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Summary (Page # 4-5)

National Report

Politics:

- Wrong policies led to price rise: Gadkari (Page # 6)
- BJP fears India's control over Kashmir will be diluted (Page # 6)
- Unwise to jump to conclusions: Congress (Page # 7)
- BJP yet to decide where Advani will sit in LS (Page # 8)
- BJP leaders sing songs as they have no serious work left: Cong (Page # 8)
- Gadkari moves away from hard Hindutva line (Page # 8)

Minorities' Issues:

- Muslim students to protest against Valentine's Day celebration (Page # 9)
- Muslim quota: MMA to launch campaign (Page # 10)
- West Bengal, Muslim quota: After big bang, it's hush (Page # 10)

Hindu Fundamentalism:

- Thackeray lauds Sainiks for agitation (Page # 11)
- Keep off Ram temple issue: VHP tells political parties (Page # 11)

Insurgency Movements:

- 20 jawans killed in biggest Maoist strike in W Bengal (Page # 12)
- Maoists kill 12 in brutal assault on Bihar village (Page # 13)

Economic Front:

- Industry wants Centre to rein in fiscal deficit (Page # 13)
- India keen to conclude FTA with EU by 2010-end (Page # 14)
- Food grains output expected to decline by 7.51 per cent (Page # 15)
- Inflation surges to 13-month high of 8.56 pc, breaches RBI target (Page # 15)

Geo-strategic developments:

- Talks will focus on terror: India (Page # 16)
- No rethinking on talks with Pakistan (Page # 17)
- India, Nepal to ink deal for 5 new rail lines (Page # 17)
- India, Russia to step up strategic ties (Page # 18)
- Don't prejudge outcome of talks, says Pak (Page # 18)

Indian Occupied Kashmir:

- Omar government seeks PoK help (Page # 19)

Social front:

- Terror alert in Delhi, Kanpur, Indore (Page # 20)
- No intelligence failure in Pune blast: Chidambaram (Page # 20)
- Pune terror blast shatters calm after Mumbai 26/11 (Page # 21)
- Above poverty line families may not get food security cover (Page # 21)
- Hindutva terror probe haunts Pune investigation (Page # 22)

Foreign Relations:

- Obama speaks to PM; condemns Pune blast (Page # 23)
- Pakistan mobile firms' charge against Indian cellular operators (Page # 24)

Regional Report

Central India (Hindi Heartland)

Politics:

Social front:

Economic Front:

The North

Politics:

Social front:

- Tension in Shimla villages (Page # 25)

Economic Front:

The East

Politics:

- Violence in Darjeeling Hills (Page # 26)

Social front:

- Agreement to end 59-day-long jute strike (Page # 26)

Economic Front:

The South

Politics:

- Seven-point terms of reference for panel on Telangana (Page # 27)
- 14 MLAs from Telangana resign (Page # 28)

Social front:

- Clashes erupt on Osmania campus (Page # 28)

Economic Front:

West India

Politics:

- Won't tolerate goondaism: CM (Page # 29)

Social front:

Economic Front:

National Summary:

BJP's president Nitin Gadkari accused UPA government for rising inflation in the country. He demanded appointment of joint parliamentary committee to investigate who benefited from the trade and which politicians aided them. The Bharatiya Janata Party opposed an open-ended dialogue with Pakistan and feared the Manmohan Singh government policy dilutes India's control over Kashmir. Party criticised Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram statement that Kashmiri youth who may have gone to PoK were "welcome" back if they are willing to give up militancy. He signalled a departure from the controversial issues to those affecting the poorest sections of society. In his first address to the party's National Council after his election as party president Mr. Gadkari indicated that he was ready to fight the Congress on what it may consider its home turf struggle for the poor and the downtrodden and take the country's development forward. He put emphasis on welfare of the poorest, social equality and development with social justice in his speech instead of anti minority and Ram temple issues.

Muslim leadership of Andhra Pradesh decided to protest against court decision on reservation of 10% quota for Muslims and government's lenient approach to handle the case.

VHP President Ashok Singhal said Political parties should not interfere in religious matters like the construction of Ram Temple and the decision on constructing a temple or mosque should be left to religious leaders, Singhal said. "Political leaders should not speak (about the temple issue) to seek more votes,"

Maoists killed atleast 20 Eastern Frontier Rifles (EFR) personnel in the biggest ever attack launched in West Bengal on sixteen February. In Bihar Maoists assassinated 12 civilian.

India would work for concluding the comprehensive trade opening pact or the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the European Union by the end of the year. Both countries have made substantial progress on the trade, investment issues and other concerns and now looking at concrete issues to narrow down disagreements. The total food grains production for 2009-10 is expected to decline by 7.51 per cent to 216.85 million tonnes due to fall in the output of kharif rice, coarse cereals and sugarcane owing to drought. Despite government's efforts inflation notched another 120 basis points (1.2 percentage points) and surged to 8.6 per cent in January setting a record high in the last 13 months and breaching the Reserve Bank's estimates of 8.5 per cent inflation by March-end.

Indo-Pak talks become hot issue as contradictions in stance of both the countries is quite clear. India wants to stick on terrorism focused talk while Pakistan wants resumption of dialogue process that was halted after 26/11. Congress government is determined to resume talks even after Pune blasts while BJP criticises Congress initiative. India and Nepal are going to sign agreement to provide railway connectivity and expand existing lines between the two countries. Once constructed, these rail lines will provide

India better access to the Madhes (Terai) region of the Himalayan country. The agreement is likely to be signed during the ongoing visit of Nepal President Ram Baran Yadav to India. Russia and India decided to firm up two major pacts on nuclear energy and a fifth generation fighter plane they also resolved to step up trade ties and develop closer cooperation in the energy sector.

At least nine people died and over 50 injured in a blast in German Bakery in upmarket Koregaon Park in Pune. Some analysts and politicians doubted the involvement of extremist Hindu outfits in the tragedy.

Regional Summary:

Violence erupted in some parts of the Darjeeling Hills on Thursday where life was hit due to a 24-hour strike by the students' wing of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM). The strike, called by the Gorkha Janmukti Vidyarthi Morcha (GJVM), was to protest against the refusal of the authorities to allow its supporters to hold a pro-Gorkhaland rally in Siliguri and other parts of the Dooars earlier this month.

Nearly a week after setting up a five-member committee on the Telangana issue, the Union government announced the panel's seven-point terms of reference. The committee, headed by the former Supreme Court judge, Justice B. N. Srikrishna, has been asked to examine the situation in Andhra Pradesh with reference to the demand for a Telangana State as well as the demand for maintaining the present status of a united Andhra Pradesh. The committee is requested to submit its report by December 31, 2010. Fourteen MLAs from the Telangana region handed over their resignation letters to Speaker N. Kiran Kumar Reddy on a call by the all-party Joint Action Committee (JAC) to protest against the terms of reference of the Srikrishna committee. All 10 MLAs of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti, two of the Congress and one each of the BJP and the Praja Rajyam Party handed over their letters.

National Report

Politics:

Wrong policies led to price rise: Gadkari

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president Nitin Gadkari has said the policies of the Central government and speculation in essential commodities through commodities exchanges are responsible for price rise and inflation in the country. The BJP president said multinationals, corporates and speculators profited from speculative and manipulative transactions in the commodity exchanges. A joint parliamentary committee should be appointed to investigate who benefited from the trade and which politicians aided them. The committee should also inquire why sugar (49 lakh tonnes) was exported in 2008-09 at Rs.12.50 a kg and imported recently at Rs.40 a kg. Mr. Gadkari said the actual delivery of essential commodities at the commodity exchanges was less than 1 per cent of their turnover of Rs.4.5 lakh in 2009. This meant that 99 per cent of the trade in items such as wheat, sugar, chana, jeera and potato was speculative. Neither the farmer nor the consumer benefited from that. "We do not need commodity exchange. That should be scrapped," he said. Mr. Gadkari said manipulative export and import of sugar, wheat and other items, manipulative assessment and announcement of production and shortages, failure to create buffer stocks, manipulation and mismanagement of government agencies and failure of economic policies were among the reasons for inflation. He said his party did not share the view of its ally, the Shiv Sena, in Maharashtra on who belonged to Mumbai. Mumbai as well as Srinagar should be open to all Indians. "Will the Congress and the CPI(M) dare to say that Srinagar should also be open to all Indians?" he asked. Mr. Gadkari stressed that the BJP was neither anti-Muslim nor anti-minorities. "We are against terrorism. The BJP was being misunderstood about its stand on secularism while those who supported people like People's Democratic Party leader Abdul Nasir Maudany claimed themselves to be secularists," he said. As president of the party, he proposed to concentrate on organising the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, minorities and other weaker sections and nurturing professional groups as 'Friends of the BJP.' He hoped to improve the party's position in Kerala. Mr. Gadkari said the BJP was opposed to the use of electronic voting machines in polling. If the Election Commission wanted to continue its use, there should be a paper backup. (The Hindu)

