21 April 2020

Shri Rameshwar Oraon

Food Minister, Government of Jharkhand

Dear Mr. Oraon,

As discussed yesterday, we are very concerned about the continued exclusion of some 20 lakh households (including many poor households) from the public distribution system in Jharkhand, and also about reports that many cardholders are not receiving double food rations this month.

We thought that it might be useful to recapitulate some of the suggestions we have made in this regard:

1. We urge the Jharkhand government to prevail on the central government to release more foodgrain to Jharkhand, for free (or at NFSA prices), so that the PDS can be universalized for an initial period of at least one year.
2. Meanwhile, we are glad to hear that the Jharkhand government has planned for the issue of 10 lakh additional ration cards – we feel that this should be done as soon as possible.
3. Every possible means should be used to ensure that cardholders receive their double rations in April, May and June, including (a) wide publicity of these special entitlements; (b) regular sms alerts to the cardholders; (c) posting public employees and/or other watchdogs at the ration shops when distribution begins; (d) regular surprise inspections; (e) strict action on corrupt dealers.
4. Regarding the provision for 10 kg of foodgrain for excluded households in the next two months, we reiterate that the modalities are unclear and impractical, and make it difficult for many people to benefit from this provision. As a result, the announcement is yet to translate into action in many areas. As things stand, it seems that if people are aware of this provision at all, they approach the gram panchayat mukhiya, often to be told that the contingency fund of Rs 10,000 has been exhausted, or the PDS dealers, who tell them that they have not been allocated any rice for this purpose. For this provision to be effective, (a) the modalities must be clarified and widely publicised, (b) the application process must be very simple and accessible to all (in Ranchi, people are now allowed to apply through anganwadis), and (c) the contingency funds must be promptly and liberally refilled whenever necessary.
5. Reports of denial of food rations (regular PDS rations or emergency rations) will be shared regularly directly with you and your personal assistant.

We are hoping that you will agree with most of these suggestions and act on them – Jharkhand has not faced such as serious food emergency since the mid-1960s or perhaps even earlier.

We shall seek another appointment with you around the end of the month, after the next round of the “Lockdown Checkup” survey (the findings of the first round were shared with you earlier). Meanwhile, we shall send you specific complaints from time to time.

Yours sincerely,

Asharfi Nand Prasad, Balram, Jean Drèze, Siraj Dutta, Sunil Minz, Varsha Poddar

(right to food campaign, Jharkhand)