

## Updates 2008-World

### **39% of world's primates at risk of extinction**

The two biggest threats: habitat destruction through logging, and hunting for bushmeat and wildlife trade. Nearly half of all primate species are threatened with extinction, according to an evaluation by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The study — the most comprehensive analysis for more than 10 years and drawing on work by hundreds of scientists — found that the conservation outlook for monkeys, apes and other primates has dramatically worsened. In some regions, the thriving bushmeat trade means the animals are being “eaten to extinction.”

The 2007 IUCN Red List has 39 per cent of primate species and subspecies in the three highest threat categories: vulnerable, endangered and critically endangered. In the list, 303 of the 634 species and subspecies are in the most threatened categories. The two biggest threats to primates are habitat destruction through logging, and hunting for bushmeat and the illegal wildlife trade.

Tropical forest destruction has always been the main cause, but now it appears that hunting is just as serious a threat in some areas, even where the habitat is still quite intact. In many places, primates are literally being eaten to extinction.

The picture is particularly bleak in South-East Asia. More than 70 per cent of all Asian primates are threatened while in Vietnam and Cambodia as many as 90% are at risk. Populations of gibbons, leaf monkeys and langurs have fallen due to rapid habitat loss and hunting to satisfy the Chinese medicine and pet trade.

The apparent jump in numbers of threatened primates from 39 per cent to 48 per cent has not happened in the course of one year. The new analysis has filled in missing data that was not available previously, said Michael Hoffman, at Conservation International. The last major assessment was carried out in 1996.

The review, funded by Conservation International, the Margot Marsh Biodiversity Foundation, Disney's Animal Kingdom and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, is part of an examination of the world's mammals to be released at the IUCN world conservation congress in Barcelona in October.

### **Phoenix discovers ice in Martian soil**

The Phoenix spacecraft has tasted Martian water for the first time, scientists have reported. By melting icy soil in one of its lab instruments, the robot confirmed the presence of frozen water lurking below the Martian permafrost. Until now, evidence of ice in Mars' North Pole region has been largely circumstantial.

Phoenix landed on Mars on May 25 on a three-month hunt to determine if it could support life. It is conducting experiments to learn whether the ice ever melted in the planet's history that could have led to a more hospitable environment. It is also searching for the elusive organic-based compounds essential for simple life forms to emerge.

The ice confirmation recently was accidental. After two failed attempts to deliver ice-rich soil to one of Phoenix's eight lab ovens, researchers decided to collect pure soil instead. Surprisingly, the sample was mixed with a little bit of ice.

NASA announced it would extend the mission for an extra five weeks, adding \$2 million more to the \$420 million price tag. The team also released a colour panorama of Phoenix's landing site using more than 400 images taken by Phoenix. The portrait revealed a Martian surface that was coated with dust and dotted with rocks.

### **Connecting continents**

Two Indian firms, Larsen & Toubro and Punj Lloyd, figure in the list of several international companies that have teamed up to implement the multi-billion dollar construction project to be complete with two new modern cities, one each near Djibouti in Africa and the other at Yemen in Asia, and a massive rail-road-pipeline network across the Red Sea, connecting the two cities. The project was formally announced recently.

This huge project was conceptualised by Sheikh Tarek Bin Laden, brother of Osama Bin Laden, whose company Al Noor Holding Investment, will be responsible for its execution in phases to be spread over 12-15 years. The estimated cost is more than \$200 billion. The landmark project will connect two continents, the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. It will open an entirely new trade route between Africa and the West Asia.

### **New Indian research station at the Arctic**

Union Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal inaugurated 'Himadri', India's own research station at the Arctic. India already has a station in Antarctica called 'Gangotri'.

Equipped with state-of-the-art facilities for year-round scientific work, the station is at Ny-Alesund in Norway, which is the northern-most permanent human settlement, 1,200 km from the North Pole. Ny-Alesund is the focal point of scientists interested in Arctic research.