BJP fears India's control over Kashmir will be diluted

The Bharatiya Janata Party made it clear on Friday that it was opposed to an open-ended dialogue with Pakistan and feared the Manmohan Singh government was moving in the direction of diluting India's control over Kashmir. Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Arun Jaitley felt that the Prime Minister would take the India-Pakistan dialogue in a direction that would lead to a borderless Kashmir, where currencies of India and Pakistan would be a legal tender and there would be a sort of joint governance over the whole of Kashmir, including Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). This would mean dilution of India's control and governance of Kashmir. BJP spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad strongly objected to the "offer" made by Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram

that Kashmiri youth who may have gone to PoK were “welcome” back if they are willing to give up militancy. While it was acknowledged that Pakistan had been pushing infiltrators across the border for perpetrating violence in Jammu and Kashmir, how could India willingly accept the “infiltrators” who had gone to PoK to get trained by terrorist outfits? This would amount to “legitimising infiltration,” he said. Describing Mr. Chidambaram’s statement as “shocking” and dangerous for India’s security, he wondered whether the government had a “scheme” to bring Kashmiri youth back from PoK. Mr. Prasad said: “Mr. Chidambaram has talked about consulting others. But has he bothered to consult even his own Cabinet colleague Ghulam Nabi Azad, who is a former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir?” He described Mr. Azad’s public stand that bringing the Kashmiri youth back would be “unfortunate” as a “silver lining” in the otherwise dismal situation. The BJP was of the view that within the Congress itself, there were many who did not like what was happening: the sudden announcement of talks with Pakistan that were stalled after 26/11; the announcement on misguided Kashmiri youth; and the lack of transparency in that neither people nor political parties were being taken into confidence. Mr. Jaitley felt that India would not be able to prioritise terrorism at the Foreign Secretary-level talks, noting that the Pakistanis had made it clear that Kashmir would be their focus. The BJP also reiterated that it suspected there was American pressure on India. Why else would the offer of talks be made on the exact date when the jihadi council was meeting in Muzaffarabad and terrorist outfits there were declaring their intention to carry on with the jihad against India? It said. (The Hindu)

Unwise to jump to conclusions: Congress

Though forced on to the back foot by the Pune blast coming as it did just a day after the India-initiated Foreign Secretary-level talks with Pakistan were fixed the Congress on Sunday chose not to rise to the Bharatiya Janata Party’s bait and mount pressure on the government to walk away from the course of dialogue. “It would be extremely imprudent, unwise and irresponsible for anybody to second guess the investigations, jump the gun and arrive at predetermined assumptions. Let the investigations fructify. And, if any inferences need to be drawn, we are confident that the government will factor that in,” Congress spokesman Manish Tewari said. As for the BJP’s demand that the government call off the proposed talks with Pakistan in view of the blast, another Congress spokesman Shakeel Ahmed criticised the attempt by some political parties to draw political mileage from the unfortunate incident. *While no Congress leader was willing to go on record on this, part of the cautious response to the blast is the fact that Pune has been the epicenter of Hindu militancy. “Don’t forget that the Malegaon blasts also have a link with Pune,” said one Congress leader on condition of anonymity.* Within the Congress senior leadership, there is a section which believes that the hard line position taken by the government after the 26/11 attacks paid rich dividends politically. So, the response to India’s latest bid to engage with Pakistan has been measured with the Congress maintaining that the government was best poised to take a decision on such matters. In a much calibrated reaction to New Delhi’s offer to Islamabad to commence dialogue, the Congress said last week: “The government in its wisdom has made a determination based upon inputs that there is a need to commence dialogue with Pakistan. It would be appropriate to allow the process to go forward.” As to whether the Congress

supported the talks since not much had changed since the Mumbai terror attacks, it was pointed out that for the first time Pakistan had acknowledged the use of its territory for attacks on India. (The Hindu)

BJP yet to decide where Advani will sit in LS

With the elevation of Sushma Swaraj as the Leader of the Opposition, main opposition BJP is yet to make it clear where top Parliamentary party leader L K Advani will sit in the Lok Sabha. With just a week left for the Budget session of Parliament to begin, BJP has not yet intimated Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar about the seating arrangement for the party's top leaders. Parliament sources, however, expect a communication from the party in the next few days. "We have not received any request from the party and they may be sending a communication to the Speaker," they said. Usually, the first two seats in the opposition benches are occupied by the Deputy Speaker and the Leader of the Opposition. This was some kind of convention being followed and there was no such rule, the sources said. As of now, Swaraj, former BJP President Rajnath Singh and senior party leader Murli Manohar Joshi occupy the front row in the Lower House. With Swaraj becoming the LOP, she is now occupying the office of Advani in Parliament allotted to him as LOP. Advani has now moved to the chamber of Atal Bihari Vajpayee which was allotted to him as NDA Chairman. Another senior BJP leader Gopinath Munde, who recently became Deputy leader of the party in the Lok Sabha, may also be moved to the front row. (The Indian Express)

BJP leaders sing songs as they have no serious work left: Cong

Congress on Thursday took a jibe at BJP leaders for singing songs during a cultural evening after their National Executive in Indore saying they have "no serious job left". "They are doing it because they have no serious job left for them to do now. But there is nothing wrong if they are engaged in entertainment. For some time at least, they are not busy in dividing people in the name of religion," party spokesperson Shakeel Ahmed said. The party's reaction came after reports that BJP leaders including its President Nitin Gadkari were humming songs from Hindi films at a cultural programme on Wednesday evening after their National Executive Meet to relax and enjoy. Asked whether BJP President's visit to the birthplace of the Dalit icon B R Ambedkar and his having lunch at the home of a Dalit leader is an imitation of Rahul Gandhi's visits to Dalit homes, Ahmed said, "If an elderly man (Gadkari) does some good work taking inspiration from a youth leader (Gandhi), there is nothing bad in it. "BJP is a party which divides society but even if this party is doing something good taking inspiration from our youth leader, we welcome it," he added. (The Indian Express)

Gadkari moves away from hard Hindutva line

In a sharp departure from the hard Hindutva line propounded by L.K. Advani through the party's Palampur resolution on a Ram temple in 1989 and taken forward successively by several party presidents, the new Bharatiya Janata Party chief, Nitin Gadkari, signalled a departure from the so-called emotive issues to those affecting the poorest sections of society. In his first address to the party's National Council here after his election as party president was ratified by some 5,000 delegates on Thursday, Mr. Gadkari indicated that

he was ready to fight the Congress on what it may consider its home turf struggle for the poor and the downtrodden and take the country's development forward. The buzzwords in his 24-page inaugural address were "antyodaya" (welfare of the poorest), "samajik samrasta" (social equality) and "vikas" (development) with social justice. Mr. Gadkari did mention the Ram temple issue at the end of his hour-long address, only to emphasise he was doing so for "otherwise the media will write that he has skipped the issue." Contrary to the BJP's routine assertion that come what may, a Ram temple will be built at the disputed spot, he preferred to "appeal to the Muslim community to be generous towards the sentiments and feelings of Hindus and facilitate the construction of a grand Ram temple." Although he dwelt at length on terrorism, Pakistan and Kashmir, there was no mention of the abrogation of Article 370 conferring a special status on Kashmir, and gave the line, elaborated later in the resolution on security issues, that there cannot be talks with Pakistan alongside terror attacks emanating from its soil. He talked about the agony of the workers in the unorganised sector, called on his party men to go to the villages, highlighted plans to end farmers' suicides, and finally indicated that the BJP could grow if it could attract 10 per cent of the poorest and most downtrodden sections of society, including Dalits. A hard-hitting message was also reserved for party colleagues, irrespective of their position. Mr. Gadkari advised them not to encourage workers to touch their feet or do anything that lowers their dignity, while asking workers not to waste their time waiting on "leaders." He pointed out he had become party president when he never had the habit of coming to Delhi and meeting party leaders unless he was doing so with some specific work in mind. The party should work for the poorest, without looking at this as a vote-bank issue. He said something similar about fighting to end caste disparities, again not with an eye on electoral politics. The BJP should always be on the side of development and would not oppose good government policies simply for the sake of opposing. He mentioned that on the nuclear deal and in the run-up to the climate change conference in Copenhagen, the government had failed to build a political consensus. And he ended his address by referring to a story of a sparrow trying to fight a fire with a few drops of water in its beak. "The sparrow may not be able to put out the fire, but at least it will be counted among those that tried to douse it," he said. The message, it seems, was for all party men to try and douse the fire of internal bickering that was hurting the party. Immediately before Mr. Gadkari's election as BJP president was applauded by delegates, the former president Rajnath Singh spoke at some length referring to two significant victories for the party during his tenure — the victory in Karnataka signalling the party's entry into the south, and the second term victories in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, besides Gujarat, defying the notion that the BJP could not secure a second term in any State. (The Hindu)

