

## Farm suicides show no sign of abating in Vidarbha

Nearly 68 suicides recorded in the first month of the new year

Jaideep Hardikar, Nagpur

The 2006-07 cotton-plucking season is coming to an end, yet the farmers' suicide index in six districts of Vidarbha is not showing any signs of wilting, even as the state government claims that its relief measures are reaching the farmers.

Fourteen more farmers have committed suicide in the last 72 hours, taking the toll to nearly 70 within the first month of the year, as per the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti (VJAS) records, while the state figures report that there have been over 600 suicides in the region in the last five months. This is the first time in six months that the suicide figure hasn't crossed the hundred figure-mark in a single given month.

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It's now the post-harvest time when farmer's earn some money," explains Kishor Tiwari, convener of VJAS.

Once the new agriculture season sets in, a new set of worries, about credit and inputs, will start nagging the farmers; that's when suicides surge and are high when agriculture activities are in full swing. Other factors like health epidemic or marriages also affect the suicide rate. "In the height of agricultural season last year, the chikungunya pandemic was the most compelling factor for a sudden rise in family expenditure. Suicides rose sharply during that period. Yet, over 70 suicides a month in only six districts is an alarming trend," Tiwari says. In the corresponding period, last year, the toll stood at 68 and in 2005, it was 52.

The state's suicide figure for the six districts in 2006 is 1427, higher than the figure pegged by the VJAS. But, the state says only 541 cases were eligible for the Rs One lakh compensation, while the remaining farm suicides were not correlated with the agrarian distress nor did they meet the parameters set for the cash compensation.

These 541 cases fall in the category of "genuine" suicides, while the cases found ineligible by the government for compensation is deemed "non-genuine". Yet, the government's own list shows a growing trend in the number of cases fit for the compensation. The rejection rate has been growing after the PM's visit last year. Tiwari contends, "Whatever be the figure, the issue is not just the suicides, but also the scale of distress. There's no indication that the distress is on the decline."

# Sunderbans vies for tourism Oscar



## Jungle Camp project has been nominated for the Tourism of Tomorrow award

Madhumita Mookerji, Kolkata

Tucked away in the mangrove delta, this is one of the most impoverished and yet biodiversity-rich areas of West Bengal. Its greatest asset is, perhaps, the elusive Royal Bengal Tiger, more heard of than seen these days. But the Sunderbans Jungle Camp has made its way into the shortlist of the tourism Oscars - the World Travel & Tourism Council's shortlist of 12 finalists for the prestigious Tourism for

Tomorrow Awards 2007.

Now a world heritage site, the Sunderbans delta fans out over more than 6,000 sq km. Among the 102 islands, 54 are habitable, while the reserved area stretches for 2,400 sq km. The salt water terrain has forced the local population for the last 100 years to depend for irrigation on harvested rainwater. In any case, they have limited agricultural option, the mainstay being rice cultivation and fishing.

For the young disinterest-

ed in farming, deer poaching was the only option, endangering its finely balanced eco diversity, till the government invited Help Tourism to spearhead a tourism development project here in 2002.

Nominated under the 'Investor in People' category, Sunderbans Jungle Camp is the only eco-resort in India to have been nominated under this category. And if it wins, it will become the first resort in India to achieve this milestone. Last year, the entire state of Kerala had

been nominated under the 'Destination Award' category but it lost out to Mexico. Mandip Singh Soin, founder and managing di-

### in the elite club

rector of Ixex Expeditions and also on the panel of WTTC judges, told DNA: "The Sunderbans Jungle Camp's USP is that it has used locals to partner its

tourism initiative, who are generally marginalized by private players."

About 75 per cent of what Help Tourism earns through its initiative is returned to the villagers in the form of various welfare projects which include free medicines, a local school and higher education facilities for promising youngsters.

Says Abhra Bhat-tacharya, team head, Help Tourism: "The trend in India is to opt for premium end resorts as in Ranthambhor. We

wanted to try out a model observing all the eco-tourism norms." Sunderbans Jungle Camp is up against 10 Knots Development Corporation/El Nido Resorts in the Philippines and Nihiwatu Resort, Indonesia.

An international expert committee selected 12 finalists from over 130 applications from more than 40 countries. Rigorous evaluation standards and detailed criteria determine the Tourism for Tomorrow Awards.

## Malaysian cruise liner forced to pay

The parent company was accused of criminal negligence after an infant died when a boat capsized

Don Sebastian, Thiruvananthapuram

A Malaysian luxury liner was detained at Kadamatt Island in Lakshadweep for over an hour on Tuesday as directed by the Kerala High Court.

