

Dear

Subject: Protection of Child Rights in Chhattisgarh's conflict-affected areas

As you may be aware, the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights has been monitoring the status of children in Chhattisgarh, especially in the districts affected by conflict. On behalf of the team which included Ms. Dipa Dixit, Mr. R. Venkat Reddy and Ms. Swati Narayan, I wish to thank the Chhattisgarh administration for all the arrangements made during their visit to the State from 15th to 19th January 2009. We would particularly like to thank all the Secretaries for attending the joint meeting at the culmination of the visit and Mr. P. Joy Oommen, Chief Secretary, for providing us with valuable administrative insights on the situation in the affected areas and offering to take immediate steps based on our suggestions.

We fully appreciate the fact that the situation of education and other issues related to child rights seem to have certainly improved since the previous visit of the NCPCR team. However, based on our interaction with state, district and block level officials, children, teachers, villagers and residents of camps in Sukma block of Dantewada district, we present the following issues for immediate, priority action which would be equally applicable across the state, especially in conflict-affected areas. These suggestions also draw from the social mobilization initiatives and in-depth trainings that have been carried out with the support from the MV Foundation and UNICEF in Chhattisgarh in the preceding months.

A. Educational Facilities

Integrated Child Development Service

1. Training of anganwadi workers requires attention as a number of issues have been detected in terms of their ability to maintain growth charts and undertake referrals especially of malnourished children, whom we noticed in the villages and camps.
2. To strengthen the care of malnourished children and prevent the deterioration of their health, would require concerted efforts at building systemic convergence between health and ICDS staff at all levels. If feasible, the model of the Rajmata Jijau Mother and Child Malnutrition Mission adopted in Maharashtra (including in the Naxal affected districts) can be studied through field-visits by the staff of the concerned departments, which can be facilitated by the NCPCR or UNICEF.

3. The vacancies of supervisors and child development project officers (CDPOs) were noticed to be very high in the conflict-affected districts and these posts need to be urgently filled especially with local recruits.
4. Given the large number of new anganwadis sanctioned in Chhattisgarh in tandem with the move towards universalisation of ICDS, we request information on the extent of their coverage in the conflict affected areas. Anganwadi-on-demand application forms need to be immediately processed especially in tribal areas and mini-anganwadis can be sanctioned irrespective of the population size of scattered hamlets.

Formal Schools

5. While it is believed that people are attempting to return back to their villages, basic facilities especially schools are often non-functional as few teachers have returned. These movements are dependent on the vagaries of the cycles of violence and the agricultural seasons. Every attempt must therefore be made to support teachers to return to village schools in areas where the conditions have improved and provide access to safe entry.
6. Approximately 800 posts of teachers in Dantewada alone remain vacant even though the entire waiting list has been exhausted. Recruitment of teachers from rosters of other districts may be considered to ensure that these vacancies of teachers are effectively filled at the earliest. Training of all teachers and shiksha karmis especially new recruits is also essential as many of them are under-qualified due to relaxation of recruitment norms due to the pressure to fill unmanageably large vacancies.
7. Once the funds for construction are handed over to the panchayat, we noticed that in several cases there is ineffective utilization resulting in the school building being rendered incomplete and unusable. This seems to be a chronic problem and needs to be addressed by providing support to panchayats for construction of incomplete school buildings which are unable to undertake civil works. Construction costs are also undoubtedly higher in Dantewada due to insecurity and lack of basic infrastructural facilities (e.g. petrol pumps) and need to be reflected in government budgets.
8. The vacancies of sub-engineers and tehsildars also needs to be addressed as it is believed that they are overburdened due to the large number of vacancies and inaccessibility of the terrain which hampers their ability to effectively supervise and fulfil the required administrative compliances for the construction of school buildings.

Residential Bridge Courses (RBCs)

9. It must be appreciated that a number of short-term RBCs have been started which have proved to be a boon for children whose education has been disrupted due to the ongoing conflict. The community however seems to be confused in terms of the difference between residential bridge courses (which function for 6 – 9 months only) and residential ashram schools (run by the

tribal department for elementary school-aged children to complete their formal schooling). RBCs also seem to be ill-equipped to satisfactorily transfer a majority of the children to ashram schools to effectively mainstream them into the formal education system on completion of their bridge courses. It will therefore be beneficial to conduct RBCs in the premises of ashrams to ensure easy tracking of their progress.

10. As the qualifications of the volunteers who are employed to run the residential bridge course is often elementary, special training programs for volunteers must be conducted to improve the quality of their pedagogy.

Ashram Schools

11. There also appears to be a ground swell of support from the community to send their children to residential schools in order to complete their formal elementary education. In Dantewada and other Naxal affected districts, families prefer residential schools as;
 - they cater to all the basic needs of a child including food, clothing and shelter which is often difficult for the families to provide due to extreme poverty in the tribal areas exacerbated by the vagaries of conflict
 - they suffer from an overall sense of insecurity to return to their villages especially with their children whose schools often remain closed or abandoned as the teachers are reluctant to resume their duties in the wake of the continued Naxal bombing of village school buildings and the occupation of school premises by the CRPF personnel
 - they are safer as the residential ashrams are mostly located away from the thick of conflict-affected areas nearer the roads
 - they have more regular attendance of teachers and pupils who do not need to commute daily from unsafe areas

There is undoubtedly an urgent need to increase multifold the number of ashram schools in safe zones rather than formal day schools. Especially in the Naxal-affected areas of Chhattisgarh, estimates indicate that there are 40,000 children who are currently out-of-school which would indicate that there is a requirement for the construction of 400 new ashram schools with the capacity of 100 children each. This requires substantial contribution of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan along with the department for Tribal Affairs especially of the Central Government to fund this initiative.

12. While usually the construction of a residential ashram school takes 1.5 – 2 years, the pilot implementation of the alternative model with the use of portacabins, which can be constructed within 7 days from the laying of the plinth (with supply of inputs from the National Bamboo Mission), is impressive and can be utilized for mass scale expansion.
13. It was also noticed that a number of ashram schools have not received funds for their upkeep for several months and have had to borrow monies at market rates of interest and take goods on credit to fund the recurring costs of the residential educational facilities. This delay in the disbursement of funds needs to be immediately rectified.

Night Shelters

14. In urban areas, we found that night shelters for imparting non-formal education (NFE) to child labourers have utility in building the first point of contact with children under distress. But they are not effective in supporting the elimination of child labour as in most cases children continue to work even as they attend these non-formal classes. Ensuring the elimination of child labour in urban contexts would benefit from collaboration with resource persons with expertise in the elimination of child labour from MV Foundation.

Remedial Classes

15. The additional tutorial support provided to children from upper primary and secondary education was found to be an excellent initiative and the number of remedial classes needs to be expanded with the support of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

Community Empowerment

16. We were impressed with the work of the Child Protection Committees (many of them consisting of illiterate villagers voluntarily expending their time and efforts to enroll out-of-school children) at the village level which have been created with the support of MV Foundation and UNICEF in Dantewada district. With the members of the Gram Panchayat, they have worked very hard to mobilize children to join schools. It would be beneficial to provide them with all the necessary support and encourage their expansion to other conflict-affected districts.
17. In particular, we would recommend the identification of nodal block and district level government functionaries who will be responsible to respond to child rights petitions which the community have delivered in the conflict-affected areas in order to bolster their faith in the government machinery.
18. While we are aware that it is difficult to gather accurate information in the conflict-affected areas, a process needs to be set up in a decentralised manner so that every gram panchayat member who is well-versed with the identity of all children from their village is encouraged to monitor out-of-school children and the progress of those enrolled in formal education. This initiative should be supported by nodal officers at the block, district and state level to monitor, supervise and collate the data generated by the community.

B. Schools as Zones of Peace

19. We noticed that a number of schools and ashrams are being occupied by the CRPF personnel in the post-Salwa Judum period. Based on our previous reports, we believe that this has exacerbated the bombing of schools by the Naxalites. In both cases, children are displaced from schools and denied their right to education. We are aware that schools are often the only pucca structures in remote villages which provide protection to the CRPF personnel from Naxal attack. But in order to protect the rights of children to education, the utilization of school buildings should be rigorously avoided and a clear timeline fixed for withdrawal of CRPF personnel from existing schools and ashrams. To facilitate the process the CRPF must

be provided with additional monies from the Police Modernisation Funds to construct suitable protective shelters in remote conflict-ridden areas.

20. To protect children in remote areas, we would call on the initiation of talks through neutral third-party agencies to engage all stakeholders including the government, Naxals, Salwa Judum, the community etc to initiative a ceasefire and declare children as zones of peace. This can enable the commencement of a number of progressive initiatives including undertaking immunization drives for children in unreached areas, extension of basic health facilities including polio vaccinations and supporting the movement of children to safe areas to be enrolled in ashram schools and pursue a formal education.

C. Health Facilities

21. While the statistics indicate that the coverage of immunization is expansive, we would encourage that they be cross-verified especially in the conflict affected areas. It would be useful to initiate a concerted week-long immunization campaign on fixed days every three months to ensure universal coverage in camps and villages in each of the affected blocks with a dedicated team of medical personnel who can travel across blocks on a rotation basis, given the lack of MBBS doctors in the conflict-affected districts.
22. Especially in conflict affected areas, it is essential to expand and monitor of the coverage of health facilities especially the availability of primary health care centres (PHCs) and sub-centres with adequate infrastructure, facilities and medicines.
23. Programs like the Graha Bhet (Home Visit), Tan Swasth Man Swasth etc to incentivise medical personnel including private doctors to extend their services in conflict-affected areas need to be expanded. Concerted efforts also need to be made to fill the vacancies of doctors, nurses, ANMs, ASHAs and other health staff, where applicable.
24. We have been informed that there is a huge need for hundreds of insecticide-treated mosquito nets to combat malaria which needs to be met with the support of the National Rural Health Mission especially in conflict-affected areas

D. Co-ordination

25. We are pleased to be informed of the creation of a district level committee on child protection with government officials in the Sukma block of Dantewada district. It will be also beneficial to create similar nodal committees in other conflict-affected districts with state, district and block level government officials to monitor, supervise and collate information on child rights in the conflict-affected areas. As indicated in point 17, we reiterate the need for the identification of a nodal block and district level government functionaries who will be responsible to respond to child rights petitions and form the interface between the administration and the community in the conflict-affected areas.

26. We also seek your advice and support in the appointment of a state-level child protection commissioner by the NCPCR who would be encouraged to oversee the progress in the conflict-affected areas with a special focus on the Dantewada district.
27. To foster collaboration and sharing of information between the Governments of Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh, given the large number of families who have migrated to the latter, the formation of an inter-state committee is necessary with a focus on child protection.
28. The pilot initiative in the Sukma block of Dantewada district must be expanded to other conflict-affected districts, given its efficacy in the improvement of educational outcomes and addressal of child protection issues

The Commission feels that the dedicated efforts of government officials at state, district and block levels, gram panchayats and the community have yielded visible strides in the direction of protection of child rights and ensured their access to schools in the conflict-affected areas. However some issues need to be addressed immediately and the recommendations that we have put forth would be applicable not only to Dantewada district, but most other districts which are conflict-affected.

We would be grateful if you could send us a report on the steps taken regarding the aforesaid, within a period of 30 days from the date of receipt of the letter.

Yours sincerely,

(Shantha Sinha)
Chairperson
National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights

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