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Monday, January 25, 2010 12:18 GMT

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RIGHTS-INDIA:

Shelter for the Homeless amid Big Chill

Ranjit Devraj

NEW DELHI, Jan 22 (IPS) - Happiness for Alok and Saddam is the bare canvas tent set up in the middle of a grassy traffic island close to Delhi Gate, the entrance to the old quarter of India's capital.

"For warmth we have each other," said the grinning homeless youth, tucked up under a pile of coarse blankets provided by a non-government organisation.

The boys, in their late teens, should soon benefit from court rulings which will ensure the tent – set up by the Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA) or Shelter Rights Campaign, to shelter up to 100 homeless people – will exist through this season's chill and dense fog across northern India, where temperatures hovering close to zero degrees Celsius have already taken 300 lives.

On Wednesday, India's Supreme Court, acting on a petition from the People's Union of Civil Liberties, a human rights organisation, ordered the Delhi state government to ensure that no one suffers for want of shelter. "If there are no shelters, put them in some vacant buildings. It is only for a few days till the conditions improve," ordered Justice Dalveer Bhandari.

The court, citing reports submitted to it, noted that "a number of deaths have taken place because of extreme cold weather in Delhi for the last two weeks" and made the observation that "malnutrition and hunger are ... making people susceptible to extreme weather conditions."

"While last year there were 46 shelters during winter, which included 17 permanent shelters and 29 temporary shelters, this year the number has been reduced to 33 [17 permanent and 16 temporary] shelters. Further, of these 16 shelters, one was demolished," the apex court said.

Perhaps it was judicial anger at that one demolition, carried out by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) on Dec. 22 last year, as part of beautification work for the Commonwealth Games being hosted by the city in October, that saved several hundred homeless people from having to sleep under the pitilessly cold sky this winter.

Taking suo moto notice of newspaper reports on the demolition, or acting on its own cognizance, the Delhi High Court summoned officials to explain how the shelter, on a traffic island in the busy Karol Bagh shopping area, was demolished.

"Have you thought of the suffering of people due to the demolition? You give as explanation for the demolition the grounds of beautification and the Commonwealth Games?" Chief Justice A.P. Shah thundered at them.

Within days of the hearing the MCD put up an alternate shelter, but not before two of the 250-odd affected people died of exposure. Moved by the plight, St. Michael's, an elite school in the neighbourhood run by the Archdiocese of Delhi, threw open its classrooms for homeless people to sleep in at night.

"We are providing shelter and blankets to people who cannot avail themselves of facilities from the MCD," confirmed a church spokesperson. Another Catholic school, St. Columba's, has been offering similar services for eight years now.

But the schools' charity may be the closest encounter that Delhi's elite could ever have with homeless people. It is not unusual to see climate-controlled luxury cars driven at top speed by the well-heeled whizzing past rows of sleeping human forms covered with torn blankets or newspapers on the pavements.

Curiously enough, it was hope of finding work for the Commonwealth Games, the holding of which is considered prestigious for rapidly globalising India, that brought many of the homeless to New Delhi.

"I heard that there was a demand for construction labour in Delhi, but the living conditions here are terrible," said Choki Lama, who arrived in the capital from Siliguri in eastern India a few months ago. "I am grateful for this tent [at Delhi Gate], but there is no security and I have to sleep with my footwear under my head to prevent them from being stolen."

"This is one of the contradictions of the system – while well over 1.6 billion U.S. dollars are being spent on an event, mostly on infrastructure and construction, there is nothing planned for the labourers who are actually doing the building work," said Dunu Roy, well-known activist and planner.

"What is happening is that the government has neatly passed on the responsibility of accommodating workers to the contractors," Roy told IPS. "As the principal employer, government clearly has the responsibility, but then (it) is both employer and regulator, judge and jury."

Roy recalled that the same callousness was visible at the time of the Delhi Asian Games in 1982 when over a million construction workers moved into the city but were not provided accommodation. "Many of them built houses for themselves along the banks of the Yamuna river (which passes through the capital), see them being bulldozed later as encroachments. And now, the supreme irony - the Commonwealth Games village is itself being sited on the banks of the river."