With Himadri, India has become the 11th country to have established a full-fledged research station here. The others are Britain, Germany, France, Italy, China, Japan, South Korea, The Netherlands, Sweden and Norway.

India began its Arctic research programme in August 2007 with five scientists. The National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research, an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Earth Sciences, will manage Himadri. Based in Goa, NCAOR has been coordinating India's polar research.

Sibal visited the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and deposited five varieties of Indian seeds — two of rice (IR-36 and IR –64) and three of wheat (Lerma Rojo, Sonoro-64, and Ridley).

Called the Doomsday Vault, the facility has been set up under a tripartite agreement between the Norwegian government, the Global Crop Diversity Trust and the Nordic Genetic Resource Centre. It is meant as a safety net against any loss of seed diversity in traditional gene banks due to accidents, equipment failures, natural disasters, mismanagement or funding cuts. The site is free of tectonic activity and has permafrost, which will aid in the preservation of seeds. It is 130 m above sea level.

The Norwegian government has met the \$9-million cost of building the vault, and will meet the upkeep costs, too. It will meet part of the operational costs, along with the Global Crop Diversity Trust. The primary funders of the trust are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the U.K., Norway, Australia, Switzerland and Sweden.

### **Indian talent is in great demand abroad**

Remittances sent by Indians working abroad are the highest

India is the third most popular country for sourcing foreign talent after China and the US, according to the Borderless Workforce Survey—a survey by global recruiting firm Manpower Inc released recently. The survey conducted in 27 countries also showed India received the highest remittances (\$27 billion) from nationals working abroad in 2007. It is closely followed by China (\$25.7 billion), Mexico (\$25 billion) and the Philippines (\$17 billion).

The demand for Indian skilled labour is highest in the US followed by the Gulf. In recent years, there has been a growing demand for engineers in the oil and gas sector and aviation. Others in demand are nurses, drivers and construction workers.

The survey also ranked India third in the list of the top 10 countries considered an economic threat to other nations. All countries with the exception of Costa Rica and Peru believe that India provides competitive threat to their own country's ability to compete economically.

So far as Indian employers are concerned, they consider China, the US and the UK as the biggest competitive threats.

According to the survey, Chinese employers — followed by those in India —were the least concerned about migration of talents to foreign countries. In India, employers in public administration, education, services, finance, insurance, real estate and manufacturing are most concerned about this, while those in wholesale and retail, transport, utilities, mining, oil and gas sectors are the least bothered. India has highest percentage of nationals working abroad with tertiary education. Of the nearly 2.2 millions of Indians working abroad, 53 percent have acquired tertiary education.

## **Transfer of power in Russia; President becomes PM**

Dmitry Medvedev's first act as Russia's President has been to appoint his predecessor and mentor Vladimir Putin as the new Prime Minister. Constitutional limits on more than two terms in office forced Putin to make way for a successor and that successor was a protégé, Medvedev. Putin's appointment as Prime Minister allows him to continue wielding power even after leaving the Kremlin.

Under the Russian constitution, it is the President who enjoys sweeping powers. During Putin's presidency, the Prime Minister's role was rather titular. That could now change. Unlike Medvedev, who has yet to build up a support base among the Russian people, Putin is hugely popular.

Putin continues to head the United Russia party, which controls the Russian Duma. These will give him a role far bigger than that envisaged under the constitution. Putin has also been quietly bolstering the role of the Prime Minister in the months preceding his exit from the Kremlin. Recently, for instance, he issued a decree that requires regional governors to submit annual reports to the Prime Minister's office rather than to the Kremlin.

The boom in oil prices allowed Putin to improve the standards of living of most Russians who suffered economic hardships during his predecessor Yeltsin's mismanagement of the economy. Putin substantially tamed the power of the oligarchs (business barons with close ties to wheeler-dealers in corridors of power), ended the war in Chechnya and re-asserted Russia's position as a player on the world stage. On the flip side, Putin's rule weakened democracy, imposed curbs on media and shackled the functioning of opposition parties and political opponents. The gap between Russia's rich and poor also widened considerably during his tenure.

