

Press Statement

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) and Nation for Farmers

New Delhi, 11 January, 2021: The three new Farm Laws enacted undemocratically by the Central Government in June 2020 have led to a major unrest in the country. Farmers have been protesting against these in several States demanding that the anti-farmer, anti-people laws be repealed in toto. A large number of farmers marched towards Delhi from the surrounding States and thousands have been camping at various places in and around Delhi, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. It has been more than a month since the farmers have been on the protest sites. In the absence of any resolution in sight, it seems that they will continue to camp at their present locations for quite some time. Under these circumstances, it is important that they have access to basic facilities crucial for daily living such as food, toilets and clean drinking water.

In this context, the Delhi and Haryana chapters of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan^[1] conducted a rapid assessment of basic amenities at the protest sites. The objective of the rapid assessment was to highlight concerns of the protesters and put forward their demands to the Central government, various State governments, local bodies and other concerned authorities to ensure adequate and good quality sanitation, water supply, solid waste management and health facilities at all the protest sites. This report is the synthesis of a survey of participants in various protest sites and field observations of JSA volunteers.

The rapid assessment survey was conducted between 19.12.2020 to 22.12.2020 at five protest sites, namely Singhu, Tikri, Shahjahanpur, Gazipur and Palwal. In total 201 respondents have been covered from these sites: Singhu (92); Tikri (70); Shahjahanpur (23); Gazipur (12) and Palwal (4).

Lack of proper sanitation, insufficient lighting, mismanagement of solid waste disposal, water stagnation, and shortage of warm clothes have emerged as primary concerns of the protestors. Inadequate number of mobile toilets and improper maintenance by the authorities have rendered these toilets dirty and unusable pushing a considerable number of protesters to resort to open defecation. Almost three in every five respondents – 57.5% – have to rely on open sites for defecation. Only 10.5% respondents said that these toilets are clean with proper water supply and 47% said they are located in far-off places, creating difficulties in accessing them. There is no provision of lighting around the toilets making it difficult to use them after dark. Women are facing added troubles as they do not want to defecate in the open. Many women protesters reported that they are eating less and consuming less water to avoid using toilets. Inadequate provisioning of mobile toilets is leading to compromised health, nutrition and hygiene for all protesters, especially women.

Lack of government effort in disposing of solid waste is clearly visible. Only 23.6% said it is getting disposed of regularly. In Shahjahanpur, the situation is better as 56.5% respondents said they have found waste getting disposed of regularly. Largely, it is the volunteers and other civil society organisations that are making efforts to maintain cleanliness. In Singhu and Tikri, the two biggest protest sites, gradually the waste is getting accumulated and civic bodies are mostly absent. Majority of the women who needed sanitary pads, had to arrange themselves as these were rarely

provided in the protest sites. Very few responded that they got pads at medical camps. Women found it challenging to dispose of pads. As many as 31% had to dispose of the used pads by the side of the roads, in absence of proper disposal facilities by the local authorities.

Water stagnation has also been seen at most of the sites. Around 40% respondents observed that there is water stagnation around the protest sites. It was most severe at Gazipur where more than nine out of every ten found water stagnation at the site. The situation was also poor in Singhu as 62.7% respondents reported stagnation. An overwhelming majority of the respondents felt that it was the effort of volunteers which is preventing the situation from getting worse. But water stagnation close to the kitchens and langar locations is a major concern, especially with highly visible presence of flies etc.

While this depicts the solidarity and determination among protesters to continue their fight, impact on their health due to poor conditions of living is a cause of concern and worry.

The survey found that protestors have not complained much regarding food and drinking water, including their quality. That is because they are receiving massive support from the common people, civil society organisations and Gurudwaras who have so far been arranging ample amount of food items and packaged water.

“The support from volunteers, individual citizens and organisations such as Jan Swasthya Abhiyan has been overwhelming and sustaining the struggle so far. However, the State cannot abdicate its responsibility towards its citizens. Protestors and their supporters have been left on their own during the severe cold wave conditions in North India. It shows nothing less than a total apathy by various governments. The Central Government, State Governments of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Rajasthan and local authorities should provide basic amenities to the protestors such as food, clean water for drinking and other use and cleanliness,” said Satnam Singh, State Coordinator, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan-Haryana and core member of the survey team.

It is a shame to see that while protestors are risking their lives under such cold weather conditions and fighting a rightful battle to safeguard their livelihoods against the state-backed-corporate-assault, the state machinery has turned away from even providing these basic facilities to the people. Already more than 50 people have lost their lives under the adverse weather conditions. Even the medical facilities are being arranged by the volunteers and civil society and other philanthropic organisations.

There is also a growing threat of mental health problems amongst the protestors with deep depression and suicidal tendencies, with some suicides and suicide efforts already happening. No mental health support measures are available in protest sites to prevent these.

Given such a situation, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan demands that urgent steps be taken by various State governments to ensure that adequate provision is made for the people at all the protest sites.

It is very important for the government to accept all the demands of the agitating farmers, in order to rectify the problems and challenges created by it for the agriculture sector and to put an end to the unprecedented difficult situations in the border locations of Delhi. In the meanwhile, it is crucial for various levels of governments to ensure proper health and living conditions for farmers in all the protest sites. Based on the findings and observations listed in this report, JSA Delhi and Haryana demand remedial measures for all those key problems identified and listed. Some of the specific demands are highlighted below:

- 1. Provide proper sanitation facilities in the form of adequate number of mobile toilets and arrange for regular cleaning of these toilets**
- 2. Make arrangements for clean drinking water**
- 3. Arrange for regular solid waste collection and disposal from all the protest sites**
- 4. Ensure that nearby public medical facilities (PHCs, CHCs, DH) are geared to provide medical facilities and medicines to the people in need at these sites, which are linked with outreach activities at all protest sites, with sufficient number of doctors and health professionals, added with referral arrangements and adequate ambulance services. Special focus on NCDs and geriatric care will be required here too.**
- 5. Deploy active mental health care and counselling teams in all protest sites and actively motivate people to seek support from these facilities whenever needed.**
- 6. Set up tents at various sites to improve protection from climate related health issues.**
- 7. Regular efforts to contain mosquitoes and flies.**

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On behalf of organisers:

JSA Delhi and Haryana

Nation for Farmers

[1] JSA is the national level movement on health and health care across the country. It consists of 21 national networks and more than 150 organisations and state level JSA platforms.