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Preparing for rain clouds

Good monsoon will uplift agriculture, economy

After two years of below average rainfall that has had a debilitating impact on Indian agriculture and stymied the growth of the overall India economy, recent assessments pointing to a better monsoon this year have no doubt brought a sigh of relief. Two factors seem to be playing in India's favour: First, the El Nino phenomenon, which refers to the unusual rise of sea surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, and which is known to curtail rainfall in this region, is weakening. The Australian Bureau of Meteorology has noted that the equatorial Pacific has been its "coolest" since January 2015, and the El Nino phenomenon is likely to be neutralised by May. The second factor is the La Nina phenomenon, which is the opposite of the El Nino phenomenon, and is known to boost rainfall in this region. A strong La Nina is expected to develop by August, according to the latest bulletin issued by the Climate Prediction Centre of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the United States. Cause for optimism as they may be, both factors, however, must be viewed in perspective. The impact of the El Nino will take about three months to be felt in



India, which means that if the phenomenon continues into May, as expected, then the first round of rainfall may still be affected. Also, the El Nino and La Nina are just two of many complex factors that determine actual rainfall, and it is still quite early in the day to make any definite predictions. A better picture should be available in about three week's time, when the Indian Meteorological Department comes out with its own report. India's policymakers and its public will be awaiting this first assessment from the IMD with baited breath.

With even the winter rains having played truant this past season, the overall monsoon deficit has already taken a huge toll. And this will only get worse, if there isn't proper rain-

fall for the third year in row. Several parts of the country are reeling under drought; the farm sector is, of course, distressed and food imports have also gone up; water levels in major reservoirs across the country are well below the red-mark; in some parts, even drinking water has been affected. In fact, in Maharashtra's Latur town, local authorities had to impose Section 144 to prevent people from rioting at water distribution points. The dam that supplies water to Latur had dried up, and while the authorities made arrangements to bring water from other places, the situation was still dire. Latur is in Maharashtra's Marathwada region which has been one of the worst hit areas in the country — the situation was so bad that hospitals have had to scale back operations while weddings had been postponed. Thankfully, there was a decent amount of rain in Marathwada in the last week of March while April brought some pre-monsoon showers to West Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. One can only hope that this trend will now sustain and the main Monsoon period, from June to September, will see ample rainfall. //

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