

Indian agriculture in crisis

Manmohan warns

UNB, Bangalore

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh warned yesterday against complacency over India's booming economy, saying the dividends of growth are yet to trickle down to the rural poor and farmers are in crisis.

Singh, whose party came to power in 2004 on the promise of improving rural lives, is presiding over an economy that is growing at around nine percent, the fastest after China.

The investment and savings rate is as high as 35 percent of national economic output, Singh said at a meeting of his Congress party in this southern Indian city, the hub of a 50-billion-dollar IT industry at the vanguard of the country's economic

resurgence.

"But we cannot be complacent till the growth becomes inclusive and socio-economic development benefits more than half the population, especially in rural areas," Singh said.

India's rain-dependent agriculture, which contributes about a fifth of economic output but is a direct or indirect source of livelihood for two-thirds of its billion-plus population, is growing at less than a quarter the pace of the overall economy.

Annual per capita foodgrain production declined from 207 kilograms (455 pounds) in 1995 to 186 kilos last year. The rate of agricultural growth fell from five percent in the mid-1980s to less than two percent in the past five years.

India, the world's second-largest wheat producer, exported no wheat last year after shortages forced it to import the commodity for the first time in six years.

Despite the Indian economy growing at a sizzling pace, thousands of debt-ridden farmers have committed suicide after crop failures.

"Agriculture in many parts of the country is in a state of crisis," said Singh, an economist who in 1991 introduced reforms that ended four decades of socialist-style insulation by opening the doors to foreign investors.

"The fact that farmers are compelled to resort to suicides is a matter of deep concern for all," he said.

In May, Singh announced a six

billion dollar package to try and help poor farmers.

The funds for investment in technology and infrastructure to bring crops to market more efficiently will be made available to India's 29 states over a four-year period.

Social activists say the suicide rate among poor farmers in six of India's 29 states has hit a 10-year high despite a 37.5-billion-ruppee (835-million-dollar) relief package unveiled by Singh last year.

On Friday, the premier pledged to improve living standards in the countryside by building state-of-the-art power plants, roads, telecommunications, housing, healthcare and education facilities.



Visitors admire Bonsai trees at an exhibition in the city yesterday. Centre for Asian Art and Culture (CAAC) organised the Bonsai exhibition to mark its 7th founding anniversary.

Taliban refuse to allow medical team access to hostages

APP, Ghazni

The Taliban yesterday refused to allow an Afghan medical team access to 21 South Koreans and said it would free two who are gravely ill only if the government released two imprisoned rebels.

The team of doctors and nurses had volunteered to treat the captives, most of whom are said to be ill after more than two weeks in captivity, and travelled to southern Ghazni province where the aid workers were kidnapped.

But the Taliban said it had refused to allow them access to the hostages.

China arrests hundreds in ethnic Tibetan region

AFP, Beijing

Chinese police have arrested hundreds of people in western China after residents there called for the return of exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, reports yesterday.

Soldiers and police were dispatched to Lithang, an ethnically Tibetan part of Sichuan province, after locals gathered Wednesday to celebrate a traditional horse festival, said rights group International Campaign for Tibet and Radio Free Asia (RFA).

The incident occurred when local Tibetan, Runggye Adak, 53, was detained after speaking in public about the Dalai Lama and social issues, the reports said.

RFA said 200 people had been

arrested but did not indicate if anyone had been released.

Police and an army station in Lithang denied knowledge of the incident when contacted by AFP.

According to witnesses quoted by RFA, Runggye Adak climbed onto the festival stage and said: "If we cannot invite the Dalai Lama home, we will not have freedom of religion and happiness in Tibet."

Runggye Adak also called for the freedom of the Panchen Lama, Gendun Choekyi Nyima and Tenzin Deleg Rinpoche, a senior and respected lama from the area who is serving a life sentence for alleged involvement in bombing offences.

After his detention many Tibetans

congregated to protest Runggye Adak's arrest, prompting police to fire warning shots in the air to disperse the crowds, said the International Campaign for Tibet.