The ship, accused of criminal negligence that resulted in the death of a 14-month-old passenger, was released after the captain produced a bank guarantee for Rs10

lakh as compensation to be awarded to the victim's parents.

Port officer A Hamza and his men were waiting for MV Super Star Libra when the cruise liner docked at Kadamatt at 6 am on Tuesday.

The captain was briefly detained, but let off after he handed over the bank note.

The vessel returned to Mumbai around noon. It had sailed to Lakshadweep on Sunday after the high court passed the order on a case filed by an American couple of Indian origin.

Mehul Shah and Natasha Banerjee filed the case after they lost their only child Neuna, who was drowned after a boat capsized off Kadamatt Island on November 21, 2006.

The family, along with other passengers, was disembarked from the cruise liner to a small boat, which could not withstand the rough seas and heavy rain on that day. Neuna was an American citizen.

The court had directed the Lakshadweep port officer to detain the vessel, owned by Starcruises of Malaysia, as soon as it docked in any island in Lakshadweep.

The interim order issued by Justice CN Ramachandran Nair said that the vessel could be released only after its owners furnished a bank guarantee of Rs10 lakh towards damages claimed by Mehul Shah and his wife.

The couple is also pursuing a \$10 million against the shipping company in a Malaysian court.

### Cruise control

Malaysian cruise liner MV Superstar Libra had capsized in the Indian Ocean on Nov 21

An American family of Indian origin was among the passengers who was disembarked from the ship

Their 14-month-old daughter Neuna drowned when the rescue boat could not withstand the rough seas

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## New IAF chief appointed

DNA correspondent, New Delhi

Over-ruling strong resistance from the powerful fighter pilots' lobby, the government today appointed Air Marshal Fali Homi Major as the next chief of Indian Air Force. Major will be the first helicopter pilot to head the IAF, which is celebrating its platinum jubilee.

The government's decision to appointment Major, who is presently the Commanding-in-Chief of Eastern Air Command, was made public this evening.

He will take over on March 31, 2007 from Air Chief Marshal SP Tyagi on latter's retirement.

## Hindus walk on fire on Moharram

Lucknow presents a unique example of communal harmony

Deepak Gidwani, Lucknow

Manish Kumar, an 8-year-old Hindu boy, walks on a carpet of red hot embers with a smile lighting his cherubic face. As he steps off the fire, cheers go up. A crowd of Muslims gathered around lift him up as chants of Ya Hussain rent the air. Manish just performed the aag ka maatam, a unique way of mourning during Moharram in this city of nawabs.

Moharram, the period of mourning by Muslims over the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, Prophet Muhammad's beloved grandson, presents an unparalleled example of Hindu-Muslim unity in Lucknow as a large number of Hindus participate in the 'azadari' processions of the Shia Muslims. The Hindus even participate in the 'aag ka maatam' in large numbers. Tuesday marked the 10th of Moharram, the day of Imam Hussain's martyrdom.

"Imam Hussain had a special affinity for India. He wanted to spend his life here," says Harish Chandra Dhanuk whose family has been performing azadari (the mourning rites) for five generations. There are several 'anjumans' (religious organisations) in Lucknow run by Hindus which take out 'azadari' processions and organ-



■ A Muslim girl mourns on the holy day of Ashura, the climax of a 10-day of period of mourning during the holy month of Moharram —AFP

ise 'majlis' (mourning sessions where heart-rending tales of Imam Hussain's martyrdom are narrated) throughout Moharram.

"As a child, I used to perform 'aag ka maatam' and now my children also do it every year as a tradition without any fear or hesitation," says Pradeep Kumar whose family has a history of observing Moharram over the last 82 years. His family leads a Moharram procession to the 'Kar-bala' ground followed by Shia Muslims.

Lucknow also boasts of several Hindu 'imam-baras' (mausoleums). One such is the 'Kishnu Khalifa ka Imambara' in Bashiratganj locality in the old city area. The Imambara, established in 1880, is famous for its Hindu 'azadars' (devotees) who observe Muharram with all the religiosity of the Shias. A large number of Hindus, including their children, perform 'aag ka maatam' here. 'Anjuman-e-Hind-e-Abbasia' and 'Anjuman Haaye Sakeena' are the other organisations known for Hindus observing all the mourning rites associated with Moharram in large numbers.

Renowned Lucknow historian Yogesh Praveen says the participation of Hindus in Moharram is indeed unique to Lucknow. He says the Moharram here is also different from the way it is observed elsewhere in India because Shia Muslims here mourn for a period of two months and eight days while at other places it is either 10 days ('daswaan') or 40 days ('chaleeswaan' day after death). Lucknow has a huge Shia population, second only to Iran.

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Names of candidates selected to appear in the written examination will be displayed on the above website.