Press Release

Right to Food Campaign urges the UPA to bring the bill through after debate and discussion in Parliament

The Right to Food Campaign is apprehensive of the Cabinet’s decision to promulgate an ordinance on food security. While today the Cabinet did not take such a decision, the chances of it doing so soon still remain.

An issue like food security which affects millions in our country requires deep and informed debate in Parliament. When the Monsoon session is just a few weeks away, such a discussion is possible, Why then the hurry to pass an ordinance?

Several important parties, including the CPI, CPI (M), BJD, TMC, AI DMK had moved amendments and they need to be heard. Through the media it is clear that the senior leaders of the BJP have also consented to the passage of the bill if brought in for discussion. Most of these parties have placed amendments asking for universal coverage and opposing the reduction of entitlements from 7 kgs to 5 kgs per month. The BJP would like to present provisions of the Chhattisgarh Food Security Bill which is more progressive than the National Food Security Bill. Parties with large farmer constituencies like the Shiromani Akali Dal are perturbed at the lack of attention to farmers’ issues. All these voices need to be heard and all the issues raised need to be debated.

The cabinet would have brought an ordinance on the lines of the amendments of the NFSB, 2011 which were presented in Parliament on May, 2nd 2013. This amended version of the NFSB is extremely inadequate and makes a mockery of food security. It provides extremely limited food entitlements, is piecemeal and is nowhere close to providing food security. It makes no provisions for production of food or for support of small and marginal farmers who are food producers, but very food insecure and poor. It even undermines some of the entitlements ensured by the Supreme Court of India in the Right to Food case. It has no provisions for community kitchens and feeding of the most hunger-prone or to deal with starvation deaths.

The Right to Food campaign has consistently campaigned since 2009 June for a comprehensive food security bill. We would urge the Prime Minister and the UPA Government to conduct business in Parliament and see that all Parties participate actively in debating, discussing and passing a comprehensive Food Security Bill. We demand that the following shortcomings be amended:
1. The Bill does not specify any time frame for the rolling out of the entitlements in the law.

2. It continues with a Targeted PDS, excluding 33% of the population from accessing the PDS as a right, giving scope to large exclusion errors of the poor in the country as a whole. The improved framework of single pricing in the present bill over the dual pricing under the existing APL-BPL system is undermined by the exclusion of a third of the country.

3. While the ICMR norms recommend that an adult requires 14kgs of food grains per month and children 7kgs; the Bill provides for reduced entitlements to 5kgs per person per month, thus ensuring only 166 gms of cereal per person per day, which is barely enough for two rotis a day.

4. The Bill provides only for cereals with no entitlements to basic food necessities such as pulses and edible oil required to combat malnutrition.

5. The Bill continues to allow for the entry of private contractors and commercial interests in the supply of food in the ICDS, especially by insisting on specific norms related to Food Safety Acts and micronutrient norms (Note in Schedule 2).

6. This bill is still ambiguous regarding universal maternal entitlements by continuing with the conditionality in the scheme of the two child norm, which will penalise children of higher order as well as deny the mother of her basic rights.

7. The Bill does not have a strong grievance redress mechanism. For the Bill to be effective there needs to be in place a strong, decentralized and independent grievance redress mechanism that includes Panchayat or block level grievance redress officers with powers to impose penalties on erring officials.

8. The Bill does not provide any agriculture and production-related entitlements for farmers in spite of the fact that more than 60% of the people in this country are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. A revived and vibrant agriculture sector forms the backbone of food security.

9. It allows for the back door entry of cash transfers instead of food grains by allowing for a food security allowance when food is not available, and by allowing cash transfers as a part of PDS reforms.

10. It has no provisions like old age pensions for the support of senior citizens, or for feeding through community kitchens or other measures of the homeless, destitute and other sections that are most often the victims of starvation.

The Right to Food Campaign has been consistently demanding a comprehensive food security law that incentivises agriculture production, provides for local procurement and local storage along with a decentralised and deprivatised universal PDS; special entitlements for children, mothers, aged, disabled, widows, migrants and destitute including universalised ICDS; monthly pensions, community kitchens and destitute feeding programmes; effective measures for grievance redress, transparency and accountability and safeguards against commercial interference including GMs in any of the food/nutrition related schemes and against the introduction of cash transfers in place of PDS.

The National Food Security Bill is a crucial opportunity to end hunger and malnutrition in India and we hope that this will not be missed. The Right to Food
Campaign will continue to protest against a Bill that is so piecemeal in its approach and mobilise for a comprehensive food security bill.

We are,

Kavita Srivastava on behalf of the Steering Committee of the Right to Food Campaign

Annie Raja (National Federation for Indian Women), Anuradha Talwar and Gautam Modi (New Trade Union Initiative), Arun Gupta and Radha Holla (Breast Feeding Promotion Network of India), Arundhati Dhuru and Ulka Mahajan (National Alliance of People’s Movements), Asha Mishra and Vinod Raina (Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti), Aruna Roy, Anjali Bharadwaj and Nikhil Dey (National Campaign for People’s Right to Information), Ashok Bharti (National Conference of Dalit Organizations), Colin Gonsalves (Human Rights Law Network), G V Ramanjaneyulu (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture), Kavita Srivastava and Binayak Sen (People’s Union for Civil Liberties), Lali Dhakar, Sarawasti Singh, Shilpa Dey and Radha Raghwal (National Forum for Single Women’s Rights), Mira Shiva (Jan Swasthya Abhiyan), Paul Divakar and Asha Kowtal (National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights), Prahlad Ray and Anand Malakar (Rashtriya Viklang Manch), Subhash Bhatnagar (National Campaign Committee for Unorganized Sector workers)

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