"Under the Delhi Master Plan, brought about by an Act of Parliament, there should have been 150 night shelters in Delhi, a city of 15 million people, when there are only 46," said Roy. "So when the Supreme Court says that the shelters can be there until the weather improves it is not being quite fair. The real issue is, why should there be homeless people at all when millions of dollars are being spent on all this infrastructure?"

"There is little doubt that the Delhi government is evading its responsibility to provide shelter to people who live and work in the city," said Paramjeet Kaur of the AAA. "We estimate that there are around 150,000 people living in the capital without access to shelter, water or sanitation, and clearly the government is not prepared to recognise this."

Kaur said the government had failed to issue Delhi's homeless people below-poverty-line (BPL) cards, the key to food and other entitlements, as directed by the Supreme Court three years ago. This despite the fact that the Commissioner of Food and Civil Supplies had identified 15,000 homeless families as being eligible for the cards.

"We find ourselves up against a mindset in the government that sees homeless people as a burden on the city's resources rather than as people who provide valuable services as rag pickers, rickshaw pullers and construction labourers, so they are doomed to remain faceless, without identity and entitlements as citizens," she told IPS.

What that means is that the homeless are extremely marginalised and vulnerable to exploitation for their labour, to brutality at the hands of the police. Without access to medical aid or support, they often go hungry, especially if they do not find enough work or are unwell. They are also exposed to Delhi's extreme weather and to the filth and severe pollution on the streets.

"At the permanent shelters, AAA is able to provide meals and some medical care, especially for the old and ailing. But not in the tented, temporary shelters," Kaur said. Of New Delhi's 25 permanent night shelters, 10 are run by the MCD and 15 by AAA, which also has 38 tents set up in different part of the city. "After the court orders, the government's main activity has been to put up banners near our tented sites to just claim the credit," Kaur added.

According to Sanjay Kumar, who also works with the AAA, the official indifference extends to women, who form about 10 percent of Delhi's homeless people, especially after the sole shelter for women in the capital was shut down in June 2007.

"You can see them huddling together in busy places like railway stations, road intersections and temples, where they are warmer and safer. Sleeping on the roadside is asking for trouble – from policemen to passing vehicles driven by reckless or drunken drivers," he said.

Kumar believes that the Supreme Court order on Wednesday could go a long way in making a positive change in the attitude of the government and ordinary citizens towards the plight of the city's homeless people. "We have been providing shelters in the city for more than 10 years now, and this is the first time that there has been any appreciable official move to recognise and help them."

"At least we have now have a solemn assurance made in court by the government that shelter, blankets, water and toilet facilities would be made available to all homeless people on a priority basis," said Kumar. "We will be watching closely to see how they implement this promise; they have broken so many others."

(END/2010)

Printed from

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

Provide night shelters to homeless: SC to Delhi govt

21 Jan 2010, 0400 hrs IST, ET Bureau

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court, which came down heavily on the Delhi government for being insensitive to the plight of the poor, ordered it to provide night shelters to all homeless by Wednesday evening.

Taking note of the plight of the homeless during the cold wave, the apex court ordered the government to hold a meeting by 4.30 pm to decide how the order was going to be executed.

Justices Tarun Chatterjee and S Radhakrishnan told the government representative to immediately advertise the locations of night shelters in the Capital through television and print media. The authorities must also ensure that the night shelters have basic amenities such as blankets, electricity and toilets, the judges said.

As of now, civic authorities run only 40 night shelters in Delhi. Their combined capacity cannot house even a small fraction of the Capital's estimated 150,000 homeless people.

The court said, the homeless should alternatively be accommodated in unused government buildings if there are no sufficient facilities to provide them shelter in the 33 shelter homes of the Capital.

The order came on a PIL filed by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), complaining that the Delhi administration has failed to provide adequate shelter and food to the homeless and destitutes.