Minorities' Issues:

Muslim students to protest against Valentine's Day celebration

Even as the Shiv Sena seemed disinterested in disturbing the Valentine's Day celebration this time, the Students' Islamic Organisation of India (SIOI) has decided to stage protest against it on Sunday. The organisation plans to hold an hour-long demonstration at Bandra railway station at 4.00 pm against the Valentine's Day celebrations, SIOI

Secretary Mirza Kamran said. “This celebration is nothing but giving a license to the youths to indulge in immoral acts. We believe such activities will erode moral and family values,” said Abdul Qadeer, Mumbai president of the outfit. He, however, said the protests would be peaceful. The Day promoted promiscuity among youths and had to be opposed, he added. Meanwhile, Mumbai Police Commissioner D Sivanandhan said that the large number of cops already deployed across the city in the wake of Shiv Sena’s protests against Shah Rukh Khan’s film My Name Is Khan would be able to tackle any untoward incident, though they anticipated none. “We do not have any specific intelligence to suggest that there will be any disturbance on the Valentine’s Day. However, there is already massive deployment across the city to tackle the Sena’s protests.” (The Indian Express)

Muslim quota: MMA to launch campaign

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a joint action committee comprising various religious and social organisations, has decided to launch a State-wide campaign on the question of reservations for Muslims in jobs and educational institutions. Moulana Hameeduddin Aqil Husami, president, Amarate Millat-e-Islamia, is the convenor of the MMA. It is proposed to take up a massive awareness programme to expose the inept handling of the issue by government and its failure to effectively represent the facts before the High court. A four day programme beginning February 20 was chalked out at a meeting of the MMA held at Dar-us-Salam on Sunday. The agitation will be kick-started with a public meeting at Mahboobnagar on February 20. The same day Majlis president, Asaduddin Owaisi, will inaugurate relay hunger strike camps at Jadcherla and Narayanpet. On February 21, relay hunger will be held at Sangareddy and Sadasivapet followed by a public meeting at Zaheerabad. The next day a public meeting will be organised at Karmingar and relay hunger strike camps opened at Koratala and Jagtiyal. On February 23, public meetings will be organised at Adilabad and Nirmal while a hunger strike camp will be held at Bhainsa. Similar programmes will also be taken up in Rayalaseema and Andhra districts at a later stage. (The Hindu)

West Bengal, Muslim quota: After big bang, it’s hush

Seven days after Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee announced the acceptance of the Ranganath Mishra Commission report providing for 10 per cent reservation in government jobs for OBC Muslims, the minorities department under the chief minister is still clueless about it. The CM had said a committee comprising representatives of the minorities department, the Backwards Class Welfare (BCW) department, the Minorities Commission and the BCW Commission would be formed to implement the government’s plan. “We have not yet received any notification. We are totally in the dark on how to go about it,” B P Gopalika, Secretary, Department of Minorities Development, said. The Minorities Commission, too, is yet to receive any government notification. “I think the government is still working on the modalities. We are still waiting for a circular,” S Z Adnan, chairman, West Bengal Minorities Commission, said. According to a source at the minorities department, the government’s biggest worry is the court since the Andhra Pradesh HC has already quashed a state government order for reservation of four per cent

in government jobs for Muslims. Meanwhile, state Minister for Land and Land Reforms Abdur Rezzaq Mollah, who is a bitter critic of the chief minister, said he had reservations whether Bhattacharjee would be able to implement his plan. "The chief minister has pious intentions and I have full support for him. But I have doubts whether he will be successful in the long run," he said. According to a Muslim minister in the state cabinet, the best way to help the poor Muslims is to provide them with loans on easy terms. "Many of the carpenters are Muslims but the owners of the furniture shops are Hindus. The masons are Muslims but they don't own houses. My suggestion is that the government provides these people with loans on easy terms so that they are able to start their own business," he said. (The Indian Express)

Hindu Fundamentalism:

Thackeray lauds Sainiks for agitation

Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray praised his cadres for their "astoundingly successful" agitation against Shah Rukh Khan's film on Friday. In a statement, Mr. Thackeray congratulated Shiv Sainiks and listed the reasons for the party's agitation. "We were not opposed to the film *My Name Is Khan*. We only opposed Shah Rukh Khan because he made these pro-Pakistan statements and insulted Hindustan because of which our Shiv Sainiks were outraged. We also did not say that he should apologise to us. But instead we felt he should apologise to the nation." He said this agitation was against Shah Rukh's love for Pakistan. "Why did he make these pro-Pakistan statements and why the Maharashtra government should put its life on the line for this Pakistan-loving Khan," the Sena chief asked. The Sena supremo criticised the Congress and Chief Minister Ashok Chavan. "Succumbing to vote-bank politics, Ashok Chavan deployed tight security with AK 47s. To ensure that Khan's film release was smooth, he arrested thousands of Shiv Sainiks and beat them up till they bled and put them in jail. In the end there was no place remaining in jail. For one Khan, how weak and helpless the Chief Minister has become. The Chief Minister has been vanquished." "Though the Congress bought tickets, the cinema houses were not full, but the Sainiks certainly made the jails houseful. This is called pride and sacrifice, which today only my brave Sainiks have. The Chief Minister and some of his Cabinet colleagues, under the protection of AK-47 toting commandoes, saw the movie. This is their heroics," he said. Mr. Chavan said: "Troublemakers have been arrested and action will continue if the Sena pursues its agitation. We will not compromise on security. Today's victory is a victory of Mumbaikars." (The Hindu)

Keep off Ram temple issue: VHP tells political parties

In a virtual rebuff to the BJP which on Thursday harped on its commitment to construct a Ram temple at Ayodhya, VHP said it was a religious issue and political leaders should stop talking about it "to seek more votes". "We totally disagree with it. The issue is not political and therefore they should not speak. It is a religious issue. Building a temple or mosque should not be decided by the BJP or Congress. It should be decided by religious leaders," VHP International President Ashok Singhal told reporters. Singhal's reaction came when asked about BJP president Nitin Gadkari's speech at the party's National Council meeting in Indore, where he reaffirmed its commitment to build a "grand" Ram

temple in Ayodhya. Political parties should not interfere and the decision on constructing a temple or mosque should be left to religious leaders, Singhal said. "Political leaders should not speak (about the temple issue) to seek more votes," the leader of the VHP, spearheading the Ram Mandir movement, said. Singhal, who was here in connection with the launch of the web-based Vishwa Hindu News Division, also opposed Shiv Sena's "Mumbai for Marathis" campaign. "The whole of Bharat belongs to Bharatiyas. There are people who are trying to divide our society. Its unconstitutional," he said, adding that he would discuss the issue with Sena supremo Bal Thackeray. (The Indian Express)

Insurgency Movements:

20 jawans killed in biggest Maoist strike in W Bengal

In the biggest ever attack launched by Maoists against security forces in West Bengal, a camp of the Eastern Frontier Rifles (EFR) at Silda, 10 km from Jhargram town, was overrun by their armed squad 16th Feb's evening. At least 20 EFR jawans are feared to have been killed, officials said at least five of them burnt to death after being forced to huddle in a makeshift tent which was then set ablaze. The Maoists are said to have escaped with the camp's stockpile of INSAS rifles and SLRs. This is the second Maoist attack on an EFR camp, the last one was on November 4 in Gidhni near the Jharkhand border in which four jawans were killed. The Silda camp, set up in 2009 before the Lalgargh operations, had over 50 jawans when the attack occurred. Said DGP Bhupinder Singh: "From the police station, we got a report that around 16 jawans have been killed. However, the figure might rise." According to preliminary reports, a group of about 100 armed Maoists arrived in two vans, a Bolero and six motorcycles. They launched the attack by throwing a grenade just outside the camp which drew the jawans out who were then targeted. Many jawans are said to have escaped. Two Maoists were injured but they were reportedly taken away by their associates. Local officials said that Maoists also planted landmines on the stretch leading to the camp which is in the middle of a crowded, bustling market. Seven shops next to the camp were also torched by the Maoists. Attack comes six days after Union Home Minister P Chidambaram visited Kolkata and held a meeting with Chief Ministers of Maoist-affected states at Writers' Buildings giving final touches to what was being planned as a joint operation by security forces. The Home Minister also urged Maoists to shun violence and come to talk. But within hours of attack, Maoist leader Kishenji called up local TV channels and claimed responsibility for the attack. Threatening to repeat such strikes, he said this was "our reply to Operation Green Hunt" and claimed that "at least 35 jawans" were killed. Sources said that the late arrival of police reinforcements at the camp helped the Maoists' retreat with some officials saying that many of them could also have crossed over to Jharkhand. The bullet-ridden, charred bodies of the EFR jawans were strewn in pools of blood as fire raged in the tent. Significantly, the Silda market area does not have any forest cover close by. It's a junction from where one can travel to Jhargram, to Bankura-Durgapur, to Belpahari and towards Jharkhand. Apparently, one big Maoist group, after the attack, returned to Dharampur, 40 km from Silda, en route to Lalgargh. They stopped to "celebrate" and fired blanks. Personnel from the nearby CRPF camp fired at the group but the exchange was short and the Maoists dispersed. On October 21, 2009, the Maoists in West Midnapore

had first launched an attack on the Sankrail police station and killed two policemen — an ASI and a constable. They abducted the Officer-in-Charge and released him after three days. On February 2, they attacked the Barikul police station in Bankura. The police repulsed that attack and had killed two women Maoists. Railway Minister and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee called for a Central probe to “determine if it (the attack) was the handiwork of the Maoists or the Marxists...I can’t understand why the state intelligence had no prior information that led to armed attack.” (The Indian Express)

