

Press Release: National Day of Mourning – 1 June 2020

People across the country demand accountability for the loss of life and livelihood due to the lockdown

The national lockdown which started on 25 March 2020 to curb the spread of COVID 19 has caused unprecedented distress across the country. The lockdown has been especially brutal for migrants, homeless, and other poor people. It has resulted in large-scale starvation, denial of medical care, exhaustion, accidents of people travelling back home, police atrocities and other gross hardships, which have together claimed about 700 lives by May-end. Today, 1st June was observed as the Day of National Mourning to highlight the colossal loss of life and livelihood that continues because of the brutal lockdown and utter apathy of the central government and many state governments.

Across 22 states,* individuals and groups associated with the right to food campaigns participated in the day of action. Several national networks, such as the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) and National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), also joined the call. People came together in small groups, wore black bands and observed two-minute silence in memory of all those who have lost their lives due to the lockdown and to the virus. This included individuals in their homes, NREGA workers at worksites, people standing in queue for their rations, activists at prominent public places and so on. There were also protests at the FCI godowns in Jaipur and in front of the NITI Aayog in New Delhi. Post lockdown, this was the first physical public action and the response across the states was over whelming.

The memorandums were given to local officials and placards and posters made by people demanded the following:

- A universal PDS that provides every individual with 10 kg grain, 1.5 kg pulses and 800 gm cooking oil for at least the next six months.
- Nutritious hot cooked meals through anganwadi centres and school midday meals.
- Annual 240 days of employment under MGNREGA to every person and introduction of an urban employment guarantee scheme.
- Cash transfers of at least Rs 7000 per household for at least the next six months.
- Safe travel facilities for migrants and others stranded in different parts of the country.
- 3 percent GDP investment for strengthening of the public health system to enable universal, comprehensive and free at user-interface services including free testing and treatment of COVID-19.

Although states have started distribution of ration and the central government has announced additional 5 kg of grain per person, free of cost, for the months of April – June, the supply is irregular and there is lack of transparency in the distribution system. Also, this support is restricted to only those with a ration card. The government should provide nutritious food items such as pulses and edible oil. In absence of monitoring and grievance redressal mechanism, it has become difficult to register complaints in the system. It is therefore important to universalize the PDS to minimize exclusion.

Because of the targeted approach to ration distribution, there is still widespread hunger and even deaths due to starvation. Many members of extremely vulnerable groups, such as the “particularly vulnerable tribal groups” do not have ration cards. They are likely to become even more food

* Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal.

insecure as the monsoons arrives. If the government does not universalize the PDS without further delay, malnutrition and starvation deaths are likely to increase, especially in poor states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. there is no point in talking about one nation one ration when the issue is that many people do not have ration cards, what is needed is a universal PDS.

The COVID 19 crisis in India has further exposed the already broken health system of the country. The engagements of hospitals in dealing with the pandemic has further reduced the access and availability of other health services. This has affected the routine health services of OPD, delivery facilities, dialysis, chemotherapy and regular supply of medicines for chronic illness. For example, the tea gardens in West Bengal have reported three deaths because of referral of cases and absence of transport facilities during the lockdown. The government should immediately resume regular health services both in rural and urban areas. It has also failed in providing sufficient protective gears to those at the frontline in combatting the pandemic. While the rich can avail paid quarantine facilities, the poor are forced to stay in government quarantines. Many government quarantines provide insufficient and poor quality food and lack basic facilities like clean drinking water and toilets.

Livelihoods of millions of people, especially the daily wage workers and others in the unorganized sector, have been affected due to the lockdown. Poverty has largely been associated to rural areas since the poor in urban areas were ghettoised. It is for the first time that the country has seen the scale of urban poverty. The government should think about an urban employment guarantee programme or a cash incentive programme that ensures a dignified life to the urban poor. Further, due to people going back to villages, the government should identify new works under MGNREGA so that there is regular livelihood opportunities for everyone.

The lockdown has been marked with an increased number of arrests, and a general heightening of state repression. There is no sign of cooperative federalism, which poses a great hurdle in responding to the crises due to the pandemic and the lockdown. The opaqueness with which the PM Cares fund is being operated is also a matter of serious concern. Also, the central government must provide adequate support to West Bengal to enable the state to recover from the super cyclone Amphan.

All policies relating to ease of doing business would fail if the workers, farmers and the poor are denied their basic entitlement. To make matters worse, through changes in labour laws, the government has robbed the hard-won rights of workers. We unequivocally oppose these changes in labour laws and demand the government to take back its decisions.

The COVID 19 crisis has affected everyone irrespective of the class, creed and religion. It is unacceptable that a humanitarian crisis is being communalised and no action is being taken against those who are responsible. If the government doesn't meet people's demands, they will again take to the streets and continue to raise their voice.

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