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## Hunger and Distress Peak towards Alarming Levels in Bundelkhand

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While hunger, deprivation, mass distress and migration have been widely reported from Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh in recent years, this year has seen the peaking of these distress conditions. Adverse weather conditions have worsened due to official neglect and apathy. If urgent steps to check the fast deteriorating conditions are not taken immediately, the situation will get out of hand within a few weeks resulting in avoidable loss of precious human lives. In addition many farm and dairy animals are badly endangered due to hunger as well as thirst.

While the above analysis is based mainly on a recent visit to nine villages of Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh, almost equally serious conditions also prevail in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh.

The Uttar Pradesh part of Bundelkhand is spread over seven districts—Banda, Mahoba, Chitrakut, Hamirpur, Jhansi, Lalitpur and Jalaun. Detailed discussions with villagers as well as social activists recently confirmed that conditions of mass distress have aggravated very rapidly during the last nine months or so. First, the previous rabi (winter) crop was destroyed very badly by untimely heavy rains and hailstorms during February to April. Then the Kharif (summer) crop suffered very badly due to severe drought conditions. Now in recent weeks due to continuing drought the new rabi crop (wheat, gram, mustard, peas) could not be planted in most of the normal crop area. In the area that has been sown (leaving aside a few irrigated fields) there is little hope left of any significant yield.

This year of repeated weather failures has come on top of a series of below-normal harvests, leading to a peaking of distress conditions among farmers and farm workers.

This situation has been aggravated by denial of work under the rural employment guarantee

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law at a time when it was needed the most, and long delays in payment when work was provided for a few days. Compensation payment for ruined crops have been late, below the people's expectations and influenced badly by corrupt practices so that small, non-influential farmers got very less payment. Nutritional programmes, mainly ICDS (anganwadi) and mid-day meals, have deteriorated further. In particular, the nutrition for adolescent girls (*kishoris*) has stopped almost entirely, on account of cut-downs in the Union Budget.

The overall impact of all this is seen in very high levels of hunger and malnutrition, including possibilities of hunger deaths in the coming months. A large number of farmers' suicides, trauma deaths and some hunger deaths have already been reported from this region in recent years, while very high levels of malnutrition have been confirmed in recent surveys. The rabi harvest is likely to be too meagre to provide much relief. So for the most part 2016 is also likely to continue to be a distress year. If next year's kharif crop is good, this relief will come at the time of kharif harvesting only in October-November 2016. So preparations have to be made for several months ahead to avoid even more extreme forms of hunger and thirst. The shortage of fodder and water is already a serious problem for cows, bullocks and other farm/dairy animals. Drinking water for human beings is also likely to become increasingly scarce in the coming weeks.

### Profiles of Six Villages

THE hamlet of *Nawapura* of Balataal Jaitpur panchayat (located in Mahoba district) is inhabited mainly by people of the Dheemar caste who work mostly as small farmers and fisherfolk. This year the water tank has very little water and fish. The drought has destroyed the kharif crop and there are very little prospects of getting anything from the current rabi crop. Hence people are migrating in large numbers