## **Maoists win the battle of ballot in Nepal**

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) received an overwhelming mandate from the Nepalese people while the two mainstream parties, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), were virtually edged out in the recent general elections. Maoists will be the dominant partner in the multi-party coalition that will write a new constitution for Nepal, heralding the abolishment of monarchy and establishment of a republic.

In neighbouring Bhutan, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) or Bhutan United Party emerged victorious winning 44 of the 47 seats in the lower house in the first ever general election held in Bhutan in which over 80 percent of the voters cast their votes.

## **Kosovo: Birth of a nation**

Separating from Serbia

- Kosovo has seceded from Serbia
- European powers have recognised Kosovo while Russia and China have sided with Serbia

- Kosovo has been under UN control since NATO drove out Serb forces in 1999
- Kosovo is landlocked and surrounded by Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia and Serbia.
- Kosovo's population is about two million; majority ethnic Albanian and 10 percent Serb.

Kosovo's provisional government unilaterally declared independence from Serbia on February 17, 2008 giving rise to an "independent and democratic state" backed by the US and key European allies but bitterly opposed by Serbia and Russia.

The UN Security Council is divided over how to respond to Kosovo's move, and it has failed to agree on any action. Russia and China supported Serbian President Boris Tadic when he made an impassioned appeal against Kosovo's recognition. US, Britain, France, Germany and Italy have all recognised the new state but others have not. Serbia withdrew its envoy to Washington in protest.

Kosovo has a population of about two million people, predominantly ethnic Albanians, with smaller populations of Serbs and other ethnic communities. Hashim Thaci, the Prime Minister of the separatist republic, is a former leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army, which battled Serbian troops in a 1998-99 separatist war that claimed 10,000 lives.

There is speculation that recognition of the breakaway Serbian province could set a precedent for separatists elsewhere. Spain and several other European countries have withheld recognition because of concerns about separatist movements within their own borders.

Serbian security forces were driven out of Kosovo in 1999 after a NATO bombing campaign aimed at halting the violent repression of ethnic Albanian separatists. The province has been under UN administration and NATO protection since then.

### **United States shoots down defunct satellite**

The US navy destroyed a decaying spy satellite that was falling to earth with potentially hazardous fuel on February 23, 2008. The USS Lake Erie, an Aegis warship in the Pacific Ocean, launched a missile that intercepted the satellite 247 km up in space. The navy was attempting both to hit the satellite before it entered the atmosphere and to destroy the fuel tank, which the Pentagon said posed a hazard to humans.

Earlier, a Chinese Communist party newspaper had accused the US of double standards. Washington criticised other nations for their space ambitions, while itself trying to win a military advantage in space, the overseas edition of the People's Daily newspaper said. The Pentagon has rejected suggestions it was using the failed satellite as a pretext to conduct an anti-satellite weapons test. Last year the US criticised China for conducting an anti-satellite test, destroying an ageing weather satellite in space without providing advance notice.

The national reconnaissance agency launched the spy satellite in December 2006. But the military lost control of it shortly after it reached orbit, when the onboard communications systems went dead. The US informed other countries that the decaying satellite was falling to

earth. President George W Bush ordered the destruction of the satellite, which was carrying a toxic fuel called hydrazine.

While the American government cited safety as the reason for the shooting down, that may be only part of the story. The satellite was a low-orbiting craft that would most likely have been incinerated completely on its descent to earth. There was no reason, therefore, for the Pentagon to plan such an elaborate and complex mission, unless the exercise was motivated less by safety and more by politics.

The crippled spy satellite offered Washington an opportunity to disguise a political statement, probably intended to ruffle Chinese and Russian feathers. This served as a chance to demonstrate to both China and Russia that America has the wherewithal to shoot down their missiles, if it needs to. Last year China had become only the third nation after the United States and the former Soviet Union to do so. The ability to shoot down satellites is seen by many analysts as crucial in future conflicts due to the dependence of modern military equipment on satellite-based communications.