Quoting various medical research reports, the PIL alleged that the cold wave deaths reported in the Capital were on account of lack of proper food nourishment and shelter to the homeless.

Additional Solicitor General Mohan Parasaran on behalf of the government assured the bench that all necessary steps would be taken to provide shelter, blankets, water and mobile toilets to the homeless at various places in the Capital to protect them from cold. He told the bench that the chief secretary had convened a special meeting in this regard to work out the modalities.

Earlier, senior counsel Colin Gonzalves told the bench that the homeless were being denied basic food facilities by the government which he alleged was dilly dallying in providing them with the Antodaya Yojana cards.

However, the apex court said it would examine the issue at the next hearing as the priority now was to provide shelter, blankets and other basic facilities to the homeless at least for the next two weeks due to the prevailing cold wave conditions in the capital. It posted the matter next week for further hearing.

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The National

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Poor lose before Games begin

Anuj Chopra

Last Updated: January 16, 2010 6:41PM UAE / January 16, 2010 2:41PM GMT



Poverty is rife in New Delhi and plans to raze crucial homeless shelters in an effort to improve the city's image has angered critics. [Raveendran / AFP](#)

For Ram Singh, a migrant labourer from the Punjab, a grubby pavement at Kashmere Gate in Delhi's old city has been home for more than two decades.

To protect himself from the harsh winter at night, Mr Singh, 50, seeks refuge in a temporary night shelter set up for the homeless, but since last month he has been forced to brave the cold in the open.

In recent months, at least 100,000 of New Delhi's 160,000 homeless people have been booted out of night shelters, many of which have been shut down or demolished in a bid to spruce up the city before the Commonwealth Games takes place there in October.

"The government has demolished or shut down night shelters to beautify the city for the Commonwealth Games" despite the rising number of homeless, complains Miloon Kothari, the head of a group called Urban Rights Forum: For the Homeless.

India, which won the bid to host this year's Commonwealth Games seven years ago, is only the third developing country to be given the opportunity to host the event, after Jamaica and Malaysia.



This event is to India what the Beijing Olympics meant for China – a marquee event to show off the country's brisk economic ascent and its growing clout on the world stage.

New Delhi is eager to be seen as a world-class city. Besides shutting down 22 of the city's 46 night shelters, plans are afoot to raze some slums, stamp out hundreds of street food vendors and deport 60,000 destitute beggars to their home states.

This enormous metropolis of 14 million is also in the throes of an unprecedented construction boom bringing its infrastructure up to date in a bid to transform itself before the opening ceremony on October 3.

New Delhi is building at dizzying speed new highways, expressways and flyovers, as well as widening existing ones. The Metro, the city's mass transit system, is fast expanding to become the world's second-longest. The city is building a Games Village spread over 63.5 hectares on the banks of the river Yamuna to house 8,500 athletes.

A four-lane, 2.2km tunnel is planned between Delhi's Linking Road and Lodhi Road to provide a smoother connection between the Games Village and stadiums.

New Delhi is investing in new power plants to boost capacity to 7,000 megawatts from 4,500mw and ensure uninterrupted supply during the games.

A new runway and terminal are being built at the revamped Indira Gandhi Airport, as well as 130 check-in counters, 55 bridges and 15 X-ray screening machines, all exclusively dedicated to 5 million foreign athletes and visitors from 72 countries expected to descend on the city during the games.

The city is adding new rooms in hotels and guesthouses to accommodate the visitors, as there is now a shortfall of 30,000 rooms.

The government is investing heavily in a programme to teach English to low-income individuals such as drivers, waiters and security personnel, to help them deal with the expected influx of English-speaking tourists.

"India is a growing economic power and hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2010 is a means of proving to the world that it is fast getting equipped to match other countries in terms of infrastructure, planning and execution," the government said in a statement on www.delhicommonwealth.com, a website dedicated to the games.

"India is desperate to prove that it can successfully host an event of this magnitude, with thousands of athletes and officials, so that it moves beyond being just a cricket venue and graduates to hosting high-profile events on a regular basis."

