

# Act Now

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## Main Story:

## Let's GO- There's FOOD in school

Fresh from bath and hair neatly oiled, ten-year-old Uttam Sahariya is in a rush to reach school. Other youngsters looking smart in white and maroon uniforms join him outside his mud hut. He and his friends are the first generation Sahariyas to be going to school.

A few years ago, Uttam was not very keen on schooling. "How can you think of school when you do not get two basic meals a day? And the schools did not serve us any food, so I didn't feel like going there", says Uttam.

Uttam hails from Shankargarh village in Madhya Pradesh. He belongs to an indigenous community called Sahariyas. Spread over eleven districts in the adjacent states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, this nearly 700,000-strong community has seen abject poverty, exploitation and starvation for generations.

Originally forest-reliant people, they were dispossessed of their natural habitat by the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, relying on irregular wage labour for survival. Recurrent droughts for three consecutive years from 2000 worsened their situation. Over 250 Sahariyas reportedly died of starvation.

In 2001 a group of lawyers, economists, ex-civil servants, academics and grassroots organisations came together in a nation-wide 'Right to Food' campaign with the belief that everyone has a right to be free



Tom Pietrasik/ ActionAid

from hunger. ActionAid and its local partner organisations joined hands and conducted surveys across seven states locating cases of hunger and malnutrition. The Public Union for Civil Liberties filed testimonies from 1500 hungry persons in the Supreme Court.

The same year, the Supreme Court made midday meals mandatory in government-run primary schools aiming to retain students in school, and not lose them to hunger and wage earning. The meals reached Shankargarh school in 2004 and the number of Sahariya children attending classes increased immediately.

"Now I go to school everyday," says Uttam. "We get brinjal with tomatoes, cabbage, moong dal, arhar dal, tur dal, chapattis and sometimes rice as midday meal at school. I like to eat everything. But it would be nice to have rice more often and may be even kadhi (a curd and gram flour dish) sometimes," says Uttam citing his favourite foods.

ActionAid's Narendra Sharma adds, "shy and gentle, the Sahariyas have been exploited for decades, and the sole objective of our work here is to help them rid themselves of hunger and fear." ActionAid and Centre for Integrated Development (CID) have

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# 2

helped set up Manav Adhikar Forum (Human Rights Forum), a network of five organisations with a view to raising awareness among Sahariyas about their rights and legal entitlements.

There are still many hurdles. Children still do not go to school all through the year. Whole families migrate during the harvest season to work as hired help in other districts. However, with support from organisations like ActionAid and CID, the Sahariyas are striving hard to alter their situation. Important milestones like Antyodaya cards



Tom Pietrasik/ ActionAid

and the midday meal scheme have given them a zesty confidence. They are now aware that the primary responsibility of guaranteeing their rights rests with the state, and together they can make these rights a reality.

*With support from organisations like ActionAid and Centre for Integrated Development (CID), the Sahariyas are striving hard to improve their situation by increased awareness about their legal rights and entitlements.*

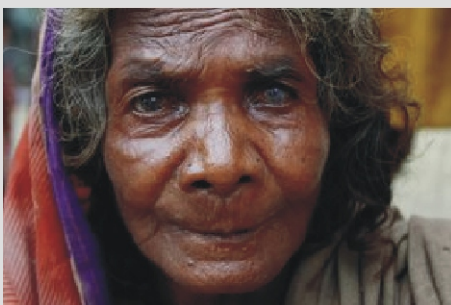


Tom Pietrasik/ ActionAid

## **“Hunger is our old companion”**

*East Champaran district, Bihar: Mahajani Devi is old and ailing. She talks as she waits for her turn to get the staple chura (flattened rice) being distributed as relief in Suryapur village. In Bihar, the Musahars often live in the lowest lying areas so are hit hardest by the annual monsoon floods. The Musahars are one of the most disadvantaged dalit groups in India's caste hierarchy. Even today, they remain untouchables, not allowed to enjoy normal social life, not able to share common amenities. In extreme circumstances in the past, and sometimes even now, Musahars (literally "rat eaters"), have had to dig grains from rat burrows to find food. If rats are available, they too become food.*

*ActionAid with local partner Samajik Shodh Evam Vikas Kendra (SSEVK) is helping Musahars to establish and strengthen their own organisations. They take a lead in responding to the annual inundation.*



Jacob Silberberg/ ActionAid

*“You ask about how the rains and flood have affected me! What can I say? It's been the same old story for as long as I can remember. No, we haven't seen any government food or money as flood relief. Hunger is our old companion,” says Mahajani Devi. “But now I see food being distributed by our Musahar Vikas Manch (Musahar Development Forum) and it gives me joy. I am happy to see Amar and his team of volunteers from SSEVK”.*

*“I can't do much work. Others can work as farm labourers - planting crops, irrigating, digging up clay, making water channels, and then harvesting - all for a few rupees. But that too goes when the rains come. No work and no money for four-five months.*





Charles Eckert/ ActionAid

## Put food on the table: Shabana Azmi tells UN

Bollywood star Shabana Azmi joined ActionAid's HungerFREE campaign outside the UN as questions were raised over US President, George Bush's opening speech.