### **Circle of innovation: US remains on top**

India is behind China in the global race for knowledge-based industries

The year 2007 saw a record number of filings under the Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT) of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the cornerstone of the international patent system. Inventors from the Republic of Korea (4th place) and China (7th) consolidated their top-ten position in 2007, along with the US (1st), Japan (2nd), Germany (3rd), France (5th), UK (6th), Netherlands (8th), Switzerland (9th) and Sweden (10th). Only 686 patent applications were filed from India in 2007, against 7,061 from Korea and 5,456 from China.

Until now, the industrialised countries of the West dominated global rankings in patent filings. Although many of them continue to occupy leading positions, the emergence of Korea and China as two leading innovation-driven economies brought a change in the prevailing rankings. In terms of companies, Japan's Matsushita Corporation leads the tally with 2100 patents followed by Philips, Siemens and Huawei.

India has performed poorly in international patent filings last year compared to its neighbour. Filing patent applications under WIPO's PCT enables companies to secure patent protection in various countries and is a measure of a knowledge-based economy and a barometer of the spread of innovation-based companies in each country.

India filed only 686 applications last year compared to 831 in 2006. In the same period, China's patent applications grew 38.1 percent to reach an all-time high of 5,456. The stark difference in the number of patents filed by China and India is due to the underlying differences in their overall economic activity. While software and services dominate the Indian economy, new manufacturing activities are at the centre of the Chinese miracle.

## **China's economic muscle "shrinks"–World Bank**

China's economy, the world's second largest, is not as big as was thought, a report by the World Bank has claimed. According to the bank, previous calculations have overestimated the size of China's economy by about 40 percent. The revelation came after the bank updated the way it calculated the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

The bank said the findings meant China would not become the world's biggest economy in 2012 as forecast. It also meant China was poorer than estimated. This in turn would influence future aid and investment plans, the World Bank said. China gains extra aid from international institutions and has asked for help in climate change talks because of its status as a developing country.

Based on the World Bank's new research, China's economy is now worth some \$5.33 trillion (£2.64trillion). Despite the drop in size, the economy is still the world's second largest. The US, at \$12 trillion, is the world's largest economy.

The method used for the calculations is called "purchasing power parity", and corrects for differences in prices, which are lower in China than in Western countries, for the same goods. However, the figures show that average incomes in China are still just 10 percent of those in the US. China averages \$4,091 per person, while average income in the US is \$41,000. Based on current exchange rates, China's economy is only half as big, at \$2.24 trillion.

In previous years, economists have tried to adjust their figures to take into account local prices in developing nations because they were often significantly lower than those in more industrialised countries. However, the bank said that many of the prices which were being used were out of date and gave distorted GDP figures. This time it has used updated prices to create more accurate figures.

In its report, the World Bank found that five nations - the US, China, Japan, Germany and India - accounted for nearly half of the world's total GDP. But they were not among the five most expensive places to live, with that honour going to Iceland, Denmark, Switzerland, Norway and Ireland.

## **Japan PM forces navy bill through**

The Japanese government invoked a rarely-used power to force through a controversial naval bill. The ruling party used its majority in the lower house (House of Representatives) to override opposition lawmakers, who had voted down the bill in the upper house (House of Councillors) of the Japanese Parliament, Diet. It was the first such move in more than 50 years, and followed months of deadlock over the proposed legislation.

The bill will allow Japanese ships to resume a refuelling mission supporting US-led operations in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda says the deployment is vital to Japan's standing in

the international community. But the opposition argues it violates the post-war pacifist constitution and lacks a mandate from the United Nations.

The Japanese navy has been providing fuel to coalition forces in the Indian Ocean since late 2001. But the ships were forced to withdraw in November last year after opposition lawmakers—who won control of the upper house in July—blocked an extension of their mandate. The government revised the legislation limiting the scope of the mission but this failed to placate the opposition which made good on its pledge to block the bill in the upper house. The legislation was immediately returned to the lower house, where the Liberal Democratic Party used its sizeable majority to force it through by 340 votes to 133.

