

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

India prepares for bountiful harvest

While global shortages of food have become acute, the Indian bumper crop may help to ensure food security.

India is expecting an all-time high foodgrain output of 180 million tons in 1990-91, following reports of a bountiful winter wheat crop now being harvested. If the next monsoon turns out to be as merciful as the last, India's foodgrain stock may exceed 28.3 million tons, the highest ever, stockpiled in 1985-86. Authorities are planning to export at least 1 million tons of rice and some wheat.

The good news has been welcomed in light of the recent report of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), sounding the alarm that despite an increase in foodgrain production globally, the recent developments in the Persian Gulf, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union have added a new element of uncertainty to the world food situation. Moreover, cereal production has fallen sharply in Africa this year, and access to food supplies has become more difficult in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South America. According to the FAO, food shortages are becoming acute in several war-torn African countries. Substantial international assistance is needed by Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, and Angola.

FAO also warns that external debt and huge payments imbalances have added "a considerable element of uncertainty to the outlook for many developing countries.

In India, such problems have added to the misery caused by growing political instability and failure to implement long-term policies over the past two years. But India's success with the Green Revolution during the last two decades has made the country

self-sufficient in foodgrains. Besides increasing output, the Green Revolution has made the country's foodgrain sector virtually drought-proof. The improvement of productivity of cropland through irrigation and indigenization of high-yielding varieties (HYV) of seeds has helped boost the country into an era of food security.

In the 1960s, India's foodgrain situation was grim. Chronic food shortages which were caused by the inadequacy of traditional agricultural methods rendered the country dependent on American wheat. The political fallout of extended dependence on PL-480 wheat exports from the Johnson administration and breakthroughs made in hybridizing wheat in Mexico and paddy in the Philippines, gave India the required motivation to become self-sufficient in foodgrain production.

Aided by a group of talented agro-scientists, India exploited its agricultural institutions and the basic infrastructure set up in the 1950s and the 1960s to increase foodgrain output significantly. From a production level of about 72 million tons in 1967, the introduction of modern agricultural methods saw India's annual foodgrain production go up to 151.5 million tons in 1983-84.

But, despite self-sufficiency, India's foodgrain production has lagged far behind its potential. Out of 141 million hectares of cropped area, only about 42 million hectares, or 30% of the total, is served with assured irrigation; the rest depends on erratic and unpredictable rainfall. Rain-fed agriculture has remained impoverished

and unless a new breed of seeds is developed for dryland farming, productivity will continue to be low. Dryland farming produce is 98.4% of the country's millet and 91.4% of coarse cereals, and surprisingly, as much as 58.2% of the paddy.

Even where irrigation is assured, the productivity of the cropland is much less than its full potential. A number of factors account for this. Among the most important are inadequate amount of fertilizer, degeneration of the HYV seeds, and lack of adequate management of past low productivity.

However, Indian agro-scientists are now in the process of developing super-fast rice varieties that can mature in only 65 days. Already, trials on three such varieties have been carried out where rainfall is scarce. The new varieties will be a boon to farmers affected by inadequate rainfall and perennial floods and can be grown when the floods are receding.

The good work done by India's agro-scientists, however, is being held ransom to political instability. A draft, long-term agricultural policy, which will not only sustain food self-sufficiency but make India a major food exporter, has been hanging fire for some two years now. Each of the last three governments has promised the country the framework of a policy to increase foodgrain production to 210 million tons by the turn of the century. The policy vacuum has caused anxiety throughout the farm sector.

Meanwhile, International Monetary Fund pressure on India to cut food subsidies has found a victim in fertilizer use. According to authorities, the cut in fertilizer subsidies may help to bridge the budget gap, but it is also expected to cause serious problems to the numerous financially weak farmers.