The cost to give New Delhi this modern facelift? Some US\$17.5 billion (Dh64.27bn). And there is an urgent need for more cash.

Last week, AK Walia, the New Delhi minister of finance, disclosed that he had asked the central government to supply an additional 20bn rupees (Dh1.6bn) for games preparations.

So far, only two of the 12 games venues are finished. The deadline for their completion has been moved to March from last November.

While this event might boost India's image globally as an economic powerhouse, such heavy spending is wasteful, critics say, as it does little to improve the plight of India's long-suffering poor.

It is estimated that 800 million of India's population of 1.2 billion live on less than \$2 a day. India's Congress Party-led government, headed by the prime minister Manmohan Singh, was re-elected last May on promises that the government would do more to ease the suffering of the country's poor.

But the government says the night shelters have been demolished not just for beautification of the city, but also to create much-needed space for infrastructure projects related to the games.

It has done little to rehouse the displaced homeless, a majority of whom are economic migrants whose numbers are rising every year.

The UN says India is expected to add 10 million migrants a year from villages to its 5,161 cities in the next 20 years. With cities such as New Delhi woefully ill-equipped to handle these rising numbers, the poor migrants are most likely to seek refuge on pavements or informal settlements such as slums, social activists say.

Pranab Mukherjee, the country's finance minister, in his annual budget last year announced an ambitious new anti-poverty scheme aimed at making Indian cities "slum free" in the next five years.

Mr Mukherjee set aside 40bn rupees for the Rajiv Awas Yojana – a housing plan named after the former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi – which would provide concrete housing to slum dwellers.

He also increased by almost 90 per cent financial aid to the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, a national scheme meant to spruce up urban infrastructure.

Mr Singh set up a cabinet committee, overseen by 12 ministers, to implement infrastructure projects "with particular emphasis on urban slum clearance".

But it could take years for these long-term urban projects to see any visible results. As it races to prepare for the games, the government is desperate to mask its widespread poverty, a dimension the growing economic power does not wish the world to see, critics say.

"We do not expect any modern civilised society to allow its people to die, whether it is for the Commonwealth Games or any other thing," the Delhi High Court said last week in a scathing indictment to the city's civic authorities. "This trend cannot be allowed."

achopra@thenational.ae

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WORLD

India's poor scramble for protection from winter chill

Friday, 15 Jan, 2010 | 10:58 AM PST |

NEW DELHI: Barefoot and carrying a thin pillow and two soiled rugs, Kunj Bihari ushers his wife and three children inside a night shelter where New Delhi's homeless seek protection from the winter weather.

But authorities refuse to let them stay, saying there is no room inside the makeshift plastic tents hastily erected by the government near a crematorium, reported AFP.

"This happens every night. We have to search for hours to find a warm place to sleep," said Bihari, who sells balloons and pens during the day.

Life for India's poorest is a grim struggle for survival, but the unusually cold winter this year has made sleeping on the streets a potentially deadly ordeal.

In the last two weeks more than 300 people have died of cold in north India, government officials say, as hundreds of thousands sleep in the open with nothing more than thin blankets to keep them warm.

Many huddle over small fires burning scrap wood, tyres and rubbish to generate a little heat.

Charity workers in the Indian capital have accused authorities of worsening the suffering by shutting down dozens of night shelters at a time when the city's homeless need most protection from the elements.

Some of the closures are part of comprehensive redevelopment plans underway ahead of the Commonwealth Games in October, though the government says it is arranging substitute facilities.

"Poor people die in the cold snap. The government has still not woken up to save them," said Miloon Kothari, of charity Urban Rights Forum: For the Homeless.

"The homeless urban poor in this country are marginalised, labelled as encroachers and often accused of making the city's appearance ugly."

An acute shortage of state-run night shelters has forced more than 100,000 people in Delhi alone to shiver through the night on pavements, below flyovers and around religious sites.

