

Bring in comprehensive Drought Relief Law

A.P. Human rights Forum Demands

Press Release

The Human Rights Forum (HRF) demands that the government bring about a comprehensive 'Drought Relief Act'. This Act should encompass measures that must be implemented towards effective drought relief and mitigation. The duties of the State to the people affected by drought and the rights and entitlements of those who suffer from drought must be codified in this law. Such an Act is imperative at the earliest because governments at the Centre and States continue to exhibit adhocism and tokenism year after year in the matter of providing relief to the drought-hit. Till such time a Drought Relief Act is enacted, an agency should be in place that would monitor and work for mitigation of damage and take care of relief work. Distressed farmers must not be compelled to run from pillar to post for succour.

Drought, which has become an annual phenomenon and blights large parts of the nation, pushes people to a precarious position denying them the right to life. Yet, the stark reality is that drought mitigation and relief is not a statutory right in our country. It is essential that in the event of drought, the people must, *as a matter of right*, be provided with the three basic requirements to preserve life: work for the people, fodder for cattle and drinking water for both. We call upon all democratic movements and political parties to demand such a statutory drought relief law so as to ensure minimal reliefs as a matter of right so that the hungry and thirsty need not beg or fight for mere survival when the water sources dry up.

HRF fact-finding teams have visited several villages in drought-hit Rayalaseema as well as Prakasam and Vizianagaram districts over the past few weeks and interacted with a cross-section of people in these troubled areas. It was clear to us that despite the government's pronouncements, there was very little relief on the ground. The extreme distress among farmers was apparent. In village after village we came across tanks that had gone bone dry, large tracts of uncultivated lands, groundwater levels plummeted dangerously low, and withered away crops. At many places farmers had left their lands fallow for it was pointless to sow seeds in a cruel, moisture-less soil. Disturbingly, there is distress migration of even small and medium farmers even *from* districts outside of Rayalaseema. The devastation is widespread and farming has crippled. This is clearly the most intense drought in recent memory.

Rural indebtedness is a very real and serious problem that needs to be addressed on a priority basis, but we were told that compensation amounts have simply not reached a majority of farmers. Shockingly, compensation for last year's crop losses were now being paid at some places and even this was patchy and arbitrary! There have also not been any proactive steps to use the MGNREGA for drought relief. In fact, there were scores of complaints of inordinate delays in the payment of wages as well as abysmally low wages. Merely declaring areas drought-hit and then proffering advice to farmers, who have all but lost the khaki crop, to cultivate short duration crops is not going to help much. To overcome these staggering losses requires a response from the government that is sincere and meaningful rather than shallow, tedious hype about real time governance.

The Supreme Court directive on universal access to food grains in drought-hit areas is not being implemented. Also, the SC order in 2016 that children must get nutritious food even during holidays in drought-affected areas is being ignored. A common complaint we heard was that of setting off bank loans for compensation. This should not happen. We came across farmers who were not informed about deduction of crop insurance while granting loan at times and were still not paid the insurance amount.

Under section 3 (4) of MGNREGA we demand immediate enhancement of person days of work to 200 days. In fact, Union Minister of State for Home Hansraj Ahir has stated recently that person days in Titli hit areas will be raised to 200 days. This must be done without delay in all drought affected areas. This must be addressed immediately. The Centre has to release monies from the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) and the State government from the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) expeditiously.

HRF feels serious attention must be accorded by the government to developing mini-reservoirs on locally available water resources instead of forever promising to complete mega projects that not only do not see the light of day but whose advisability, feasibility, and plain legality is in considerable doubt.

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