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Migrant Workers Solidarity Network

To:

Shri Narendra Modi

Prime Minister's Office
South Block, Secretariat Building
Raisina Hill, New Delhi.

Date: May 25, 2021

Subject: Ensuring food security, income support and public transportation for migrant workers, as per to SC orders dated May 13 and 24, 2021

Sir,

We write to you on behalf of [Migrant Workers Solidarity Network \(MWSN\)](#), a citizens' effort to provide urgent relief and transport arrangements for migrant workers that was initiated last year during the Covid-19 pandemic. We wish to acquaint you with some of our experiences in running a helpline for stranded migrant workers since the second week of April, 2021.


On May 13, 2021, the Supreme Court on hearing the matter '*In Re: Problems and Miseries of Migrant Workers*', had directed the Union government to provide dry food rations and community kitchens without local ID cards as well as make transport arrangements for migrant workers in National Capital Region. On May 24, 2021, the same was extended to all states and union territories. While state governments have responded by a slew of ad-hoc announcements for migrants and workers in the unorganized sector, at large, they acknowledge that their financial strings are tied without Union intervention.

Last year, your government had invoked the Disaster Management Act and the Epidemic Diseases Act to announce nationwide restrictions on movement as well as other emergency schemes, such as the *PM Cares* fund and the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* package. This year, with state-wise curfews and lockdowns being announced in a staggered manner, no such central intervention has been forthcoming. We would like to bring to your notice that excess food stock held by the Food Corporation of India is sufficient to cover all Indians under the Public Distribution System (PDS) and provide an enlarged food basket in this hour of crisis. By the powers vested by the Constitution of India, it is the Union government that can and must implement universal PDS coverage and ensure food security of all Indians, including the vulnerable migrant working population.

Food security



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Since second week of April, MWSN has received calls for food ration from Delhi NCR, Haryana (Gurgaon), Chandigarh, Punjab (Ludhiana and Jalandhar), Gujarat (Ahmedabad and Surat), Karnataka (Bangalore), West Bengal (Kolkata), Maharashtra (Pune and Mumbai) and Jammu.

Last year, the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* package announced by your government had covered eight crore migrant workers who do not have PDS cards in their place of work. However, estimates from the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution later [revealed](#) that a mere 33% of the eight lakh tonnes of grain (wheat and rice) and 56% of 29,132 tonnes of gram were actually disbursed under the *Atmanirbhar* package.

As of April 2021, the FCI had [3.5 times](#) (or 5.62 crore tonnes) more food stocks the buffer norms. Food stocks are expected to increase to around 8.5 crore tonnes by July – two crore tonnes more than the highest PDS allocated annually in the last five years (6.59 crore tonnes). Meanwhile, a little under three-fourth of all Indians are formally enrolled for Targeted PDS. This includes migrant workers who may not actually be availing rations away from where they are registered. Too few Indians have been covered under the Food Security Act for too long—a historic public healthcare crisis that now threatens our food security calls for this to be radically overhauled.

Rough calculations show that FCI's current excess capacity can supply a monthly grain basket four times larger than existing PDS norms, that is 20 kilograms of food grain per head, for the next eight months to an additional 10.8 crore Indians. The entitlements basket can be further refined to diversify nutritional content, such as by including eggs, and moving PDS beyond food grains to cover basic medical and sanitation needs.


Income support

Reportedly, [23 crore](#) more Indians have been pushed into poverty over the last year and [75 lakh](#) lost their jobs in April alone. MWSN has received distress calls from across the country from migrant workers. A common thread appears to be that most working Indians in unregulated sectors, such as small scale industry, textiles, private transport, domestic work, ragpicking and others, have faced near complete job loss since mid-April and are staring at least two more months with no income. Even in the organized sector, such as large scale manufacturing in automobiles or garments manufacturing, there has been a high degree of contractualization. 'Apprentices', NEEM 'trainees' and 'contract' workers have faced the axe in several sectors after lockdowns came into effect.

Last year, a Union Home Ministry directive, dated March 29, 2020, advised landlords to forego rent during the pandemic. While its legal validity was later refuted in court, not even such an advisory has been issued this time. Lack of food and affordable urban housing, exacerbated by these job losses, have kicked off another migrant exodus.



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The need of the hour is to initiate cash transfers for income support along with other social security measures to provide public healthcare, education and formal credit at zero interest rates in order for working Indians to be able to tide over the crisis. As our experience over the last year has shown, even as lockdown is eventually removed, employment will not recover to pre-pandemic levels any time soon without adequate government support to working people, not just their employers.

Public transportation

In the Union government's reply to the Supreme Court, it has been submitted that no such transportation crisis exists as of now. MWSN has received over 400 distress calls dealing with lack of transportation from migration hubs across the country. With our limited means as a non-governmental organization, we have been able to facilitate return journeys to home states in only about half of these instances.

While the crisis has not been as visible as last year, as there has been no nation-wide restrictions on movement, it persists at a subterranean level. Far from adequate special routes have been announced this year. Problems faced by migrant workers include extortion by private bus agencies and touts due to the lack of railway and public buses. In certain instances, we have been forced to pay up to five times of regular fares to make transportation arrangements. Despite our best efforts, transport systems are overstressed and no social distancing norms are being followed by private transportation agencies.

While you have acknowledged the role of private volunteer efforts in attenuating the crisis, we would also like to submit that the scale of what India's toiling and oppressed majority faces is beyond what civil society initiatives can handle. Only an intervention by the Union government to enable dry ration and food canteens without local ID cards, cash transfers for income support and public transport arrangements for migrant workers can orient states and non-governmental initiatives towards surviving this crisis.

Thanking you,



Shreya Ghosh

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