Gendun Choekyi Nyima disappeared with his parents at the age of six after he was recognised by the Dalai Lama, who is Tibet's top religious figure, as the 11th Panchen Lama.

His whereabouts since then are unknown, and Beijing selected another boy -- largely raised and educated in Beijing -- for the role.

China sent troops into Tibet in 1951. The Dalai Lama later fled to India in 1959 after a failed uprising and established a government-in-exile in Dharamsala.

Nepal launches new king-free national anthem

APP, Kathmandu

Nepal launched its new national anthem yesterday, a song notably making no mention of the nation's embattled monarch, King Gyanendra.

The snub comes as the king's future hangs in the balance after fiercely republican Maoists ended their 'people's war' last year and entered government.

"The old national anthem which praised feudalism has been killed," Prithvi Subba Gurung, Nepal's Minister for Culture and Tourism, said at the launch of the national anthem.

The lyrics by 30-year-old lawyer Pradeep Kumar Rai were chosen in December.

But the panel selecting the national anthem only recently decided on the tune by popular composer Amber Gurung that resembles traditional Nepali folk music.

"I congratulate the song writer and music composer on behalf of the Nepal government for giving us a new national anthem that represents the diversity of Nepal," the minister said at the launch of the anthem.

The one minute six seconds tune was played to ministers, government officials and media in a packed auditorium at the parliament complex.

The old national anthem lauded the monarchy with the lines: "May glory crown you, courageous sovereign ... his majesty the king, our glorious ruler, may he live for many years to come."

But the new anthem drops any mention of the king and focuses on the diversity of the Himalayan nation.

"We are Nepali, the only garland with hundreds of flowers," the anthem starts out.

Gyanendra came to the throne in tragic and bizarre circumstances in 2001 after an apparently drunk and drugged crown prince massacred most of his family including his father and mother, the king and queen.

India hikes perks for glacier warriors to end suicides

APP, New Delhi

India on Thursday increased perks for troopers deployed on a frigid glacier in a bid to reduce psychological stress and a spate of suicides in the ranks, officials said.

The cabinet headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh increased allowances for the officers by 80 percent from 7,000 rupees (175 dollars) a month and agreed to hand out other concessions, the officials said.

"This is expected to reduce stress levels of soldiers and officers and hopefully also cut down on the number of suicides," defence ministry spokesman Sitanshu Kar told AFP after the announcement late Thursday.

Some 120 soldiers posted mainly on the 6,300-metre (20,800-foot) high Siachen glacier and in mountainous Kashmir killed themselves last year.

India has around 5,000 troops on the frigid wasteland, experts say, part of disputed Kashmir, where temperatures plummet to minus 50 degrees Celsius (minus 58 degrees Fahrenheit).



Bina Smriti Snan Ghat, which was constructed on the bank of Buriganga at Badamtali in memory of slain Dhaka City Corporation Ward Commissioner Binoy Sarker Bina, has now turned into a site for dumping garbage due to lack of proper maintenance.

Darfur rebel factions gather for unity talks

APP, Arusha

government and seven, eight or nine rebel groups on the other," African Union envoy to Sudan Salim Ahmed Salim told reporters Friday in Arusha.

The start of the talks was delayed until 1400 GMT as rebel delegations were only beginning to trickle to the venue of the talks.

Sponsored by the African Union and United Nations, the meeting in the Tanzanian town of Arusha will seek to define a common stance among the rebels for a fresh round of peace negotiations with the Sudanese government.

When the deadly conflict erupted in the impoverished western Sudanese region four and a half years ago, the uprising against the central authority in Khartoum was spearheaded by one group.

Some 120 soldiers posted mainly on the 6,300-metre (20,800-foot) high Siachen glacier and in mountainous Kashmir killed themselves last year.

Now diplomats face the daunting task of finding common ground for a dozen rebel factions, with one of the most significant ones missing from the talks.