Maoists kill 12 in brutal assault on Bihar village

At least 12 villagers, including three women and one child, were killed in a brutal Maoist attack by nearly 150 heavily-armed rebels who stormed Phulwariya village in Bihar’s Jamui district late on Wednesday night. Police sources in Jamui on Thursday said there was a possibility that the Maoists had abducted some villagers during the course of the strike, which came hot on the heels of the Maoist attack on the Eastern Frontier Rifles camp in Midnapore district of West Bengal three days ago. According to ADG (Headquarters) U. S. Dutt, the ultras swooped down on the village firing indiscriminately and dynamiting houses, gutting 35 huts. Of the 12 killed, six were Kora Adivasis while two were from so-called backward castes. “Two bodies were charred beyond recognition, so it is not possible to ascertain whether they were tribals or belonged to the backward castes,” said Mr. Dutt. Strongly condemning the violence, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has announced a compensation of Rs.1.5 lakh for the kin of each deceased, in addition to Rs.50,000 each from the Chief Minister’s Relief fund. Speaking to *The Hindu*, Mr. Dutt said the prime cause of the attack was that villagers of Phulwariya and surrounding areas had been opposing the naxals for some time. “The Maoists had put up leaflets on village walls warning villagers not to side with the police. Apparently the ultras suspected them of handing eight of their comrades over to the police, which would then make it a ‘revenge’ attack,” said Mr. Dutt. According to informed sources, the naxals’ objective was to hunt down their key ex-cadres who were believed to have been living in the village. (The Hindu)

Economic Front:

Industry wants Centre to rein in fiscal deficit

What is playing on the nerves of the industry and commerce sectors is quite different this year than what it was when the Union budget was prepared a year ago. They almost secured what they wanted during the current fiscal, and it is no surprise that their chief demand now is that the Centre adopt a different approach to the budget for 2010-11. They feel that the exercise should help the government put its finances in order. Industry and commerce bodies feel that their efforts at taking forward the recovery process will have little impact unless the Centre takes a hard look at its ways and means of reining in its fiscal deficit. Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee’s statement that the government would consider tinkering with the stimulus package has made private enterprise jittery. All major bodies, including the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and the Associated Chambers of

Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) have urged the Finance Ministry not to withdraw the stimulus package. CII president Venu Srinivasan is against sacrificing the growth momentum, especially when the economy is barely emerging out of a severe slowdown, while FICCI chief Harsh Pati Singhania reckons that withdrawal of the stimulus would hit the industrial sector. Assocham president Swati Piramal says it will prove to be counter-productive. But the issue upper most in their minds is the burgeoning fiscal deficit. They contend that fiscal deficit is not so much a matter of concern for the government as for the industry, since much of their enterprise will depend on how well the government reins in the problem. A high fiscal deficit will have an adverse impact on the economy, hit private investment and push up interest rates. It will also restrain the RBI from calibrating its monetary policy. The CII blames the fiscal deficit on the government's expenditure on consumption rather than investment and hopes the budget will strive to set aside funds for private investment and augment demand. They are pushing for reforms recommended in the Economic Survey, from deregulation of the prices of petroleum products and rationalisation of food and fertilizer subsidies to tapping of potential revenue sources, for instance, by expanding the service tax to cover railway fares and freights. But they are against undoing the cuts in excise and service taxes provided in the stimulus package. The other measure they suggest is that the Centre expedite the disinvestment process to fund the expansion of social and physical infrastructure, especially in areas where the private sector is unwilling to tread. Exports must continue to get support as outlook for the global economy is still uncertain. The delay in the introduction of the Goods and Service Tax too is a matter of worry for industry. They want the delay to be minimal, and the GST regime to be so flawless as to cut production cost by 10-15 per cent and fetch revenue in excess of Rs. 1 lakh crore to the government. The rampant rise in the prices of food articles is also bothering industry. Mr. Singhania is against any tightening of the monetary policy to avoid food price inflation. The refrain is for improving the agriculture supply chain. They also demand incentives for private sector investment in agriculture infrastructure and research and development. Resources for agriculture should be increased and a road map should be drawn up for launching a second green revolution. They want the increase in the Minimum Alternative Tax (from 10 per cent to 15 per cent) be withdrawn. They also want the corporate tax revised because it effectively exceeds 35 per cent, discouraging foreign investments, and transaction cost reduced through reforms in property registration and taxation and export and import procedures. These bodies also favour retaining the current peak custom duty at 10 per cent for some more time and increasing the depreciation rate from 15 per cent to 25 per cent and providing cheaper and easier credit access to small and medium units. To generate demand and increase the purchasing power of consumers, the maximum rate of 30 per cent of income tax should be made applicable on an annual income of Rs. 7 lakh. Without stimulating demand through fiscal measures, these bodies feel, it will not be possible to draw up a strategy for investment-led growth. (The Hindu)

India keen to conclude FTA with EU by 2010-end

Union Commerce and Industry Minister Anand Sharma on Friday said India would work for concluding the comprehensive trade opening pact or the Free Trade Agreement (FTA)

with the European Union by the end of the year. “We have made substantial progress on the trade, investment issues and other concerns. We are now looking at concrete issues to narrow down our disagreements and work in the positive direction. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is keen that the FTA with the EU is concluded within 2010,” Mr. Sharma said here. He said although India was in talks with a number of countries, it was hoped that FTAs with Japan and Malaysia would be inked within this year. Talks for an India-European Union FTA started in 2007. Eight rounds of negotiations have been completed till now, with both sides narrowing down disagreements on a number of issues, including definition of trade and investment. Indian officials engaged in the negotiations said the FTA was expected to be concluded during the next India-EU summit-2010, likely to be held at the end of this year. Mr. Sharma said the eight rounds were fruitful as the two sides made progress on several issues, including services, a key area of interest for India. “I have been told by my officials that the latest round has been very productive and many of the issues on services and investment have also been virtually settled.” India’s trade with the EU has the potential of reaching \$572 billion by 2015 once the FTA with the 27-nation economic bloc is implemented. Exports to the EU stood at \$39.35 billion in 2008-09, while imports were \$42.73 billion. Major exports include coffee, tea, mineral fuels and apparels, while imports include organic chemicals, pearls and precious stones. Mr. Sharma said the country had no shortage of pulses or edible oils and measures were in place to ensure their long term availability. “Some of the pulses are in inadequate quantity, which has fuelled prices. I am sure that as more and more pulses are released, after imports, it will cool down the markets and the prices,” he added. Prices of pulses, or lentils, have helped push up food inflation. Food prices rose 17.9 per cent in the 12 months to January 30, higher than an annual rise of 17.6 per cent in the previous week. (The Hindu)

Food grains output expected to decline by 7.51 per cent

The total food grains production for 2009-10 is expected to decline by 7.51 per cent to 216.85 million tonnes due to fall in the output of kharif rice, coarse cereals and sugarcane owing to drought. According to the second advance estimates of food grains production released on Friday, the total output is expected to be 216.85 million tonnes as against 234.47 million tonnes in 2008-09. (The comparisons here are made with the final estimates of 2008-09). The output of rice is expected to decline by 11.72 per cent to 87.56 million tonnes as against 99.18 million tonnes last year. However, wheat output at 80.28 million tonnes is expected to almost match last year’s level of 80.68 million tonnes. The total coarse cereals output is expected to be also short by 20 per cent at 34.27 million tonnes against 40.03 million tonnes. However, pulses production has improved with the output this year estimated to be marginally higher by 1.1 per cent at 14.74 million tonnes as against 14.57 million tonnes in 2008-09. Production of oilseeds is expected to be lower by 5.3 per cent at 263.22 million tonnes compared to 277.19 million tonnes last year. Sugarcane output is expected to decline to 2512.68 lakh tonnes compared to 2850.29 lakh tonnes last year, a shortfall of 11.84 per cent. (The Hindu)

