

Centre weighs GM crop options

OFFICIALLY SHY Green ministry says it will give permission for field trials of drought-tolerant variety of sugarcane

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NEW DELHI: A crippling drought has prompted the Narendra Modi government to look for solutions in genetically-modified (GM) crops, a sector it has tried to restrict due to ideological differences.

Sugarcane plantations, which guzzle more water than most crops, are being blamed for the drought crisis in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

The government is willing to back efforts and give permission for trials in drought-tolerant GM sugarcane by the Coimbatore-based Sugarcane Breeding Institute and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research under the farm ministry, according to a letter from Union environment minister Prakash Javadekar to former agriculture minister and leader of the Nationalist Congress Party, Sharad Pawar.

India is the world's largest

consumer of sugar and also the second-biggest producer, after Brazil. Frequent droughts have forced scientists to find sustainable ways of growing it.

GM crops have been stiffly resisted in the country by civil society organisations, including those affiliated to the RSS on grounds of bio-safety and market control by seed firms.

GM crops are those in which a gene has been altered for a specific outcome, such as pest-resistance.

The Modi government has no policy on shutting out GM crops, but it has focused more on traditional farming practices since coming to power.

In December, the farm ministry intervened to bring down BT cotton seed prices and referred Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech (India) Private Limited — a 50:50 joint venture of US biotech giant Monsanto Company — for a probe into alleged monopoly. BT cotton is the only GM crop India has allowed so far.

poor under normal circumstances... You must give something more," a bench of justice MB Lokur and justice NV Ramana told additional solicitor general PS Narasimha. The court reserved its verdict on a PIL filed by NGO Swaraj Abhiyan that alleged the Centre and 11 states have failed to provide adequate relief to drought-hit areas. **HTC**

SELF-IMPOSED CURFEW



50°C highest temperature ever on June 3, 2003

99 people died in Odisha from ailments related to sunstrokes

48°C highest April temperature ever recorded in state

■ People in Titlagarh, literally meaning sizzling place, finish their chores by 10am and come out after sundown. **HT**

Titlagarh too hot to handle at 48.5°C

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TITLAGARH (ODISHA): It's 11 in the morning on a weekday and the streets of Titlagarh are empty. Not even a stray dog is in sight.

This small town of 60,000 people in western Odisha's Bolangir district is reeling under a heat-wave with the mercury touching 48.5 degrees Celsius on Sunday, the highest April temperature ever recorded in the state.

Locally known as Tatlagarh or sizzling place, the town is among the country's hottest places. It recorded 50.1°C on June 3, 2003.

But the past weekend has been terrible even by the town's high standard as an unrelenting heat-wave is scorching Odisha. The

state has recorded 99 deaths so far from sunstroke-related ailments.

"You can say there is an undeclared curfew in Titlagarh after 10am. If you go out, you are either a very brave person or you are an outsider," Congress member Upendra Bag said.

"Though summers are usually hot in Titlagarh, this time it feels like living in a furnace,"

People try to finish their chores by 10am, rush into their homes and venture out only after sundown.

Even airconditioners are giving up. "The airconditioning in our office is no match to the rising heat," Titlagarh sub-collector Kailash Sahu said.

Journalist Dilip Purohit deploys an array of remedies

to avoid sunstrokes when out on assignments. "As soon as I leave bed at 5am, I sense the heat. By 9am it is unbearable and after 10am anyone out won't be able to last long. Even when I go out, I tie a wet gamchha (towel) over my head and drink as much buttermilk and soft drinks as possible. The heat is blinding," he said.

All meetings, social events and even weddings are scheduled after nightfall.

The standard food for the residents is "pakhalā" — cooked rice normally soaked overnight in water — a popular dish known for its cooling properties.

The condition improved a little with the mercury dropping to 45.5 degrees Celsius on Tuesday.

'DO MORE THAN IMPLEMENT MNREGA'

NEW DELHI: Noting that acute water crisis in the country has given rise to an extraordinary situation, the Supreme Court told the Centre on Tuesday that its drought-relief package should offer more than what is mandated under the law to the people in affected areas. "Laws such as MNREGA and Food Security Act are meant to take care of the