### **Intel exits One Laptop project**

An uneasy partnership between Intel and a non-profit project to provide cheap laptops for third-world children has ended acrimoniously. OLPC unveiled a 10-point list of complaints, accusing Intel of constantly criticising the project's XO laptop and instead promoting its own Classmate laptop for developing countries. The two sides temporarily settled their differences last July, after Intel had publicly criticised the OLPC effort and Nicholas Negroponte, OLPC's founder, had accused Intel of selling the Classmate below cost to drive the XO out of the market.

Intel had agreed to help with development and marketing of the XO and join the OLPC board. It joined 11 other companies as partners, including its rival Advanced Micro Devices, provider of XO's processor. The XO went into full production in October, costing \$185 rather than the \$100 initially envisaged. OLPC expects the price to fall and has sold XOs to US buyers for \$400, pledging to donate one for free to a child in a developing country for each US sale.

The Intel spokesman said OLPC had asked it to end its support for the Classmate PC, a request it could not accommodate. OLPC accused Intel of disparaging the XO in countries from Peru to Mongolia and said its criticisms had increased in frequency and volume after it joined the board. It said it hoped to introduce an XO based on an Intel microprocessor but "the best Intel could offer in regard to an 'Intel inside' XO laptop was one that would be both more expensive and consume more electric power." The project alleged that Intel had not contributed any engineering effort or even a single line of code during its six months of membership.

### **Fanuc's robotic arm is Japan's Robot of the Year**

A mechanical arm from technology company, Fanuc, that picks 120 items a minute from a conveyor belt won Japan's Robot of the Year award. Concerns about food safety have been growing in Japan following a spate of scandals involving makers using old or cheaper ingredients, and falsely labelling products to mislead consumers. The Fanuc robots have no exposed wiring, which makes for easy washing and sanitising.

### **Uranium supplies: Govt looks to tap non-NSG alternatives**

With the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal off the radar for now, the government is looking at the possibility of sourcing uranium from elsewhere for its civilian nuclear programme. The supply could be from non-Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) countries, especially the West African nations of Niger and Namibia. A Mumbai-based private company, Taurian Resources, recently bagged exclusive rights for exploration and mining of uranium in the Niger, which is the fifth largest supplier of uranium globally.

Implementation of the Indo-US deal is a necessary pre-condition for supply of nuclear fuels by NSG countries to India. The 45-member NSG has a stranglehold on the nuclear fuel market, controlling close to 80 percent of the world's uranium reserves and about 78 percent of its production. Niger and Namibia, along with Uzbekistan, are the only three non-NSG countries producing sizeable amounts of uranium.

Niger recently issued a total of 23 permits to three Canadian firms, three British firms and Taurian Resources, which is the first Indian firm to bag a mine abroad. Uranium is the largest export item for Niger. China is already a big investor in Niger, with Chinese firms having bagged a series of exploration licences in the past.

### **Biofuels may be worse than coal and oil: experts**

Using biofuels made from corn, sugarcane and soy could have a greater environmental impact than burning fossil fuels, according to experts. Although the fuels emit fewer greenhouse gases, they all have higher costs in terms of biodiversity loss and destruction of farmland.

The problems of climate change and the rising cost of oil have led to a race to develop environmentally-friendly biofuels, such as palm oil or ethanol derived from corn and sugar cane. The emerging global market in biofuels is expected to be worth billions of dollars a year.

But the new fuels have attracted controversy. "Regardless of how effective sugarcane is for producing ethanol, its benefits quickly diminish if carbon-rich tropical forests are being razed to make the fields, thereby causing vast greenhouse-gas emission increases," an analyst at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama, wrote in Science.