Inflation surges to 13-month high of 8.56 pc, breaches RBI target

Inflation notched another 120 basis points (1.2 percentage points) and surged to 8.6 per

cent in January setting a record high in the last 13 months and breaching the Reserve Bank's estimates of 8.5 per cent inflation by March-end. In contrast, headline inflation stood at 7.31 per cent in December last year and 4.95 per cent during the same time a year ago. "Inflation has to go up in an economy that is growing at more than 7 per cent. Although the Reserve Bank has started tightening the monetary policy, it will have to intervene in the future to rein in inflation," said chief statistician Pronab Sen. Both the government and the Reserve Bank of India have expressed confidence that the economy will grow at more than 7.5 per cent for this financial year. While industrial production has grown by more than 16 per cent in December, it will be a tough call for the government and the Reserve Bank going forward. The government has an option of either supporting growth, which is largely a result of the stimulus package, or take measures towards fiscal consolidation and rein in inflation. "There is a tough balancing act for the finance minister in the Budget. If he withdraws stimulus then it would put pressure on inflation. However, withdrawing stimulus is necessary to reduce fiscal deficit," said Crisil, principal economist, D K Joshi. The rise in inflation is mainly on account of base effect and also a substantial increase in demand. In January, the non-food and fuel indexes rose by 2.7 per cent and 1.8 per cent. On the other hand, the food price index declined by 0.7 per cent. (The Indian Express)

Geo-strategic developments:

Talks will focus on terror: India

The first wide-ranging dialogue between India and Pakistan after the November 2008 Mumbai attacks will take place on February 25. This followed a phone call to Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao from her Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir on Friday stating that February 25, one of the two dates suggested by India, was acceptable to Pakistan. While New Delhi is open to discussing all subjects, including Kashmir and water, its focus will be on terror and the steps being taken by Pakistan to ensure that its territory is not used for attacks against India. New Delhi is still not in favour of restarting the composite dialogue process which had been Islamabad's desire during contacts between the two sides since the Mumbai attacks. Sources said that during meetings last year at Sharm-al-Sheikh in Egypt and in New York, the Pakistani side had pitched for beginning the fifth round of composite dialogue but India had maintained that Islamabad still had to demonstrate its resolve in convicting the masterminds of the Mumbai terror attacks. "Nothing is static. The dynamics have changed," said External Affairs Ministry officials while explaining the need for the talks. They said India had made its "point" to the Pakistani leadership and the international community by breaking off official-level dialogue after Islamabad had dragged its feet during the initial period after the attacks in acting against the perpetrators. Since then, India has noted that Pakistan had taken a "few steps" such as arresting seven persons and slapping criminal cases on them, accepting the lone surviving gunman Kasab's testimony in its court and attempting to get to the root of the conspiracy. The dialogue process, hopes India, will touch upon the issue of dismantling the infrastructure of terror in Pakistan which still exists. Both sides also hope to narrow differences on their involvement in Afghanistan and India hopes to remove Pakistan's misgivings on Balochistan if the issue comes up on February 25. (The Hindu)

No rethinking on talks with Pakistan

India has no intention of allowing terrorists to dictate the scope and schedule of diplomatic interaction with Pakistan and will not let Saturday's bombing of a bakery in Pune derail the February 25 meeting of foreign secretaries, highly placed sources told *The Hindu*. With investigations into the attack still under way, officials said on Sunday there would be no "knee-jerk reaction." India knows the situation is complex, they added. Speaking to reporters External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna hinted that the motive of the bombers was to disrupt the impending dialogue with Pakistan. "We are well aware that the dark forces of terrorism are against peace and amity between nations," he said. The message from Mr. Krishna and senior officials was clear: there will be no backing away from talks. Even if the Pune incident is traced to a Pakistan-based organisation like the Lashkar-e-Taiba, this would only strengthen India's position that terrorism needs to be the main focus of the coming meeting. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior official criticised the Opposition BJP's demand that the proposed talks be called off. "Not talking may be a legitimate diplomatic option, as Arun Jaitley has said, but is it an effective option?" he asked. Terrorists will attempt to strike at targets in India whether there are talks or not. "What we do know is that the terrorists are opposed to the dialogue. Why should we oblige them?," the official added. In Sunday's interactions of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Home Minister P. Chidambaram, National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon, the intelligence chiefs and others, all stakeholders agreed there should be no deviation from the current policy of trying to have a dialogue with Pakistan on terrorism. And the Congress party supports this line as well, the sources said. "If we stop talking, it is not given that terrorism will stop," a senior official said. "Terrorist threats require a different response. Calling off talks will not reduce those threats." He added that the government was still not sure who was responsible for Pune. "We have our suspicions but Pakistan has been creating layers of deniability over the years which may make it difficult to directly pin the blame on anyone there." As far as the talks themselves are concerned, the sources stressed that they had low expectations. "We are not dealing with the Pakistan of 2004 or 2005," said an official, referring to the period when the two sides made progress on a number of issues. "There is a very different situation across the border today." (The Hindu)

India, Nepal to ink deal for 5 new rail lines

India and Nepal are set to ink an agreement to provide railway connectivity and augment existing lines between the two countries. Once constructed, these rail lines will provide India better access to the Madhes (Terai) region of the Himalayan country. The agreement is likely to be signed during the ongoing visit of Nepal President Ram Baran Yadav to India. Yadav is slated to meet President Pratibha Patil, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and External Affairs Minister S M Krishna on Tuesday. While India has been exploring the possibilities of setting up new rail lines through five different routes, two of these routes the 17.65-km long stretch between Jogbani (India) and Viratnagar (Nepal) and the 70 km long stretch from Jaynagar (India) to Birdibas (Nepal) via Baijalpura (Nepal) are likely to be given top priority and will form the core of the agreement to be signed. Sources said that the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has already sanctioned a sum of Rs 470 crore for the Jaynagar-Birdibas line and another Rs

210 crore for Jogbani-Viratnagar line. “The Jaynagar-Birdibas route involves gauge conversion of the existing rail line and construction of a new line from Baijalpura to Birdibas,” a government official said. A 12.11 km stretch between Nepalgunj Road (India) and Nepalgunj (Nepal), a 15.30 km stretch between Nautanwa (India) and Bhairawaha (Nepal) and a 46.30 km stretch between New Jalpaiguri (India) and Kakrabitta (Nepal) are the other three rail links that have already been explored as options for setting up rail lines between the two countries. (The Indian Express)

India, Russia to step up strategic ties

In a series of high level interactions, Russia and India on Tuesday decided to firm up two major pacts on nuclear energy and a fifth generation fighter plane in time for Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s visit in March. They also resolved to step up trade ties and develop closer cooperation in the energy sector. This emerged during meetings between visiting Russian Deputy Prime Minister and India pointman Sergei Sobyenin with Union Ministers S.M. Krishna, Anand Sharma, Murli Deora, A.K. Antony besides National Security Advisor Shiv Shanker Menon and Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister T.K.K. Nair on Monday and Tuesday. Mr. Sobyenin also called on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and gave an overview of Russia’s perspective of bilateral relations with India. The discussions with Dr. Singh and members of his Cabinet were aimed at preparing for Mr. Putin’s forthcoming mid-March official visit, said a Russian Embassy statement. Both countries expect to reach an agreement on Indian participation in the development and manufacturing of the fifth generation fighter aircraft (FGFA) with stealth characteristics, which made its maiden test flight last month. The two sides will first agree on the technical design which will be followed by discussions on monetary and Indian expertise contribution to by India in the project. Analysts expect the FGFA to give the Indian Air Force an edge in the skies along with the Sukhoi-30 MKI and the soon-to-be-acquired 126 fighters of medium class. Leading the defence talks, first deputy head of the Federal Service for Military and Technical Cooperation, Alexander Fomin, also touched on the other five Indo-Russian projects in this sector including more supplies of Sukhoi-30 MKI, T-90 tanks and Mig-29 fighters. Heading the talks in the civil nuclear arena, chief of the Russian Federal Agency for Atomic Energy, Sergei Kirienko, discussed the prospects of further cooperation. Both sides have agreed to set up more nuclear reactors in Kudankulam and discussions are continuing on sourcing more reactors for the existing site and the new site in West Bengal, offered by the Indian government. The Indo-Russia umbrella nuclear agreement that covers much more ground as compared to pacts signed with other countries, was initialled during Dr. Singh’s visit to Moscow in December last year and the interlocutors are confident of signing it during Mr. Putin’s visit. (The Hindu)

