fanatics in Malaysia, during Jan 2010. The inter-faith and political balance, generally fragile in Malaysia has been shaken. There are allegations the Christians are trying to convert Malays, who comprise around 60 percent of the population. Under Malaysia's constitution the Malays must be Muslims. Following government appeals and the agreement of the Catholic Church, the Malaysian High Court suspended its own ruling, on 06 Jan 10. Even then several Islamic groups protested against the High Court ruling on 08 Jan 10, and thereafter. During Jan 10, arsonists set fire to about a dozen churches, a convent and a Sikh Temple in Kuala Lumpur. Important politicians and Muslims have condemned the violence, and the Malaysian government has offered compensation and raised security in the vicinity of churches.

Prime minister, Najib is under pressure from UMNO's far right. Some time in 2009, a group of Muslims had used a cow's severed head to demonstrate against the building of a temple. Religious fanaticism triggering worsening violence is discouraging foreign investors and tourists.

QUAKE IN HAITI

An earthquake of 7.0 magnitude struck Haiti on 13 Jan 10, the most powerful in Haiti for over 200 years. The major earthquake destroyed the presidential palace with domes, schools, hospitals and hillside shanties in Haiti. Over 100,000 people are feared dead, and three million more were injured or left homeless. The epicentre of the earthquake was about 16 km from Port-au-Prince, where 4 million people live in the city, and surrounding areas. President Preval and his wife, were not inside the palace when the earth quake struck. A five-storeyed UN headquarters building was also demolished. The Haitian nation has been afflicted for a long time with poverty, catastrophic natural disasters and political instability. Along with scavenging for supplies and looting, there has arisen local anger and frustration over delays in receiving help. Main prisons have crumbled and dangerous criminals have escaped.

Countries across the world are pouring relief supplies and medical teams into quake-hit Haiti, which is the poorest in the western hemisphere Caribbean. USA has despatched 3500 soldiers and 300 medical personnel to help in disaster relief and security in Port-au-Prince. An earlier agreement between USA and Cuba

permits violations of air space, for emergency medical flights. Setting aside decades of Cold War animosity, Washington and Havana have expanded the authority to a standing basis, allowing US military to utilize restricted Cuban air space, for medical evacuation flights, transporting Haitian earthquake victims. Evacuation flights from US naval station in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba now travel over communist Cuba island on way to Florida. The flight time has been shortened by ninety minutes on trips, that normally fly around Cuba.

PRICE RISE AND STOCKS

India's common man continues to face hardships, with the sky rocketing food prices, even though in 2009-10, government purchase of food stocks had risen to a 50-year record of 255 lac tons. Resulting from robust production estimates, government's purchase of food stocks in the approaching rabi season of 1010-11, could exceed last year's record levels. Wheat stocks are expected to be 147 lac tons by 01 April 10, much higher than the 40 lac ton buffer standard for the period, and an additional 30 lac tons for the strategic buffer. The government projects about 8.5 million tons of additional food grains and 1.5 million tons of additional oil seeds during the rabi season, which has commenced from March 2010. Duty free imports of white sugar shall continue till end Dec 2010. Additional subsidy based releases for edible oil and sugar have been introduced. The state-run procurement agencies had purchased 33.6 lac tons of rice, despite an estimated 15 million ton production shortage, in the kharif-marketing season, which concluded in September 2009. The total available quantity of sugar will be 24 million tons, against the estimated annual consumption of 23 million tons. But high subsidy reliant short term measures are generally not sustainable, as hoarders, speculators and black marketeers are beyond control.

TRINAMOOL SUPPORTERS?

Lalgarh-Jhargram areas are being virtually run by the Maoists. Trinamool Congress leaders are providing legal support to some Maoists arrested recently in West Midnapore (West Bengal). The district leaders of Trinamool claim that those arrested were not Maoists, but innocent villagers and Trinamool supporters, who were framed by the police. Over fifty local people have been arrested from Jhargram, Salboni and Lalgarh police station areas recently. Demonstrations are prohibited in Jhargram sub-division, ever since section 144 of CrPC has been imposed. With the commencement of police operations in June 08, around 150 people have been arrested as Maoists. Trinamool leaders are campaigning for their release. The tribals of West Midnapore do not have sufficient confidence in the Trinamool's overtures.

ILLEGAL ARMS

Police in West Bengal have discovered a major arms racket, which relates to acquisition of illegal firearms, through private security agencies using forged licenses. The illegal firearms are then sold to militant groups in North Bengal and left wing Maoist affected districts of South Bengal. Illegal firearms have been seized from a BSNL Telephone exchange in Tiljala (Kolkata) and a water treatment plant of Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) at Palta (North 24

Parganas). Gunmen of security agencies with government offices in Kolkata, coalmines in Asansol, and Durgapur Projects have been found moving freely with illegal arms. More than 50 licenses were recovered which were forged in Kashmir, Bhagalpur and Munger (Bihar) and Kohima (Nagaland). □□□