

Endangered Food Security

Occasional food riots here and there don't really reflect the depth of global food crisis. With every passing year more and more countries face the threat of food security. Asian miracle has vanished. Tiger economies no longer hit the headlines. Now India and China are being billed as the new spots of gold rush though millions in these two countries that represent the Asian Age, literally starve. Hunger is the main disease of the two growing economies—India and China—America count on.

There is no reason to believe that food prices will come down anytime soon. On the contrary, agriculture being neglected for rapid industrialisation and ecological devastation associated with both India and China might face the worst food crisis in the coming days.

Fifteen percent of India's grain harvest is produced by overpumping its groundwater. In human terms, 175 million Indians are being fed with grain produced from wells that will be going dry. The comparable number for China is 130 million. Among the many other countries facing harvest reductions from groundwater depletion are Pakistan, Iran, and Yemen. In a sense the situation in China is somewhat better.

The tripling of world wheat, rice, and corn prices between mid-2006 and mid-2008 actually signaled growing vulnerability to food shortages.

Past decades have witnessed world grain price surges, but they were event-driven - a drought in the former Soviet Union, a monsoon failure in India, or a crop-withering heat wave in the US Corn Belt. This most recent price surge was trend-driven, the result of administrative failure to reverse the environmental trends that are undermining world food production.

These trends include—in addition to falling water tables—eroding soils and rising temperatures from increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Rising temperatures bring crop-shrinking heat waves, melting ice sheets, rising sea level, and shrinking mountain glaciers.

With both the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets melting at an accelerating pace, sea level could rise by up to six feet during this century. Such a rise would inundate much of the Mekong Delta, which produces half of the rice in Viet Nam, the world's second-ranking rice exporter. Even a three-foot rise in sea level would cover half the riceland in Bangladesh, a country of 160 million people. And these are only two of Asia's many rice-growing river deltas. Also, the gangetic plains of India would suffer equally badly.

The world's mountain glaciers have shrunk for 18 consecutive years. Many smaller glaciers have disappeared. Nowhere is the melting more alarming than in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan plateau where the ice melt from glaciers sustains not only the dry-season flow of the Indus, Ganges, Yangtze, and Yellow rivers but also the irrigation systems that depend on them. Without these glaciers, many Asian rivers would cease to flow during the dry season.

The wheat and rice harvests of China and India would be directly affected. China is the world's leading wheat producer. India is second. (The United States is third.) With rice, China and India totally dominate the world harvest. The

projected melting of these glaciers poses the most massive threat to food security the world has ever faced. □□□