Don’t prejudge outcome of talks, says Pak

Days ahead of the Indo-Pak Foreign Secretary’s meeting, differences have started emerging between the two countries of the nature of the talks. While India has maintained on several occasions that the talks would be focused on terror and are not a resumption of the composite dialogue, Pakistan on Wednesday said the outcome of the

meetings should not be 'prejudged'. In an official statement, the Pakistan foreign office took on India's position that the talks should not be seen as a resumption of the composite dialogue by saying that this is 'contrary to our understanding', indicating that Islamabad was expecting the meetings to focus not only on terror but other matters as well. While India had made it clear on earlier occasions that a freeze would remain on the composite dialogue that was halted after the Mumbai attacks, Islamabad said the "outcome of the meeting should not be prejudged nor its scope circumscribed". This came after India's repeated assertion that the talks would focus only on terror and should not be mistaken for resumption of bilateral talks on a host of issues. New Delhi has said that the Foreign Secretary's meeting on February 25 is more of an exploratory step and would focus exclusively on the terror angle and the terror infrastructure on Pakistani soil. Earlier this month too, India had conveyed to Pakistan through diplomatic channels that it would not be possible to resume the dialogue process straightaway as that would indicate that India's concerns on the terror front have been addressed fully by Islamabad. While Pakistan's High Commissioner Shahid Malik, sources said, had conveyed to Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao that Islamabad was keen to resume the composite dialogue, India had only expressed its concerns on the activities of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa and its leader Hafiz Mohammed Saeed. (The Indian Express)

Indian Occupied Kashmir:

Omar government seeks PoK help

The Jammu and Kashmir government on Friday said the actual number of youths who had crossed over to other side of the Line of Control since 1989 was not known and sought the help of the government of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir for obtaining the figures so that the rehabilitation programme envisaged by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah was carried forward. Addressing a news conference, Minister of State for Revenue and Tourism Nasir Aslam Wani said the youths who had crossed over to the other side had not gone on any legal document. "It is the initial stage of a process which the Chief Minister kick-started and it will need a comprehensive exercise to find out how many are there and who is keen to return to seek amnesty," Mr. Wani said. He declined to offer any time-frame for the rehabilitation programme. Seeking help from Muzaffarabad, Mr. Wani said, "We will expect people from the other side to respond and let us know how many people are there who have migrated in the last 20 years," He asked political parties, including the Opposition PDP, to rise above party politics and support the process. Referring to the policy, the Minister said this was a great move which would provide the youths an opportunity to come back into the national mainstream. He hailed the Union Home Ministry for supporting the State's cause that envisaged amnesty and rehabilitation for Kashmiri youths who returned from PoK. "Even the Centre has accepted the Chief Minister's idea of amnesty to Kashmiri youths who have crossed over to PoK and are desirous of coming back. The youths across the LoC are craving to return home without weapons and join the mainstream. We should give them an opportunity to come back and join us in ridding the State of the scourge of violence that has gripped us for more than two decades now," the Minister said. He said that as per reports, two-third of the population of border villages like Keran in Kupwara district has migrated to PoK after

1990 and there was a need to seriously think about their return and rehabilitation. (The Hindu)

Social front:

Terror alert in Delhi, Kanpur, Indore

In the wake of the Pune blast, an alert was sounded in three cities, including the national capital, to tighten security following intelligence inputs that terrorists may target public places there. The alert was issued after a high-level meeting, chaired by Home Minister P Chidambaram, reviewed the security situation across the country following the bomb blast in Pune which has so far claimed nine lives. After the meeting, Chidambaram met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and briefed him about the developments in the light of the Pune blast. "We have intelligence inputs that terrorists may target Delhi, Kanpur and Indore. We have shared the information with all concerned and asked the state governments to take necessary action," a senior Home Ministry official said. A three-day BJP national executive is scheduled to be held in Indore from February 17. A general advisory has also been sent to all states asking them to take necessary security steps in crowded localities, railway stations, bus terminals and other public places. Officials said RDX and ammonium nitrate were used in the Pune explosion and forensic experts were examining the blast site for clues. Besides Chidambaram, the meeting was attended among others by National Security Adviser Shiv Shanker Menon, Home Secretary G K Pillai, IB and RAW chiefs Rajeev Mathur and K C Verma respectively and other senior officials. (The Indian Express)

No intelligence failure in Pune blast: Chidambaram

The Pune blast was not the result of any intelligence failure but an 'insidious' planting of a bomb in a 'soft' target establishment, Union Home Minister P Chidambaram said. After a visit to the blast site and meeting the injured in hospitals, he made it clear that the area of Koregaon Park, housing Jewish Chabad House and Osho Ashram, had been sensitised by police since it was on the 'radar of terrorists' but it was difficult to provide 24/7 security to all soft targets. Chidambaram said such establishments have to themselves adopt security measures since it was not possible for police to check every person, bag or place at all times. "There is no intelligence failure, but please remember this is not an overt attack by gunmen. This is an insidious bomb that had been planted in what appears to be a backpack," the Home Minister said. Terming Osho Ashram and the Chabad House as "hard targets", he said, "But apart from hard targets, there are soft targets...All these (the German bakery and an Italian restaurant nearby) are soft targets where foreigners and Indians congregate especially during the peak hours." The Home Minister said the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad has taken over the case and constituted teams to investigate blast that left nine people dead and 57 injured. He announced a compensation of Rs five lakh to the families of those killed in the attack. The improvised explosive device, kept in a packet outside the kitchen of the German bakery, exploded at around 7.30 pm when a waiter attempted to open it. Union Home Secretary G K Pillai said in Delhi that none of those killed was a foreigner. (The Indian Express)

Pune terror blast shatters calm after Mumbai 26/11

Breaking the over 400-day lull after the attacks in Mumbai, suspected terrorists set off a bomb that ripped through the heart of Pune's international face for almost two decades, German Bakery in upmarket Koregaon Park, killing at least nine people and leaving over 50 injured, a dozen of whom are critical, police said. Of those killed, five are reported to be women and at least one is a foreigner. Police said that given the condition of the bodies, the identification exercise is still going on. The lone dead person identified is Shankar Pansare from Belha taluka of Pune district. While a Jewish prayer centre, the Chabad House, is right across the road from the bakery, the Osho Ashram is barely 100 m away. Incidentally, both were venues recorded and monitored by Lashkar suspect David Coleman Headley, currently in FBI custody in the US, charged with helping plot the 26/11 attacks. Hotel Surya Villa, where he checked in during his visits, is also close to the bakery. Police sources said that a bakery employee had picked up an "abandoned" bag and tried to open it when the explosion took place. However, there were also reports late tonight that the employee is said to have told the police that a "woman got off an auto rickshaw" and handed him the bag. So deafening was the blast suspected to be an improvised explosive device that it could be heard 2 km away when it occurred at around 7 pm. Some of the bodies were blown to pieces, blood marked the site. For almost an hour, the city police said it was set off by "multiple gas cylinders," before Pune Joint Commissioner of Police Rajendra Sonawane confirmed it was a bomb blast making this the first terror strike in Pune. A team of the Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS), Intelligence and ballistic experts reached the spot to investigate the nature of the explosive used in the high-intensity blast. (The Indian Express)

Above poverty line families may not get food security cover

Amid concerns of a rising fiscal deficit, the government is unlikely to include Above Poverty Line (APL) families under the ambit of the proposed National Food Security Act (NFSA). This will mean that the government may not be legally bound to provide 25 kg of rice or wheat to 13.26 crore APL families at the hugely-subsidised rate of Rs 3 per kg. Government officials estimated that this would significantly reduce the burden on the exchequer, but at the cost of food security to all Indians. Food subsidy for the current fiscal 2009-10 is estimated at Rs 47,000 crore. As on September 30, 2009, about 24.23 crore families hold ration cards, of which 13.26 crore fall under the APL category. About 8.54 crore families are under the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category, while the remaining are holders of the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards. In fact, as on October 30, 2009, 9.49 lakh tonnes of rice was allocated for BPL families and 5.99 lakh tonnes for APL families. Presently the allocation of wheat and rice for the APL category ranges between 10 kg and 35 kg a month per family in different states and Union Territories. During 2009-10, about 190.20 lakh tonnes of food grains were allocated to the states/UTs under the APL category against 112 lakh tones in 2008-09. In another significant move, the empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) will also most likely ask states to adhere to the BPL estimate of the Planning Commission. The Plan panel had pegged the quantum of BPL families at 27.5 per cent in 2004-05, a sharp decline from 36 per cent in 1993-94. The Suresh Tendulkar committee had, however, estimated the BPL populace to be about 38 per cent. The two numbers are not comfortable since the

Tendulkar committee had redefined the way poverty itself is calculated. “Funding subsidised food for all will entail a cost of over Rs 45,000 crore under the current policies. The Suresh Tendulkar Committee’s higher poverty estimates would have meant that the costs would go up to Rs 65,000 crore. If APL families are brought under the ambit of the proposed Act, the cost of running the programme with legal backing would touch a whopping Rs 1,00,000 crore,” a source said. Against 4.02 crore households estimated to be below the poverty line, there are about 8.13 crore BPL cardholders. “The Group also discussed the issue of ensuring food for orphans and street children, but favoured they be covered by welfare institutions,” the source said. The Group also reasoned that along with the Plan panel’s estimate, the latest available census data be also used to determine the ceiling for each state and district. “The EGoM suggested that the projected population figures of the Registrar General of India be taken for the purpose of five-yearly review of the ceiling,” the source said adding that the EGoM also felt the need for a uniform methodology for identification of poor under various government programmes. In another move, the EGoM is understood to have agreed to continue with the existing status of the Antyodaya Anna Yojana, in which 35 kgs of rice or wheat is provided to the poorest among the poor at a rate of Rs 2 per kg. (The Indian Express)

