Drowning in dust: dealing with extreme weather

A wave of extreme weather over northern States in India has killed at least 124 people and caused much misery, mostly in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The residents of this 'weather hotspot' region are used to annual storms carrying natural dust clouds in the pre-monsoon season, from the Thar desert and further west. But they have been hit by a particularly destructive version this year, one that combined hot western winds and moisture from the east. Record April temperatures in parts of Pakistan, at one place exceeding 50°C, are thought to have added to the ferocity of the dust-laden winds. This could be a recurring feature, and there is a need to develop accurate forecasting methods and protocols to mitigate the impact. Many of the casualties in the recent storms were caused by collapsing infrastructure, such as electricity transmission lines that were not built to withstand such weather. Good housing could have saved many. India's vulnerability to such storms has always been underscored by scientific estimates of the flow of aerosols, or dust particles. Their presence in the country is three times the global average due to sheer abundance of mineral dust. There is also a body of research that points to altered climate patterns due to accumulation of dust particles, which affect even the Himalayan glaciers. Considering the large population in the Indo-Gangetic Plain, where the impact of weather on public health and agriculture is massive, the Central and State governments should do everything possible to cut loss of life and property.

Globally, the major dust-producing regions pump 1,000-3,000 teragrams of particles into the atmosphere annually, with the Sahara alone responsible for a third of this, according to the UN Environment Programme. India is at the receiving end of winds from West Asia, although some scientists reported recently an overall reduction in dust volumes in the pre-monsoon season due to a pattern of increased rainfall. Even if that were to be true, unexpected surges such as the recent one pose a challenge. The Centre has to raise its game in forecasting, and broadcast early warnings. In fact, as the World Meteorological Organisation points out, clarity and frequency of warnings are key to saving lives. In the wake of the storm on May 2, State governments have blamed the India Meteorological Department for not providing clear warnings, while the IMD claims to have conveyed the forecast of the coming storm to the Centre several days ahead. This clearly points to lack of coordination, that affects disaster-preparedness. Millions of people who are in the path of extreme weather each year expect better from official agencies. On the ground, strong public infrastructure and adequate capacity among administrators and personnel to handle rescue and rehabilitation must be ensured.

On Kathua, the BJP is presenting one narrative to Jammu, another to the rest of India

The revival of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, sans U.S., must buttress the free trade debate

END