

Flood-hit India boosts monsoon tracking skills

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

India is strengthening its skills to predict annual monsoon rains that spell the difference between riches and ruin for its farmers, but says 2010 is the earliest it will be able to advise them when to grow crops.

India's four-month monsoon season plays a crucial role in determining rural incomes and consumer spending for a wide range of goods, because about two-thirds of a population of more than one billion live off the land.

Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal said India was investing \$215 million in the first phase of plans to improve weather prediction that

includes upgrading weather forecasting equipment across the country.

"Our ultimate goal is to provide specific information to our farmers about the possibility of the monsoon hitting them at a given time, because that really determines their sowing and their harvesting times," Sibal said in the Malaysian capital.

Today, it is impossible to accurately predict the path and direction of winds carrying the rain, the main source of water for most farms in India — and even less so the amount of rain that will pour down.

Devastating floods across five states this year have already hurt Indian industrial and agricultural output.

Swollen rivers swamped thousands of villages and towns in parts of the south and the industrialised west, forcing 4.5 million people from their homes and halting output at a major gas plant serving northern power stations.

In the desert state of Rajasthan, the heaviest rains in at least three decades triggered flooding last week that killed almost 140 people and displaced thousands from their homes.

But India expects to be in a much better position to track the monsoon by the middle of 2008, Sibal said, when it will have built a network of weather stations, rain gauges,

sophisticated radar and weather-modelling techniques to monitor the winds.

"You can buy the instrumentation but you need physical assets to be built on the ground to actually put it in place," said Sibal, who was on a visit to Malaysia for talks with ministers of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

"So I think, though it will take about five to seven years to set up the whole system till stage three, stage one should be ready by 2008."

The monsoon rains are crucial for crops such as oilseeds, cotton and rice.

On genetically modified seeds, Sibal said Indian farmers had

adapted very quickly to GM cotton, launched in 2002, but concerns over high prices and seed quality needed to be worked out.

"We all believe that farmers have a right, in a sense, in the context of a country which is substantially an agrarian economy, to have access to these products at reasonable and affordable prices," he added.

Indian government research was focusing on foods such as more tasty and larger brinjals (eggplants) and tomatoes as well as protein-rich rice which could be put on the market by 2010 or 2012, following field trials, Sibal said.



PHOTO: STAR

Dulal Chandra Biswas, a teacher of Rajshahi University Mass Communication Department, speaks at a two-day consultation meeting with journalists and members of non-governmental organisations on 'Challenges on reporting poverty' in Rajshahi city yesterday. Panos South Asia and CCD Bangladesh organised the meeting.