"It is a shame. At one end, we spend millions of rupees to beautify the city, make fancy accommodation for ministers, while at the other end we have nothing for the poor," said Kothari.

"There seems to be no balance and no dignity," he added.

A majority of the homeless are manual labourers who have migrated to urban centres from their villages in search of employment.

After a day at work earning as little as 150 rupees, they bed down wherever they can to avoid the attention of the police or criminal gangs.

"The poor are beaten by the police if they sleep on the road, there are no night shelters made for them. Should they then vanish into thin air?" asked Uma Nath, an aid worker who provides temporary shelter for the urban poor.

Activists said the number of temporary night shelters in Delhi fell from 46 to 24 in the last year despite an increase in the number of homeless.

Winter temperatures in the city are hardly extreme — rarely dropping below four degrees Celsius — still, lives have been lost.

"Who cares for us? We might as well die in the cold," said 45-year-old Ramnek Dhua, a labourer, while sitting outside a tent.

Dhua's wife and children were not allowed to sleep in the men's night shelter as authorities feared for her safety.

"But I can be raped more easily when I sleep out on the road," said Dhua's wife Janatika, covering her arms with threadbare old clothes.

The family's woes were accentuated in December when Delhi's municipal rulers tore down one large night shelter, where 300 people could sleep, as part of a park renovation scheme ahead of the Commonwealth Games.

Human rights activists protested against the demolition and accused the government of putting cosmetic improvements above human life.

"The government hates their presence. The poor contribute nothing to the economy, and people say they dent the city's international image by displaying grim poverty on every road," said Nath.

But city authorities challenged allegations made by activists and said they were doling out firewood and blankets, and putting relief measures in place as the cold snap was forecast to continue.

"We will soon make shelters and provide blankets and television in all these centres to make the poor comfortable," said Deep Mathur, spokesman for the Delhi Municipal Corporation.

"Right now, we are setting up tents to help people in the short term."

<http://72.249.57.50/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/30-indias-poor-scramble-or-protection-from-winter-chill-so-01>

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HT Correspondent, Hindustan Times

Email Author

New Delhi, January 09, 2010

First Published: 23:57 IST(9/1/2010)

Last Updated: 23:58 IST(9/1/2010)

200 families left out in the cold

The state government's apathy towards the plight of the homeless was once again highlighted on Saturday after the police, along with Railway Protection Force (RPF), evicted over 200 families from their settlement under Pul Mithai Wala in Old Delhi.

The eviction drive, according to locals, happened without notice and even had women and children hurt in the process.

The police, however, have denied any clash between their personnel and the evicted.

"Mainly the RPF was involved in the process," said Sagar Preet Hooda, Deputy Commissioner of Police, North Delhi.

"The eviction has already taken place and was a peaceful process. We have made no detentions."

The settlement under Pul Mithai Wala — an old flyover over the Railway Line at the Junction of Qutub Road and Azad Market Road — mainly comprised families of daily wage labourers, who are now left shelterless in bitter weather conditions.

MLA Prahlad Singh Sawhney, who met the families after the eviction, will meet Union Minister Kapil Sibal on this issue.

"How can they decide to throw them out at this time of the year? I will meet Mr Sibal tomorrow and request for a meeting with the Railway Minister on this issue," he added.

"No alternate arrangement has been made for the families. There was no warning and the police have even confiscated belongings of many. They will all have to fend for themselves in this weather," said Raj Bhushan, who is an activist associated with 'Shehri Adhikar Manch Begharon Ke Liye', a consortium of 26 bodies working with homeless people.

"The government's blatant disregard for the rights of the homeless, especially after High Court's recent criticism of the night shelter demolition on Pusa Road, is shocking," he added.

The High Court had lambasted the Municipal Corporation of Delhi on Wednesday for demolishing a temporary night shelter on Pusa Road.

Of the 250 people who were left shelterless, a balloon seller died because of exposure on New Year's Eve.

In wake of this death, the MCD had apologised for the demolition and made alternative arrangement for the evicted on January 3.

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/495717.aspx>

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