Hindutva terror probe haunts Pune investigation

Back in November 2008, as Lieutenant-Colonel Prasad Shrikant Purohit walked into a Nashik court to face trial for his alleged role in the bombing of a Malegaon mosque, Hindutva activists showered the rogue military officer with rose petals. Last week’s bombing of the German Bakery in Pune has brought the ugly story of Abhinav Bharat — the Hindutva terrorist group Purohit helped found — back from the obscurity to which it was consigned by the Mumbai carnage, which took place just days after the trial in Nashik began. In private, Hindus sympathetic to the ultra-right have been saying the bombings demonstrate the moral legitimacy of Purohit and his Hindutva terror project. Even as the police detained more than two dozen young Muslim men for questioning, some community leaders have been arguing that the bakery attack could just have easily been carried out by a Hindutva group. Part of the reason for the controversy is that key suspects involved in Abhinav Bharat’s terror campaign have never been held. Jatin Chatterjee — better known by his alias Swami Asimanand — is thought to be hiding out in Gujarat’s Adivasi tracts, where he runs a Hindu proselytisation organisation. Ramnarayan Kalsangra, Abhinav Bharat’s key bomb-maker, is also a fugitive. Founded in the summer of 2006, Abhinav Bharat was set up as an educational trust with Himani Savarkar — daughter of Gopal Godse, brother of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassin — as its chairperson. But, documents filed by Maharashtra prosecutors show, members of the group were soon involved in discussing armed activity. In June 2007, Purohit allegedly suggested that the time had come to target Muslims through terrorist attacks — a plea others in Abhinav Bharat rejected. But, the evidence gathered by the police suggests, many within the group were determined to press ahead. At a meeting in April 2008, key suspects including Madhya Pradesh-based Hindutva activist Pragnya Singh Thakur and Jammu cleric Sudhakar Dwivedi, also known as Amritananda Dev Tirtha, met Purohit to hammer out the Malegaon plot. Explosives were later procured by Purohit, and handed over to Kalsangra in early August 2008. Abhinav Bharat’s long-term aims, though, went

far beyond targeting Muslims: its members wanted to overthrow the Indian state and replace it with a totalitarian, theocratic order. A draft constitution prepared by Abhinav Bharat spoke of a single-party system, presided over by a leader who “shall be followed at all levels without questioning the authority.” It called for the creation of an “academy of indoctrination [sic.]” The concluding comment was stark: “People whose ideas are detrimental to Hindu Rashtra should be killed.” Purohit’s plans to bring about a Hindutva state were often fantastical. He claimed, the prosecutors say, to have secured an appointment with Nepal’s King Gyanendra in 2006 and 2007 to press for his support for the planned Hindutva revolution. Nepal, he went on, was willing to train Abhinav Bharat’s cadre, and supply it with assault rifles. Israel’s government, he said, had agreed to grant members of the group military support and, if needed, political asylum. Many believe that Abhinav Bharat carried out many attacks earlier attributed to jihadist groups — notable among them, the bombing of the Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad in May 2007, and a subsequent attack on the famous shrine at Ajmer. Despite persistent questioning of Abhinav Bharat cadre, though, the investigators have not been able to link the group to the attacks. Matters are complicated by the fact that some of the operations attributed to Abhinav Bharat may not have had much to do with the group — even though its leading luminaries claimed responsibility for the attacks. For example, Purohit allegedly claimed to confidants that the attack was carried out by the Dewas-based Hindutva terrorist Sunil Joshi, who was murdered in December 2007. But the United States Treasury Department later imposed sanctions on Lashkar-e-Taiba activist Arif Kasmani — a Karachi-based jihadist with close links to the Taliban and al-Qaeda — for financing the attack. In January this year, Pakistan’s Interior Ministry chief Rehman Malik went further, admitting that “there were some Pakistan-based Islamists who had been hired to carry out the Samjhauta Express attack.” Judging by recent Hindutva terror attacks, like last year’s bombings in Goa, it is unclear if they still have the capabilities to mount a sophisticated attack of the kind seen in Pune. Few investigators believe that the organisations — or other Hindutva cells — mounted the operation. “Still”, says one Maharashtra police official involved in investigating both Hindutva and jihadist attacks, “you can’t help wondering — what if?” Signs are the investigation into the bombing of the German Bakery will take time. All that investigators have by way of suspects are three men recorded holding brief meetings before the blast by a poor-quality closed-circuit television camera. From the videotape, it is unclear if the men had anything to do with the attack. The longer the investigation takes, the more time conspiracy theories and speculation will have to proliferate — likely deepening the communal fissures the bombing is already opening up. (The Hindu)

Foreign Relations:

Obama speaks to PM; condemns Pune blast

US President Barack Obama on Thursday spoke to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and condemned last week's terror blast in Pune that has claimed 11 lives. In the brief telephonic conversation, Obama condoled the loss of lives, the Prime Minister's Office said. "The two leaders took the opportunity to review developments in Indo-US relations," it said. The Obama administration has offered FBI help in the investigation into Saturday's blast at the German Bakery, a popular eatery in Pune's posh Koregaon

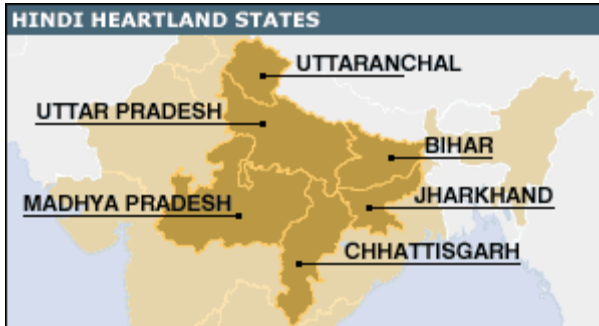
Park area. The US State Department has said it is working with India and Pakistan to combat the threats the three countries face from terrorist and extremist groups. "The information we have shared so far has been quite unprecedented, and we intend to continue to working with the Government of India to try and protect our two societies from these types of attacks," Acting US State Department Spokesman Gordon Duguid said. (The Indian Express)

Pakistan mobile firms' charge against Indian cellular operators

Pakistan mobile phone companies have complained to the authorities that interference in the frequency bandwidth from Indian cellular operators — particularly Tata Mobile and Reliance Communications — are affecting the quality of their service. Lahore, Sialkot, Kasur, Sahiwal, Bahawalnagar and Bahawalpur, which border India, were being affected, representatives of the phone companies said. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and Frequency Allocation Board carried out a joint survey following the complaints. They said the interference caused a “calculable depreciation in the quality of mobile telecommunication services in areas of Punjab province, located near the border.” (The Hindu)

Regional Report

Central India (Hindi Heartland)

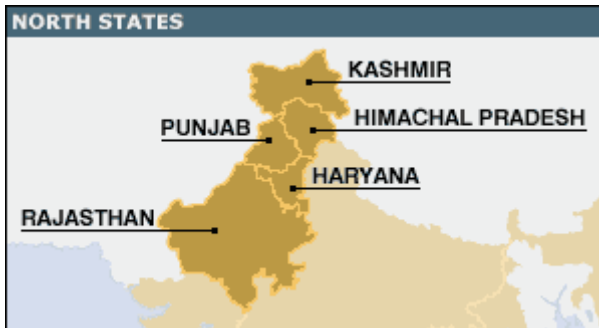


Politics:

Social front:

Economic Front:

The North



Politics:

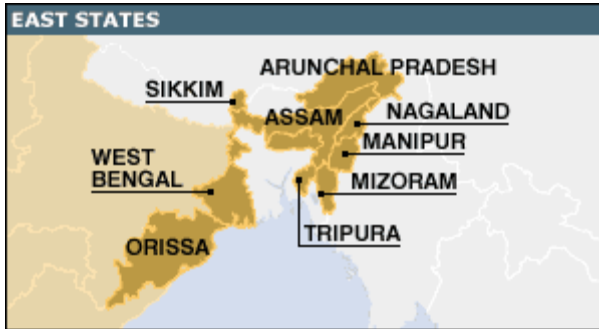
Social front:

Tension in Shimla villages

Tension prevailed in some hamlets of Shimla district in Himachal Pradesh on Friday following reports of cow slaughter. Three places of worship and a few habitations were set afire in the hamlets in the Nerwa sub-tehsil of the Chopal division.

