

Normal monsoon forecast may ease inflationary pressure

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The Indian sub-continent is fed by two monsoon seasons, the southwest monsoon—extending from June to September—and the northeast monsoon—from October to December. Agriculturally, the southwest monsoon is more important as it bestows almost 80 per cent of the country's annual rainfall. Besides, two-thirds of the Indian kharif crop (monsoon sown) is rain-fed and is dependent on the southwest monsoon. Hence, apart from the extent of rains, its timeliness, temporal and spatial distribution have a profound impact on the country's agricultural production and consequently its economy. In this context, the performance of southwest monsoon gains importance and the entire country keenly awaits pre-monsoon forecasts and also follows the progress of the monsoon. In the current year, in the prevailing anxiety over mounting inflation a normal monsoon prediction is a welcome relief to the government, farmers and the general public at large.

According to the IMD's (India Meteorological Department) Long Range Forecast for 2008, the southwest monsoon season rainfall (June to September) for the country as a whole is expected to be near normal. Quantitatively, the monsoon season rainfall is likely to be 99 per cent of the long period average with a model error of ± 5 per cent. The Long period average (LPA) rainfall for the period 1941-1990 is 89 cm.

Weakening La Nina Conditions over equatorial Pacific: La Nina conditions are believed to lead to above normal rains. During August 2007, La Nina conditions developed over the equatorial Pacific, with colder than normal sea surface temperatures (SST). However, in recent weeks, negative SST anomalies have weakened across the central and east-central equatorial Pacific. During March 2008, La Nina conditions declined to moderate-strength. The recent dynamical and statistical SST forecasts indicate that La Nina will become weak and persist during the next three months. Thereafter, there is considerable spread and uncertainty in forecasts of La Nina conditions.

IMD's Forecast of South-West Monsoon		
Rainfall and Actual		
Year	Forecast	Actual
1997	92	102
1998	99	106
1999	111	96
2000	99	92
2001	98	92
2002*	101	81
2003	96	102
2004	100	87
2005	98	99
2006	92	99
2007	95-94	105

* Drought Year

It may be pointed here that despite the monsoon reflecting 105 per cent of LPA during 2007, anomalously, the northwestern parts of India suffered from deficient rains while the Southern

peninsular regions received excess rains and were affected by floods. Thus, the distribution and timeliness of monsoon during the four-month period beginning June is equally critical.

On the agricultural front, key cereals, viz rice, maize, jowar and bajra (sorghum and pearl millet), oilseeds (groundnut, soybean, cottonseed, etc.) and pulses (tur or pigeon pea and urad or black matpe) are grown during the kharif season fed by the southwest monsoon. The following table gives the area and production of kharif crop for the last three years:

Area and production of major kharif crops

Crops	2005-06		2006-07		2007-08	
	Area (Million Ha)	Production (Million tonnes)	Area (Million Ha)	Production (Million tonnes)	Area (Million Ha)	Production (Million tonnes)
Rice	37.37	78.27	37.21	77.43	36.93	81.52
Maize	6.87	12.16	7.30	11.10	7.45	14.29
Soybean	7.80	8.274	8.12	8.682	8.76	9.45
Groundnut	5.65	6.298	4.77	3.182	5.41	5.81
Tur	3.84	2.74	3.62	2.64	4.08	2.90
Other Kharif Pulses	7.54	2.13	7.85	2.60	8.44	2.87
Sugarcane	4.44	281.17	4.28	315.53	5.10	340.32
Cotton*	8.46	184.99	8.87	209.64	9.09	233.8

Source: Ministry Of Agriculture

*Lakh bale of 170 kg

As the performance of the southwest monsoon is associated with the country's fortune as a whole, the current forecast for 2008 and the progress of the monsoon during the June-September period holds the key for agricultural production and can be the much-needed support for containing inflation.