Hollywood actor Tim Meadows and Hilda Dokubo from Nollywood (Nigerian cinema) also joined in to call on the UN to honour its commitment to halve world hunger by 2015.

"Put food on the table this is our only chant for the UN leaders. We are here in New York to make sure that they are not allowed to ignore this promise," said Shabana Azmi. "Food is the most basic need in a

human being. I want this to become an emotive issue for all. I want them to stop thinking about it in cold statistics and understand how they would feel if it was their child, their spouse, their parent who had to go hungry," she added.

Inside the UN building US president George Bush told delegates that they were not doing their "duty" in the world.

"When millions of children starve to death or perish from a mosquito bite, we aren't doing our duty in the world. When whole societies are cut off from the prosperity of the global economy, we're all worse off," said Bush.

### "Become a Child Sponsor"

*"ActionAid is giving us a unique opportunity to help the girl child by offering us a chance to support a child through education and thereby strengthen her community. I strongly believe that if we can develop a large mass of strong women leaders, together they can arrest India's growing problem of poverty and underdevelopment."*

*I have appealed to over 20,000 members of the Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological societies of India (FOGSI) to support ActionAid's efforts to transform the life of a child by becoming a child sponsor."*

**Dr. Narendra Malhotra**

President of 'The Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India .'



But ActionAid challenged the president's rhetoric, demanding actions rather than mere words.

"President Bush is rightly giving priority to hunger as a global issue. Now, the US must put its money where its mouth is by ratifying the UN resolution on the right to food. It is currently the only country in the world which has failed to do so," said ActionAid's campaign coordinator Colm O Cuanachain.

ActionAid also demands that any US policy on hunger also needs to address the issue of corporate accountability.

### What Is **HungerFREE** Campaign?

HungerFREE is a global campaign launched by ActionAid to push the issue of hunger to the top of the political agenda and force governments to deliver on their commitment to halve world hunger by 2015.

The U.N. Millennium Development Goal of reducing hunger by half by 2015 is nowhere in sight. In fact, hunger is increasing. As many as 35,000 people die of hunger every day!

We are asking governments to enact laws that can end starvation deaths, ensure basic social protection, and guarantee women the right to own land. We are also asking governments to ensure that corporations are held accountable for abuses of the rights of the poor to food, water, land and seeds.

In India there is an immediate need to provide support to the families and children facing chronic hunger and malnutrition, and help people put pressure on the government to deliver on promises to provide food, employment and land rights. We need your generous support to educate people about their rights and entitlements and to fill the gaps when food is not reaching those who need it most. **Please read the attached letter and donation form.**

## 4

# Millions go hungry as rat plague sweeps Mizoram



Kazu Ahmed/ActionAid

Nearly 100,000 people are going hungry as a largely unreported crisis unfolds in Mizoram in the North East following bamboo flowering, a phenomenon that occurs once every 48 years.

The flowering of bamboo groves triggers a massive explosion of rodent population as they feast on the protein-rich bamboo flower seeds. These rodents have wreaked havoc by causing a wide spread destruction of crops.

"All our crops were eaten by rats. We couldn't save any-thing," says Binondo, who lives with eight family members in Bawngva village, Mamit district. Remote communities who survive on slash and burn agriculture have seen entire fields of rice, maize and vegetables vanish overnight.

Supplies are reaching villagers at an achingly slow pace due to inaccessible terrain and short

*Do you know that 854 million people in the world are hungry right now, and 16,000 children die of hunger-related causes one child every five seconds? With 212 million hungry people, India is the country with the highest number of undernourished people in the world. And do you know, one out of every five children in India is wasted due to acute malnutrition?*

supply of food grains within Mizoram.

Distress sales of land and property are being reported across the state. Even the local fishing ponds which used to provide seasonal income are up for sale, at far below the market rate.

In Poithar village of Lawngtlai District, J Rochunga, a man from the Lai community says: "People

do not have food for tomorrow. We are afraid to plant anything because the rats consume everything, even cash crops like oranges and vegetables like pumpkins and chilies."

The situation is worse in inaccessible southern areas of Mizoram, Lawngtlai and Saiha are two of the hardest-hit districts, bordering Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh.

"Tight-knit support systems are crumbling as communities do not have enough resources to tide through a famine-like situation. Many are surviving by foraging in the forests for roots and herbs, says Mrinal Gohain, ActionAid's representative in the North East. "The young, women and elderly are having the most difficult time. We are hearing reports of onset of blindness due to lack of food," he adds.

The State estimates an additional 5,740 metric tonnes of rice will be needed over the next two months to feed those going hungry.

An assessment by ActionAid indicates that food aid is urgently required for at least 10,000 families across 200 villages who are struggling to get one meal a day.

As ActionAid is currently delivering food to the worst affected hamlets in some of the most inaccessible areas, we appeal to you to come forward with donations. With your help we can reach more people who are desperately short of food, and work with government and local people to develop a long-term plan to improve food security in the region.



## SEND YOUR RESPONSE TODAY!

Please read the letter and donation form to send your contributions for Mizoram.

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## act:onaid

ActionAid is an international anti-poverty agency working in over 40 countries, taking sides with poor people to end poverty and injustice together.

In India, ActionAid works with some 300 civil society organization and over 12 million poor and excluded people in 24 states