

India: Contaminated school-meal kills 22 children

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At least 22 school children, ranging in age from 5 to 12, have died as the result of eating a severely contaminated mid-day meal Tuesday in a government-run primary school in Dharmasati Gandaman—a village in the Bihar state sub-district of Mashrakh.

The meal was supplied under a national government program that provides lunches to all pupils attending a government-administered or -supported primary school.

There were scenes of anguish Tuesday evening and all through Wednesday as parents and relatives claimed the bodies of the dead children and sought news of the two dozen children who remain in critical condition.

By Thursday morning some media sources were attributing 25 or more deaths to the contaminated meal. The *Times of India* reported that angry relatives have buried at least 27 bodies in front of the government school in Dharmasati Gandaman “as a mark of protest”. It added that those buried there do not include several children who were declared dead on their arrival late Tuesday in the state capital, Patna, which lies sixty kilometers to the south-east.

Yesterday, villagers took to the streets to voice their anger against the state government, which took 15 hours to organize any serious effort to come to the aid of the poisoned children. They blocked roads and railway lines and attacked a police station, reportedly setting several vehicles ablaze. In Chhapra, the district capital, police used water cannon to quell protests.

The school’s headmistress, who doubled as one of its two teachers, reportedly fled the scene after the children began falling ill.

The cook had complained of a foul odour coming from the cooking-oil being used in preparing the meal, but was reportedly ordered by the headmistress to use it anyway.

These deaths are hardly the first from the Mid-Day

Meal program, which is plagued by underfunding, poor hygiene standards, and corruption. In March of this year two children died in the northern state of Haryana after eating a tainted mid-day meal.

On Wednesday, the *Indian Express* reported that 50 children became ill in a government-school in another part of the Bihar. The children said they had fallen sick because the meal had a dead lizard in it. Also Wednesday, at least 31 children in the western state of Maharashtra were admitted to hospital for gastroenteritis after consuming a mid-day meal.

In a transparent attempt to deflect public anger away from Bihar’s JDU (Janata Dal-United) state government, the state education minister P.K. Shahi claimed the Dharmasati Gandaman deaths were likely a deliberate conspiracy to discredit the government. He alleged that the food used in preparing the meal had come from a store run by the headmistress’ husband, whom he alleged is an activist of a rival political party.

The Hindu-communist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which until last month had been in a governmental coalition with the JDU, accused Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar of being “insensitive and callous” for failing to visit the grief-stricken villagers.

Kumar has announced that the families of the dead children will be paid 200,000 rupees (\$US3,370) in “compensation”.

The Congress Party, which heads India’s national coalition government, for its part, made only the mildest criticisms of Bihar’s government. It is hoping that now that the JDU has quit the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance it can be induced to align with the Congress for the 2014 national elections.

Various political parties, including the BJP and the Rashtriya Janata Dal, a sometime Congress party ally, called for protests Wednesday. While anti-government

sentiment was strong, the BBC says its local correspondent reported that in some places opposition “political leaders have been chased from the streets by enraged protesters.”

It has been widely reported in the press that one of the doctors treating the sick children suspects that the deaths may have been caused by food grains getting contaminated with Organophosphorus, a chemical compound that is used widely as a pesticide in agriculture and as a nerve agent in chemical warfare.

However, this has not been confirmed by forensic analysis and the relatives of the children noted that only those who ate a vegetable dish made of soybeans and potatoes fell ill. Not the ones who merely ate grains. In any case, only a comprehensive scientific analysis will be able to pinpoint the exact cause of this horrific tragedy.

The Mid-day School lunch program was launched nationwide in every state in 2001 after the Indian Supreme Court ordered that all children in government and government-assisted primary schools be given one hot meal daily. The court also mandated that each child should be given at least 300 calories per child with 8-10 grams of protein.

The court’s ruling was in response to numerous studies showing that hunger and disease stalk India. Malnutrition and undernourishment are rampant among both children and adults, contributing to high mortality rates and, among children, stunted physical and intellectual development. According to the World Bank, India is home to at least one third of the malnourished children in the world, with almost half of India’s children considered malnourished.

As with every endeavour launched by the Indian ruling elite in the name of alleviating widespread poverty and misery, the Mid-Day Meal program exhibits widespread official indifference, incompetence and thievery.

Neither the Indian nor the state governments have set up proper kitchens and hygienic facilities for preparing children’s meals.

Instead the state governments have given contracts to politically-connected NGOs and others to supply and prepare meals. Many times the meals are prepared in ramshackle off-school premises, brought to the schools during the course of the morning, and then left to sit in the open till lunch. By the time the food is served to the

children, it has often gone bad due to the hot climate and lack of refrigeration.

Also, the facilities where food grains are stored are habitually infested with rats and other vermin. The Indian government itself has a notorious reputation for letting massive amounts of food grains rot every year—grains it refuses to distribute to the poor and hungry because, in the words of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, it doesn’t want to “disrupt” the grain market.

Throughout India and especially in Bihar, which is one of India’s poorest states, children often refuse to eat the mid-day meals because they are so bad. Complaints of dead rats, lizards, snakes and insects being found in the food are quite common.

For the Indian ruling elite, this horrid social reality is quite acceptable. While there will be much finger-pointing among the politicians, the calls for greater attention and resources to be given to the Mid-Day Meal program and India’s dilapidated schools will soon be forgotten. Indeed a prevailing theme in discussions within the ruling class is the need to reduce social spending and the state budget deficit so as to make India more attractive to international investors.



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