Economic Front:

The East



Politics:

Violence in Darjeeling Hills

Violence erupted in some parts of the Darjeeling Hills on Thursday where life was hit due to a 24-hour strike by the students' wing of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM). The strike, called by the Gorkha Janmukti Vidyarthi Morcha (GJVM), was to protest against the refusal of the authorities to allow its supporters to hold a pro-Gorkhaland rally in Siliguri and other parts of the Dooars earlier this month. GJM supporters went on the rampage in Kurseong by setting ablaze the residence of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) MLA Shanta Chettri, torching two vehicles and damaging a few others belonging to the police after laying siege and ransacking the local thana, reports reaching here said. The trouble arose as news spread that some GJVM activists were held for blocking the national highway leading to Siliguri. Their colleagues in Kurseong attacked the residence of the GNLF president of the Kurseong unit. Amid the developments, the GJM leadership has given a call for a 24-hour strike on Friday in protest against the alleged failure of the State government to ensure adequate protection at the Silda camp, where 24 jawans of the Eastern Frontier Rifles were killed in a Maoist attack on Monday. "The State police failed to provide adequate protection at the camp — earlier abandoned by the Central Reserve Police Force as the location was found unsuitable," GJM general secretary Roshan Giri told over telephone from Darjeeling. (The Hindu)

Social front:

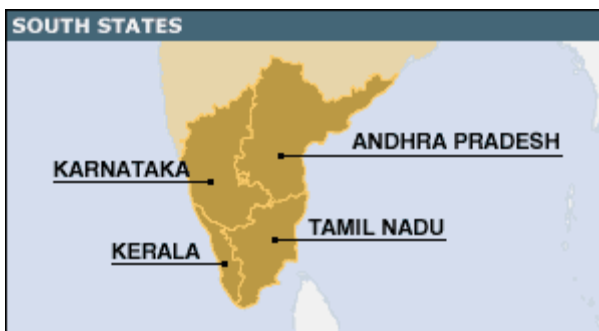
Agreement to end 59-day-long jute strike

The 59-day-long jute strike was called off on Friday following an agreement reached at a tripartite meeting. The gates of the 50 units which came under the purview of the strike will open on Sunday and work will start in phases. The pact will remain in force for three years. Eighteen meetings had to be held to break the deadlock. Workers are to get a Rs.1,164 increase in their monthly wages, including dearness allowance (DA) of Rs.321. The DA arrears, the bone of contention in the protracted bipartite and tripartite negotiations, will be paid in six installments. Centre of Indian Trade Unions leader Govinda Guha sees the arrear payment as a major victory for the workers. Union Textiles

Minister Dayanidhi Maran thanked all stake-holders for reaching a peaceful settlement and promised all help for the industry's growth, according to Press Information Bureau release. The release also said that the Minister had taken a decision on February 5 to facilitate the consultation process among stakeholders to end the strike within a time frame. The Joint Secretary (Jute) and other senior Ministry officers held marathon meetings with stakeholders on February 9 and 10 to arrive at a settlement. The Chief Labour Commissioner (Central) and the Additional Labour Commissioner (State) were also associated with the consultation process. A total of 20 unions, including all Central unions, had called the strike in November 2009 to press for demands, including fair labour practices and payment of DA arrears. The Trinamool Congress-affiliated union stayed out of the strike saying they did not subscribe to work disruptions. Another unit, run by a workers' cooperative, too did not stop work. The new accord has been signed by 15 unions barring the All-India Trade Union Congress, which says the workers will not benefit much. However, it will not oppose the reopening of the mills. Chairman of the Indian Jute Mills Association Sanjay Kajaria was relieved at the resolution of the dispute. The strike has cost the industry Rs.320 crore. Due to the prolonged strike, the synthetic bag industry has succeeded in making inroads into the sectors reserved for packing by gunny bags as the government had to relax reservation norms set by the Jute Packaging Control Order to fulfil the requirement of the food grains sector and also the sugar mills. Addressing a press conference at the Secretariat, State Labour Minister Anadi Sahu said that as part of the agreement, a wage board would be set up for the industry to examine the demand for grades and scales of pay for the workers and related wage issues. The State Government would constitute the board within three months. (The Hindu)

Economic Front:

The South



Politics:

Seven-point terms of reference for panel on Telangana

Nearly a week after setting up a five-member committee on the Telangana issue, the Union government on Friday announced the panel's seven-point terms of reference. The committee, headed by the former Supreme Court judge, Justice B. N. Srikrishna, has been asked to examine the situation in Andhra Pradesh with reference to the demand for a

Telangana State as well as the demand for maintaining the present status of a united Andhra Pradesh. “The committee is requested to submit its report by December 31, 2010,” a Union Home Ministry statement said. The panel may hold its first meeting on Saturday, informed sources said. The committee will review the developments in the State since its formation and their impact on the progress and development of different regions of the State. It will examine the impact of the recent developments on different sections of people such as women, children, students, the minorities, the Other Backward Classes, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The committee, constituted on February 3, will consult all sections of people, especially political leaders, on the “aforesaid matters and elicit their views; to seek from the political parties and other organisations a range of solutions that would resolve the present difficult situation and promote the welfare of all sections of the people; to identify the optimal solutions for this purpose; and to recommend a plan of action and a road map.” According to the terms of reference, the committee will “consult other organisations of civil society such as industry, trade, trade unions, farmers’ organisations, women’s organisations and students’ organisations on the aforesaid matters and elicit their views with specific reference to the all-round development of the State’s different regions.” The panel has been asked to make any other suggestion or recommendation that it may deem appropriate. (The Hindu)

14 MLAs from Telangana resign

Fourteen MLAs from the Telangana region handed over their resignation letters to Speaker N. Kiran Kumar Reddy on Sunday on a call by the all-party Joint Action Committee (JAC) to protest against the terms of reference of the Srikrishna committee. All 10 MLAs of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti, two of the Congress and one each of the BJP and the Praja Rajyam Party handed over their letters. Two other Congress MLAs who on Saturday announced their decision to quit backed out, but the former Minister, R. Damodar Reddy, said they would follow suit very soon. After submitting his resignation, Mr. Reddy told journalists that this time the MLAs took care that the letters were in the prescribed format. Last time, the Speaker rejected the letters on the ground that they were not in the prescribed format. All the MLAs insisted with the Speaker that he accept their resignation when he sought their views individually, Mr. Reddy said. A TDP member C. Ramesh, whose resignation was pending, also met the Speaker to press his case. (The Hindu)

Social front:

Clashes erupt on Osmania campus

The Osmania University campus and its environs witnessed renewed violence as students and police fought pitched battles on Sunday night. Thirty persons, including 13 students, eight journalists, eight CRPF personnel and Additional Commissioner Krishna Raju were injured in repeated stone-pelting and lathi charge. For over four hours, police fought to bring the situation under control. Trouble broke out around 6.45 p.m. when a group of students tried to take out a rally from Arts College to Tarnaka demanding resignation of legislators of the Telangana region. They also tried to burn an effigy. Heated arguments

between the police and students eventually led to caning and stone-pelting. Soon, it was a free-for-all as the police resorted to a lathi charge and lobbing of tear gas shells. In the melee journalists came under attack. Students living in adjoining Manikeshwarnagar too joined in the stone-pelting. This led to another round of lathi charge. A police post and a few tents on the campus were set on fire. It was difficult to get authentic information as police refused to allow any journalist to enter the campus. The entire area was plunged into darkness and even streetlights were not burning adding to the chaos. All one could hear was tear gas shells being fired. Entry points were barricaded and even the inner ring road touching the campus was sealed leading to traffic jams as traffic police diverted vehicles to alternative routes. Later, Joint Commissioner of Police P.S.R. Anjaneyulu apologised to the media for injuries to scribes and claimed that only tear gas shells were used. All political parties condemned the lathi charge. The Andhra Pradesh government on Sunday night ordered an inquiry into the lathicharge on students at the Osmania University. “The incident at OU is painful. I spoke to the DGP and Police Commissioner on the conditions that led to this incident and why lathicharge had to be done. An inquiry has been ordered into the incident immediately,” State Home Minister P. Sabita Reddy told reporters. (The Hindu)

Economic Front:

West India



Politics:

Won't tolerate goondaism: CM

Chief Minister Ashok Chavan has praised Mumbaikars for defying Shiv Sena threats over My Name Is Khan and said the government would maintain law and order with a firm hand. “In the past few days, attempts were made by certain parties and organisations to disturb law and order in some parts of the state,” Chavan said on Saturday, “But the law and order situation will not deteriorate and we won't tolerate goondaism.” He further stated that the government had prevented any untoward incident from taking place in the state and the police, along with Home Minister R R Patil and Minister of State for Home Ramesh Bagve, were maintaining a strict vigil. Referring to people turning out to watch MNIK despite Shiv Sena's agitation, Chavan lauded them for showing that they could defy threats. (The Indian Express)

Social front:

Economic Front: