

GREP has succeeded in driving away the virus. The present situation is a remarkable improvement over past efforts.

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Asia in the midst of rice crunch

The global food scenario has spelt doom for developing countries, with a hike in its prices. One-third of the global population is expected to be hit by this crisis that has become a painful reality. This has been confirmed by the President of World Bank, Robert Zoellick and United Nations Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, John Holmes. The obvious consequences of the food crisis are shortage of food leading to inflation. A staggering hike of 40% in food prices over the last one year has led to revolts in countries like Egypt, Uzbekistan, Ivory Coast and recently, in Cameroon. In order to control the escalating domestic prices, major rice-producing countries like India, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, have restricted exports leading to disruption of global supply chains and fuelling inflation. Asia is experiencing one of the uglier aspects of globalization: as countries have become increasingly reliant on one another for vital products, they have also become more vulnerable to external shortages and price hikes as they ripple around the world¹.

Two successive droughts in Australia, diversion of a major portion of maize crop in the US to ethanol have led to a deficit in world production and low food stock. As a result², the world price of rice in the last six months has spiralled by 60%. To make matters worse, the World Bank³ has issued a statement that food prices will remain high throughout this year and 2009, and will not return to the levels of early 2000 at least until 2015.

According to the estimates of the US Department of Agriculture, the global annual rice production was more than 420 million metric tonnes last year¹. The increase in the cost of rice has adversely affected South Asian countries, where it forms the staple food of about three billion people, approximately half of the world's population. Rising consumption of rice due to increasing population in South Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, conversion of agricultural land for construction purposes, increasing pests and the expanding bio-fuel industry are gradually but steadily taking their toll on the production of rice.

To combat the rice crisis, the Philippines has charted a rice self-sufficiency programme, comprising land allocation to farmers, construction of irrigation networks, and use of hybrid seeds and organic fertilizers to maximize the yield of rice production³.

Globalization has also had an adverse effect on the agrarian sector of the country, thereby threatening the food security. The contribution of agriculture to our GDP has declined from 54.56% in 1951–52 to 27.87% in 1999–2000, resulting in a reduction of nearly 50%. Export-oriented agriculture is gradually reducing the area for food cultivation, as more and more land is being used for cash-crop production⁴.

India recently witnessed an inflation of 7% in wholesale food prices and a reported 20% hike in the consumer price of rice². The growing cost of rice is attrib-

utable to the global inflation and not to low production of rice, since this year's annual rice production stands at 94 million metric tonnes with a rise of 2 million metric tonnes over the last year¹. The open economy of the nation has offered lucrative export options for the emerging farmers. Hence, the export of rice at a higher price has spearheaded the inflation of this crop in the domestic market. As a combat strategy to curb the prices, the Government has recently banned export of non-basmati rice and adjusted price controls to discourage export of aromatic basmati rice.

The source of inflation in food prices is global in nature and the solution to this problem lies in increasing the world's food production with corresponding fall in its prices. The farmers should take a cue from the present scenario and grow more crops globally to ease the inflation in coming years².

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