Efforts to work out which crops are most environment-friendly have focused only on the amount of greenhouse gases a fuel emits when it is burned. Environmentalists want a more comprehensive method, which can take into account the total environmental impact, such as loss of forests and farmland and effects on biodiversity.

Biofuels that are the most environment-friendly are the ones produced from waste products such as recycled cooking oil, as well as ethanol from grass or wood.

### **Vote to abolish Nepal's monarchy**

Parliament in Nepal has voted to abolish the monarchy, as part of a peace deal with former Maoist rebels

The Maoists left the government in September, vowing not to return unless the monarchy was scrapped. They ended a decade-long insurgency last year. Nepal will be declared a republic after elections in April. King Gyanendra, whose dynasty dates back to 1769, lost popular support when he sacked the government in 2005 and assumed absolute power.

The decision to make Nepal a “federal democratic republican state” was taken by an overwhelming majority—270 MPs out of 371 voted to abolish the monarchy, with only three against. The main political parties had originally agreed to leave the question of whether Nepal should become a republic to the constituent assembly being elected in April.

But the Maoists wanted the decision taken at once; hence the recent agreement reached by the main political parties. It will allow the Maoists to re-join the administration. The king's fall from grace began in February 2005, when he dismissed parliament and took executive powers over for himself, saying this was the way to root out corruption and end the Maoist insurgency of the day.

But his heavy-handed action united political opposition, and a violent uprising in April last year forced him to restore parliament. The new civil authorities have since stripped him of his powers, his command over the army, his immunity from prosecution and now are set to strip him of his title.

### **Bhutto killing: What next for Pakistan?**

Benazir Bhutto’s killing marked another tragedy in the violence-stricken saga of Pakistan’s most prominent political family. It also throws Pakistan into its most serious internal crisis since the secession by Bangladesh more than three decades ago. The assassination has left Pakistan mournful and unsure about its future.

Weeks after miraculously surviving a suicide bomber’s attack in her home city of Karachi, which killed 134, Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in a terror attack in Rawalpindi near Islamabad. Her Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) activists blamed Musharraf’s regime, saying the government had failed to provide adequate protection for their leader who was returning home after eight years of self-imposed exile. Pakistan’s army must surely have been startled by the ability of militants to strike such a high profile target in the high-security garrison town of Rawalpindi.

The assassination came just days after Musharraf lifted a state of emergency in Pakistan, which he had used to suspend the constitution and arrest thousands of political opponents, and which he said he had imposed in part because of terrorist threats by extremists in Pakistan.

Settling the succession issue three days after Benazir Bhutto’s assassination, the PPP named her 19-year-old son Bilawal to head the party. His anointment extends the country’s most famous political dynasty but leaves real power with her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, who will serve as co-

chairman. After her assassination, a handwritten will was produced. It bequeathed her party, like the dynastic heirloom to her husband, who said he would pass leadership to their 19-year-old son. For a woman who claimed to be driven by a burning desire to bring democracy to Pakistan, it was a curious legacy.

After her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was deposed as Pakistan's prime minister in 1977, Benazir resisted the military regime for a while but ultimately gave up and went into exile in London before returning home to a tumultuous welcome in 1986. Two years later, after Zia ul-Haq was killed when his plane crashed, she was elected to power. For a while, it seemed that the country could put its many troubled years of military rule behind it, and look forward to a democratic future.

But the hopes Benazir had aroused were swiftly doused. Her regime was marked by human-rights abuses, incompetence and massive corruption. Her husband Zardari became known as Mr 10 percent, for corruption. Ousted in 1990 and re-elected in 1993, she was again dismissed in 1996 by the president. Zardari was jailed and she retreated back into exile to escape corruption charges. From there she watched her successor and nemesis, Nawaz Sharif, fall to the Musharraf coup in 1999, and saw Musharraf become an important American ally after September 11, 2001.

There was, however, still a role for Benazir. America saw her as the best way of putting a democratic face on a military dictatorship, so it helped broker the agreement that saw her return to Pakistan in October to fight elections due in January.