

# **Report On Right To Food and Work In Cyclone Ai la Affected Areas**

June 15<sup>th</sup> 2009

## Report On Right To Food and Work In Cyclone Aila Affected Areas

### **Methodology**

This report is based on a quick survey done by Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity activists in 10 Blocks, 36 Gram Panchayat and 47 villages amongst 52 individuals in both affected districts of the Sunderbans. In addition it is based on discussions with PBKMS activists who have contacts in or members in 335 affected villages in 54 Gram Panchayats of 10 Blocks in South and North 24 Parganas . In addition, information was provided by Dr. SN Chattopadhyay, who is working at the Government PHC at Brojjoballabhpur Pathar Pratima Block and members of Jana Swasthya Adhikar Manch, Melbandhan and Sahanagrikder Mukta Mancha who are covering Kumirmari GP in Gosaba block. Also, meetings and correspondence was initiated with the two District Magistrates. A detailed table of information gathered in the quick survey is given in Annexure 1.

### **Present Status**

Cyclone Aila has led to widespread and unprecedented destruction of life, livelihood, shelter and sources of fresh water. There is a need for sustained and long term support for the people of the Sunderbans. In a welfare state, it is primarily the state's responsibility to provide people with food, work , housing, drinking water, medical care and all other facilities. This has been legally reinforced by the Supreme Court through its interim orders in Writ 196/2001, where food is now an entitlement for all citizens of India. In addition, for livelihood security, work in rural areas has been guaranteed by the NREGA 2005. However , in both South and North 24 Parganas, these legal provisions are being violated

### **Inadequate Quantity and Dependence on Non-government Sources**

The amount of food grains distributed to most people has often been in the range of 5-8 kgs of foodgrains per family in the first 15 days of the cyclone, which is totally inadequate. This has been supplemented only occasionally by pulses and milk. Even relief camps have often provided 1 cooked meal a day , supplemented by dry food once a day. It is only the huge quantity of food that has been distributed by NGOs and civil society that has kept people from going hungry. However, this food has been distributed by NGOs with little control or coordination by the Government. As a result, certain areas have received huge quantities while interior villages complain of neglect.

### **Adhoc distribution of Food**

Relief materials and relief camps were set up by the State Government but distribution has been ad hoc and arbitrary. There has been the attempt to corner food grains and relief material and to distribute them in a partisan manner. Most importantly there are no norms in place for the distribution of food grains leading to wide spread differences in distribution in food. It has also become impossible for people to do any kind of monitoring of food distributed , which would have been possible if food had been given in specified and fixed quantities to all affected people.

People have thus not received food as a right, but have been turned into beggars by many insensitive NGOs and the administration or have had to fight amongst each other for food from both the Government and NGOs

### **Food for Children**

All ICDS centres in the area as well as the Midday Meal Scheme have been shut down totally. Keeping in mind the special needs of nutrition for children and pregnant mothers this is problematic, especially as only ad hoc and limited provisions seem to be in place for children's food.

### **Non payment of dues in Midday Meal Scheme**

In South 24 Parganas, payment for midday meal scheme which is run by SGSY groups is pending from September 2008 onwards. SGSY groups who are facilitated by the NGO Shramajibee Mahila Samity and other NGOs in South 24 Parganas district have been running the midday meal scheme (MDMS) in many primary schools. In the absence of regular payments by the district and block authorities, many of them have made payments for required purchases under the Scheme from their own savings. While the district released about Rs.34 crores on March 23rd 2009, these amounts have still not reached many of the groups, especially in Pathar Pratima block. This is further aggravating the ability of the members of these groups to cope with the present calamity.

### **Non payment of NREGS Wages**

Wages amounting to Rs.1 crore 30 lakhs 58 thousand and two hundred for about 7000-8000 NREGS workers have been pending for periods ranging from nine to two months (from November 2008 to March 2009). A list of the areas in which these wages are pending has been provided by Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity (PASCHIM BANGA KHET MAJOOR SAMITY) on 30th May 2009 to the DM South 24 Parganas. There have been repeated discussions with the DM about payment of these wages. Many local protests have also been organized. However, till date only about 11-12% of these wages have been paid. The list is attached for your reference in Annexure 2

### **Work on Embankments**

While the DM South 24 Parganas has issued orders for repairing of embankments under NREGS and has asked for daily cash payments, this is not being done in many places. Payments are taking place 5-7 days after work is done. As a result, workers are finding it impossible to sustain themselves. Also, payment rates have been Rs.600-650 for 1000 cu.ft. of earth, which is much below the legal NREGS rates.

In addition in places where wages are pending for the last 5-7 months, workers are not keen to work on NREGS. Where large breaches have been made, piling has to be done by the Irrigation department before earthwork can be started. This is not happening in many places.

### **Fresh Water Ponds**

While the problem of drinking water continues in certain pockets (e.g. Dayapur in Gosaba block), the problem of fresh water for other purposes is widespread over the entire area. The Sunderbans Development Board has responded by giving the responsibility to some NGOs (e.g. Mass

Education, SPAR) to provide aid for draining out saline water from ponds , so that they can later, when the rains come, be filled with fresh water. There is little transparency in selection of beneficiaries by these NGOs who are by-passing elected Panchayats. There is also no transparency in the norms that they are following e.g. how much of diesel will be given for draining of a pond, with people complaining of being paid too little.

### ***Recommendations and Demands***

1. The Government should declare gratuitous relief of 14 kgs per person per month for the next two months for the affected population . Such measures have been taken earlier in closed tea gardens and in Bagda after the 2005 floods.
2. In the long term AAY cards should be issued to the cyclone affected population.
3. Gratuitous relief and AAY rations should be provided through the existing PDS system and with the help of the Panchayat. Bypassing of elected Panchayats and the existing PDS system is only leading to ad hoc ism.
4. ICDS and MDMS must be re-started immediately, and all dues of SGSY groups for MDMS must be cleared.
5. All dues in NREGS should be cleared immediately and compensation given for late payment of wages as per Section 30, Schedule II of NREGA 2005
6. All embankments should be repaired immediately with NREGS funds, with immediate piling work being done by the irrigation department. Materials component of NREGS to be used for piling with additional funds to be provisioned for if necessary.
7. All workers in NREGS embankment work to receive Rs.81 per day and task rates to be reviewed accordingly.
8. Payments on NREGS to be done every 2-3 days in cash in the presence of a Government official. Job card entries must be made accordingly
9. Norms and scheme for draining of ponds to declared immediately
10. Panchayats and Gram Sansad to be consulted in all matters of beneficiary choice.
11. All relief materials, and other works undertaken to be publicly displayed with beneficiary lists.
12. Immediate punitive and exemplary action on any complaint of misuse of relief and of corruption.