

COMMENT



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FIVE years ago, he raised the spectre of doom. Iraq, he said, had weapons of mass destruction.

Many believed US President George Bush.

What followed is there for all to see.

Now, the US president and his administration are hawking a new mantra: India and China, they say, have "weapons of mass consumption".

The US, and for that matter many Western commentators, think the huge rise in food prices is mainly due to increased prosperity in these countries.

From global warming to soaring fuel prices and now a rise in food prices, it has become fashionable for the US to bash India and China.

Last week, Mr Bush said that prosperity in countries like India is "good" but it triggers increased demand for "better nutrition" which in turn leads to higher food prices.

He was echoing what his Secretary of State had said a few days earlier.

"Improvement in the diets of people in India and China" is forcing the governments in the two countries to keep food "inside", which is a cause for the current global supply shortage," Ms Condoleezza Rice had said.

While there is some element of truth in what the two say, figures from the Food and Agriculture Organisation show that it is the Americans who have been consuming more.

One must understand that the US has only a population of 303 million, while both India and China each have billion-plus mouths to feed.

CRUEL JOKE

The statement by Mr Bush was enough to raise the ire of Indian politicians, with Defence Minister A K Antony calling the US president's comments a "cruel joke".

The Indians may be overreacting to the comments of the US leaders, but the Americans cannot hide behind India and China for their misadventures.

The price of oil started to climb after the Iraq invasion. And as oil prices went up, the US decided in 2005 that 7.5 billion gallons of ethanol should be produced by 2012 to be mixed with petrol.

Subsidies were provided for producing ethanol.

Farms in the US that previously planted corn for food and feedstock for cattle began to focus on corn for ethanol.

GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS

US President George Bush blames India and China for high food prices. But the truth is that...



Picture: REUTERS

US must stop using FOOD FOR FUEL

The Chicago Tribune reported that in 2005, about 15 per cent of total corn acreage in the US went into ethanol production.

It has rocketed to 33 per cent this year as farmers abandoned wheat and other grains to cash in.

Naturally, there was a shortage of wheat and corn and their cost went up. Ethanol also requires a large quantity of water and energy - read, more oil - to produce.

BIO-FUELS

Mr Ashok Gulati, the Asia director of the Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute, reckons about 30 million tonnes of corn was used in the US to produce bio-fuels last year.

Fortunately, two leading candidates in the US presidential race - Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain - have shown a willingness to do away with the current ethanol policy if elected.

When asked about the connection between rising food and energy prices and US ethanol policies by NBC over the weekend, Mr Obama said: "If it turns out we need to make changes in our ethanol policy to help people get something to eat, that has got to be the step we take."

Even if there is a change of policy, it is highly unlikely that the people in the US will cut down on their consumption of food and fuel.

The cheaper the fuel, the more gas-guzzling vehicles they will produce and drive, and the cheaper the food, the more they will eat.

Which means the Asian giants better buck up.

They have to find ways and means to sustain their food and energy needs from within.

That calls for more effort into looking for alternate means of energy and higher yields of foodgrains.

The two Asian economic giants can even turn their adversity into opportunity. It is worth noting the

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comment of Mr M S Swaminathan, the man known as India's father of the 1960s Green Revolution.

He told Reuters: "Today we have a great opportunity to produce for ourselves and for others."

Diverse climate and the world's biggest population of farmers would help India achieve the status of a major supplier of food to the world, he said.

The same holds true for China.