"Our objective is to find a common position. You cannot have negotiations with on the one hand the Khartoum

flourished.

The signatory was Minni Minawi, a military commander who broke away from Nur's group and is now the fourth-ranking official in the Sudanese state.

According to a recent report on Darfur rebels, the need is not so much for an effort to revive the Abuja peace deal but for a new and inclusive process.

"Abuja is dead. Moving forward requires starting from scratch. The most immediate hurdle remains the rebels' lack of unity and political vision," said the report, published last month by the Small Arms Survey.

Some factions have made an effort to streamline their unwieldy ranks ahead of the Arusha talks.

In mid-July, the leaders of five rebel factions gathered in the Eritrean capital agreed to form an alliance, the United Front for Liberation and Development, and invited other splinter groups to join.



Visitors admire a painting on display at an exhibition of fine arts by the ex-students of Fine Arts department of Chittagong University at Shilpkala Academy in the city yesterday. The exhibition will continue till August 17.

Climate deal talks gain global support

AP, United Nations

Nearly 100 countries speaking at the first UN General Assembly meeting on climate change signalled strong support for negotiations on a new international deal to tackle global warming.

There was so much interest among worried nations many facing drought, floods and searing heat that the two-day meeting was extended for an extra day so that more countries could describe their climate-related problems, how they are coping, and the help they need.

"We now have the momentum," General Assembly President Sheikh Haya Rashed Al Khalifa told delegates at the closing session Thursday evening. "What we do with this is more important. We need to ensure that we agree an equitable, fair and ambitious global deal to match the scale of the challenges ahead."

Clinching that deal will likely take several years of intense and difficult negotiations, which are expected to start at a December meeting on the Indonesian island of Bali. It will focus on a replacement for the Kyoto protocol, which requires 35 industrial nations to cut their global-warming emissions 5 percent below 1990 levels by 2012, when the accord expires.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who has made climate change a top priority since taking the reins of the UN on Jan. 1, urged all countries to reach a comprehensive agreement by

2009, which would leave time for governments to ratify the accord so it could take effect in 2013.

In an effort "to build on existing momentum" and "galvanize political will" for the negotiations, Ban said he was convening a high-level meeting on climate change on Sept. 24, a day before the General Assembly's annual ministerial meeting begins.

The question of what to do to tackle climate change has become increasingly complex because of competing environmental, economic and energy concerns from countries with different priorities.

The United States, the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, is not a party to the Kyoto agreement, and large developing countries such as China, the second-largest emitter, India and Brazil are exempt from its obligations. They are afraid they will be called on to reduce emissions after 2012, which would hurt their economic growth and poverty eradication efforts.

At the same time, small island states in the Pacific are demanding action to deal with rising sea levels that could wipe them off the map, while oil-producing countries are concerned that a major source of revenue could be harmed by climate change in the future.

Koji Tsuruoka, the Japanese Foreign Ministry's director general for global issues and point man for climate change, said inviting world leaders to the Sept. 24 meeting was

important because unless new negotiations start "under top leadership, you can't expect any progress or results."

He said it was critical to get all countries to participate in negotiations and avoid the mistake of Kyoto where proceedings were rushed and "the most important passengers" were not on board.

After the Sept. 24 meeting, Tsuruoka predicted that climate change "will become top priority agenda politically to each and every nation."

The two-week Bali meeting will then hopefully agree on a negotiating agenda, perhaps with a roadmap leading to a post-Kyoto agreement, he said.

Climate change will be discussed again when the Group of Eight major industrialized nations meet in Japan in July 2008, he told several reporters on Thursday.

"That will present a possibility ... of departing the train with full passengers, and this is a must," Tsuruoka said.

The United States and China account for about 40 or 45 percent of global emissions, he said. "If those two countries do nothing, that's already globally very dangerous. So we need to have ... (a) strong commitment, strong obligation for either mitigating or reducing their emissions."

US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad told the General Assembly the United States was committed to the UN Framework Convention on Climate

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