

Drought threatens Indian economic gains

by Susan Maitra

While the specter of famine has been virtually ruled out by the successes of the late-1960s "Green Revolution," severe drought conditions resulting from the failure of the monsoon are putting great pressure on the Indian economy, in a way that reveals other critical structural weaknesses. Of immediate concern are shortages of power, drinking water, and fodder. As a result of the latter, the country's dairy industry—an essential source of high-quality nutrition for the population—is threatened with shutdown.

In his Aug. 15 Independence Day speech to the nation, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi called for a "mass movement" to fight the drought, involving especially the youth, and pledged that the government would go all-out to meet the emergency without compromising on the nation's development programs. Gandhi has leaned heavily on the state chief ministers to monitor grain stocks and the public distribution system, and to step up the anti-hoarding campaign.

The government is fighting to meet the relief requirements without upsetting delicate budgetary projections or draining funds from development plan coffers, an apparent "relief" which would only create more problems in the future. A ballooning deficit and continuing tight foreign exchange position underscore the constraints.

By late August, the central government had allocated about \$200 million to meet the crisis, part of it intended to finance installation of some 15,000 hand pumps in rural areas and 5,000 in urban areas. Another \$10 million was subsequently issued to 13 states for acquiring rigs for drinking water.

Within a week, another \$200 million was channeled into the country's anti-poverty programs, to compensate for the loss of income among the large population of rural day-laborers. More allocations will be made pending reports from survey teams dispatched to 10 affected states by the Cabinet Committee on the Drought, headed by Gandhi.

The century's worst monsoon?

The current drought is by every basic measure worse than the disastrous 1965-66 drought, which necessitated emergency imports of foodgrains and threw India's overall develop-

ment plan into a tailspin. Of the country's 35 meteorological subdivisions, only 12 recorded normal or excess rainfall from June 1 to Aug. 19, compared to 13 in 1965. According to Minister of State for Agriculture Yogendra Makwana, 16 states and 6 Union Territories have reported scarcity conditions, covering 254 of the total 407 districts in the country.

It is impossible to predict what the extent of crop loss ultimately will be—one current estimate is 15 million tons for the summer crop. By itself, that magnitude of loss would be tolerable. Today, 45% of India's rice, 75% of its wheat, 47% of its barley, 30% of its cotton, and 80% of its sugar cane is grown on irrigated land—by contrast with 1966, when all wheat and rice was dependent on the rains.

But though the current rain shortfall follows two consecutive poor monsoons, it may not be the peak of the drought. And if there is no rain or inadequate rain during the fall to ensure a successful winter crop, then food shortages may well be added to a spiraling crisis fueled by power, drinking water, and fodder shortages.

The pressure on power, drinking water, and fodder supplies is the most serious aspect of the current drought. These are essentials, which it is difficult financially, if not physically, to import at the drop of a hat, for a population of 800 million. The power shortages exacerbate an already untenable situation, and the attempt to transfer power from industry to agriculture could paralyze the economy altogether. Lack of drinking water and loss of milk as a result of fodder famine could kill millions of villagers.

In each case, the pressure points exist in the first place because of persistent policy mistakes in Delhi:

- The government's virtually exclusive emphasis on large surface-water systems instead of groundwater development for irrigation, and the pursuit of irrigation to the exclusion of developing supplies of clean drinking water—much less an overall water management program—has clearly been a serious vulnerability.

- The policy of basing the country's already inadequate power supplies on coal and hydroelectric—keeping nuclear power marginal—is similarly incompetent. Hydroelectric power is expected to account for 28% of the total power output of India this year—yet the failure of monsoon rains has so far reduced the water level by about 25% from a year ago in 45 of the major reservoirs.

- The "Green Revolution" worked wonders for wheat and rice, mainly, but no serious push has been given to extending modern production methods to many other vital crops or to the livestock sector. Failure to effectively address the need for guaranteed supplies of high-quality animal feed, in particular, has already taken a serious toll ecologically; grazing animals are no small contributors to the deforestation and desertification process in the subcontinent. Now this irresponsibility could lead to destruction of the dairy industry and cutoff of milk supplies to a population, the majority of which hovers on the brink of malnutrition in any case.