



# Right to Food Campaign

(Secretariat)

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## **Statement on the Central Government proposal to utilise excess FCI foodgrains for production of ethanol**

We are shocked and dismayed to learn that the central government has decided to convert the FCI's rice stocks into ethanol to make hand sanitisers while there is no response to the multiple demands by civil society and academicians for universalising the PDS so that no person goes hungry. The nation-wide lockdown that was imposed on 25 March has resulted in mass distress with millions of people losing their source of livelihood and migrants being stranded without food or shelter. The central government took three days to make the announcement that additional foodgrains would be distributed under the PDS – even then this was only for those who already have ration cards. Over the last three weeks there have been reports of mass hunger and near starvation from across the country. However, the additional grain has still not reached people in many parts.

It must be noted that only about 80 crore people are covered with ration cards, and this is not even 67% of the population as mandated by the National Food Security Act (NFSA). One estimate suggests that at least 10 crore people have to be included to even to meet the NFSA coverage requirements. Many of those excluded belong to the most marginalised groups including migrants, homeless persons, dalits, adivasis, single women and the elderly. Even within households, not all members are included in the ration card. The current coverage is about 60% of the population with over 40% people remaining outside the PDS net.

There are sufficient grains to mitigate this food crisis: including the unmilled paddy there are over 75million tonnes of foodgrains in the FCI godowns and another 35-40 million tonnes are expected to be procured over the next few months from the Rabi harvest. In fact, Mr. Ram Vilas Paswan, himself, recently admitted there is no food shortage at all. However, he called the food crisis a result of 'logistical problems' owing to states not issuing adequate ration cards. At this time of distress, rather than passing the blame or even focusing on identifying the poor or needy, the central government must announce that every person who approaches them shall be given free rations which include at least 10 kg of foodgrain, 1.5 kg of pulses and 800 gm of edible oil per person. State governments that start such a provision must be allowed to lift grains from the FCI for free.

It is important to remember that the potential repercussions of the food crises are not limited to immediate starvation deaths and hunger issues, but also long term effects like increased incidence of TB and diseases caused by malnutrition, especially in children and women. Besides, the lockdown has led to wide disruptions of food supply chains, loss of employment and food inflation. With that in mind, the support for food security must continue for the next one year, at the very least.

We would like to remind the central government that the Indian state must uphold Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life to every person on Indian soil. Rather than putting in place systems for decentralised procurement for all crops and distribution of food to all, it is appalling that the government is thinking of using it for the production of sanitizers. It is indeed important that there are adequate arrangements for handwashing made available for all. For this, we demand that the government ensures adequate availability of water supply and distributes soaps through the PDS.

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(On behalf of Steering Committee, Right to Food Campaign)