

Biofuels hurt Asia's poorest

BIOFUELS are not only hurting poor consumers in Asia by driving up crop prices, they are also failing to help the region's farmers who have not been able to adapt their production to cash in on the boom, a United Nations report said yesterday.

The rise of biofuels has come under fire, with Indian Finance Minister P Chidambaram yesterday criticising countries such as the United States for diverting farm products to produce biofuels, saying this had led to soaring global food prices.

Food giant Nestle's chief executive officer Peter Brabeck also said earlier that the growing use of crops such as wheat and corn to make biofuels, is putting world food supplies in peril.

The UN report noted that the biofuel sector has the potential to lower oil prices as well as provide higher demand for farmers, but urged governments to "carefully consider the impact on the poor". —AFP

Scramble to grow rice

Experts warn on future availability of staple

LOS BANOS [Philippines] — It is the staple food of half of humanity but only a handful of countries have large rice surpluses, leaving even some of the biggest producers scrambling to grow enough to feed their own people.

Land endowment determines which countries have enough of the grain, say the world's foremost rice experts.

Rice yields in the Philippines are nearly double those of Thailand, the world's top exporter, yet as in the case of Indonesia, "there is just not enough land", said International Rice Research Institute (Irri) president Robert Zeigler.

The Philippines and Indonesia have a total of nearly 300 million mouths to feed and are among the most vulnerable consumers of the grain as inflation-adjusted rice prices have recently spiked close to historical highs.

The Philippines has imported rice almost every year since 1869, while Java, Indonesia's most populous island, has been an importer since the 16th century, said Irri economist David Dawe.

Just 30 to 35 tonnes — or 7 per cent of the world's annual rice harvest — is traded in the world market, and because the volumes are so thin, they are subject to price shocks.

China is the world's largest producer and consumer and also has the highest yields, but is not a key player in the export market, said Dr Zeigler, adding that



RICE CRISIS: A Filipino farmer plants rice in southern Philippines.

China guards its rice reserve levels as a "state secret".

"China, like any government, is extremely concerned that their people have enough to eat," he said.

An unlucky confluence of events has pushed spot prices close to US\$1,000 (\$1,380) per tonne, levels not seen since the scientific breakthroughs of the "green revolution" in the early 1980s boosted yields and had since then helped keep prices below US\$400 a tonne.

Bad weather in Bangladesh, pests and disease in Vietnam, and political problems in Myanmar — until the 1950s the world's top rice exporter — have cut stocks usually available in the international market, Dr Zeigler said.

The biofuels industry could also make maize and soybeans more attractive.

"We have some land in Asia that is being redirected towards biofuel — certainly a lot of interest in converting some good land into oil palm plantations for biodiesel. That's a concern," Dr Zeigler said.

"In general, there's just not much room for areas of growth in the world for rice." —AFP

Half a million could die of Aids in Asia each year: UN

UNITED NATIONS — Asian governments must devote more funds to preventing Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Aids) or face the risk that the disease could kill nearly half a million people each year across the continent by 2020, a United Nations report said.

While the international spotlight has often focused on Aids in Africa, the study commissioned by the United Nations programme on Human Immunodeficiency Virus

(HIV)/Aids sounded the alarm about the impact of the scourge in Asia.

Currently, about 440,000 die from the disease each year in the continent, the report released yesterday said. The most comprehensive study on Aids in Asia, it also said the overall number of infected people would likely double to 10 million by 2020 if prevention efforts are not implemented.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appealed to Asian countries to implement the study's recom-

mendations, including increased funding for prevention efforts.

The report said an annual budget of US\$1 billion (\$1.38 billion) for focused prevention programme among most-at-risk populations could reduce infections by 60 per cent in Asia.

It noted that HIV transmission in the continent was driven primarily by three high-risk behaviours: Unprotected commercial sex, injecting drug use and unprotected sex between men. —AFP



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