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Indian farmers braced for rat plague

By Peter Foster in New Delhi

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Nearly 500,000 Indian farmers are facing the prospect of famine as a plague of rats that strikes once every 50 years threatens to destroy their crops, rice paddies and village granaries.

Efforts to control the rodent plague in the north east Indian state of Mizoram have led the local government to offer a reward of one rupee (1.2 pence) for every rat tail delivered to the authorities.

More than 400,000 rats have already been killed, creating piles of tails, which have to be counted by officials before reward money can be disbursed to the catchers.

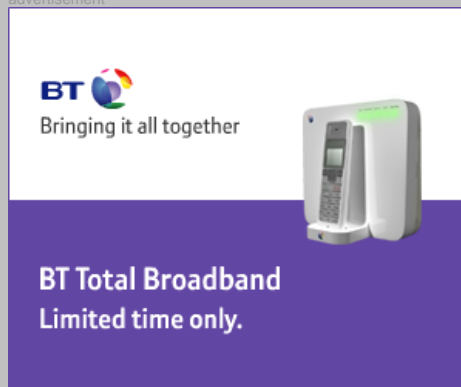
The rat plague occurs once every 50 years in Mizoram - a tiny state of 900,000 people squeezed between India's borders with Bangladesh and Burma - and is linked to the flowering of a rare species of bamboo, the Mautam or melocanna baccifera. It flowers all together, dropping millions of protein-rich seeds that are devoured by the rats, causing a population explosion. When the seed supply is exhausted the rats move to crops and granaries.

The last plague, in 1958-59, provoked a rural uprising that saw the indigenous Mizo people launch a violent 20-year rebellion against the federal government that was only finally resolved in 1986.

The current chief minister of Mizoram, a leading figure of the rebellion called Zoramthanga, is well aware of the potential impact of the famine and is determined that the problems of 50 years ago will not be repeated.

"We are taking all measures to fight the impending Mautam. We are encouraging people to kill rats, we are telling farmers what to do and we are asking Delhi to rush huge additional supplies of food grains to feed our people when the crop shortfalls happens," he said.

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A study by the ministry of forests has predicted that 80 per cent of Mizoram's forested area will be affected by the phenomenon which was first observed scientifically by the British.

A year before the 1911 flowering, Sir Robert Reid, the then governor of Assam, reported that crop failures occurred as "an indirect result" of the flowering of the bamboo, noting similar famines in 1815 and 1863.

This year the prospects of famine have been worsened by the fact that many farmers have decided not to plant rice and grains because they are resigned to their crops being destroyed by the hordes of rats.

Mizoram's agriculture department has officially estimated a 75 per cent shortfall for 2007-8, although few are predicting a repeat of the starvation that occurred in 1958-9.

With transport links and grain stocks improving dramatically since then, it is expected that the central government and armed forces will be able to prevent complete disaster by a generous package of aid.



The flowering of a rare species of bamboo causes the rat plague

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However, stories of the rats still abound in the tribes' oral traditions. "The rats would wipe out three to four hectares of paddy cropland in one night," an elder, T Chaltanga, told the BBC. "We would see our crop standing the night before but next day it would all be gone, eaten away by the rats."

There are also unconfirmed local reports of giant rats - known as Chawmnu and about the size of a female pig - stalking the villages. They are said to be the leaders of the other rats and a special reward of 1,000 rupees (£12) has been offered by the government for one of them - dead or alive.

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