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## Bumper paddy harvest in the East

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Thousands of acres of paddy land in the Eastern Province were left fallow during the long years of conflict. The prevailing insecurity made it difficult for farmers to access their fields, while many people left the region altogether. Further, the LTTE compelled farmers in areas under its control to pay into its coffers after each harvest, which affected the profitability of their enterprises. Paddy cultivation dropped sharply.

Since the military operations of 2006 and 2007, the Government has focused its attention on promoting economic activity in the Eastern Province. A key aspect of this strategy has been supporting production.

The Provincial Ministry of Agriculture has led these efforts. Having first identified the owners of abandoned paddy lands, hardly an easy task, it set itself to provide the necessary inputs. Seed paddy has been distributed on a wide scale, along with farming equipment.

As a result, land under cultivation has gone up dramatically. While a mere 277,776 acres were cultivated in 2007/8, this extent has increased by 47% to 408,952 acres in 2008/9. The Eastern Province now supplies 30% of the local demand for rice, which is a major contribution to the national economy, as well as being a tremendous gain for the local people. One of the problems encountered is the tendency for increased yields to force down prices. Private traders, bent on making a bigger profit, have started to offer less than the standard Rs. 28 to Rs. 30 per kilo, which makes it difficult for farmers to break even.

The Provincial Ministry of Agriculture has intervened by establishing a guaranteed price of Rs. 27 per kilo, and paddy is now being purchased through cooperative societies. This hasn't been easy, for the Government no longer has the infrastructure to support this kind of purchasing scheme &ndash; stores were privatised when the Paddy Marketing Board was closed down by a previous administration.

Meanwhile, steps have also been taken to promote the use of organic fertiliser. Immediately after the paddy is harvested, jute is planted in the fields. The jute plants are then ploughed back into the soil, adding to the nitrogen content. They are therefore an excellent and environmentally friendly source of fertiliser. The Provincial Ministry of Agriculture has been creating awareness amongst farmers of the advantages of jute, and a jute festival was held recently at Wellavelly in the Batticaloa district for this purpose.

The Peace Secretariat is in the process of making plans to contribute to this effort to revitalise agriculture in the Eastern Province, by coordinating a small loan programme for farmers owning less than two acres, and for unemployed youth. As well as support for paddy cultivation, this will include assistance to start other kinds of businesses and to plant cash crops like maize, cowpea, onion and chilli. Discussions have already been held with the Provincial Ministry of Agriculture, and it is hoped that the Lankaputhra Development Bank will join in too.

Social Affairs Unit Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process Courtesy: SCOPP