

Government deplores UN Rapporteur's comments on Mahatma Gandhi;

Rejects human rights allegations about water and sanitation programmes

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Government of India has deplored the serious insensitivity towards the Father of our Nation shown by Mr Leo Heller, the United Nations Special Rapporteur (UNSR) on human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. In a press release in New Delhi today, he said, "Now is a critical time to replace the lens of those glasses (Gandhi's glasses) with the human rights lens". The world knows that the Mahatma was the foremost proponent of human rights, including for sanitation, his unique and special focus. Gandhiji's glasses, the unique logo of the Swachh Bharat Mission, epitomise core human rights principles.

The UNSR on human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation undertook a visit to India from 27 October to 10 November 2017. While, the UNSR appears to compliment India's efforts in recent years in addressing gaps in water and sanitation services through an "unprecedented commitment", he goes on to make sweeping judgements which are either factually incorrect, based on incomplete information, or grossly misrepresent the drinking water and sanitation situation on the ground. Admitting that "two weeks is not sufficient to fully understand all aspects of the situation of human rights to water and sanitation in a country as big, diverse and complex in India", he still goes ahead to make the unsubstantiated allegation that human rights principles have not been properly addressed in India's water and sanitation programmes.

In a statement, the Central Government strongly rejected his mostly baseless assertions and reiterated that the Swachh Bharat Mission and the rural and urban drinking water programmes fully conform to the Human Rights Criteria and Principles (as established by the UN system) as listed below.

Availability

- Over 25 crore people have got sanitation facilities in three years. Over 2.7 lakh villages, 227 ODF districts and 6 ODF states are open defecation free (ODF)
- 77% of the habitations in rural areas have access to at least 40 Litres Per Capita per Day (LPCD) of water supply. More than 90% people in urban areas have access to safe drinking water

Quality

- SBM promotes safe toilet designs. States have flexibility to establish relevant quality standards
- GoI's national sub-mission to end arsenic and fluoride contamination in rural water in 4 years

Acceptability

- SBM emphasizes behavior change through community mobilization to ensure toilets are acceptable to all sections of society and privacy for women
- Separate toilets for men and women at all institutions

Accessibility

- Over 5.3 crore Individual Household Latrines have been constructed in three years alone
- The National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) provides for drinking water within the household premises or at a distance of not more than 100 metres from their household

Affordability

- SBM provides a toilet incentive of Rs.12,000 in rural areas and Rs.4,000 in urban areas
- Water is available for free or very nominal rates to the rural population

Non Discrimination

- SBM focuses on community approaches to sanitation, taking along all sections of society
- SBM ensures access to sanitation for specially abled, transgenders, poor and backward classes
- The NRDWP earmarks 22% funds for SC and 10% for ST concentrated habitations

Access to information

- Both SBM and NRDWP have robust MIS and dashboards which are in the public domain
- SBM trains local grassroots motivators to provide information on sanitation to communities

Participation

- The ODF declaration process is completely decentralized, democratic and community driven
- Women, children and marginalized groups are leaders in the mobilization and monitoring
- Village Water and Sanitation Committees plan, operate and monitor water supply schemes

Accountability

- SBM has a thorough verification process at district, state and national level. Third party verifications through reputed agencies are a key aspect of SBM.
- All toilets constructed under SBM must be geo-tagged

Sustainability

- Sustainability is one of the hallmarks of SBM. There is a detailed sustainability protocol, including continued IEC post ODF, and a sustainability verification of ODF verified villages
- NRDWP earmarks 10% allocation for water security through source and system sustainability

Referring to the incomplete understanding of water and sanitation in India, the statement says that the UNSR has failed to acknowledge the paradigm shift in national sanitation policy which has moved from construction of toilets to open defecation free communities and seems to be looking at the SBM from a tinted lens. He also attempts to question the findings of a third party, 1,40,000 household national survey by the Quality Council of India that usage of toilets was above 91%, by misleadingly comparing it with a survey of only 1024 households by Water Aid which focused on toilet technology and not on usage.

Regarding the allegation about the lack of toilets in government schools, the UNSR's claim citing a report by a private organization is denied. It may be noted that an unprecedented programme to ensure separate toilets for boys and girls in every school was successfully implemented in just one year between August 2014 and August 2015.

The UNSR also claims that there is inadequate attention and funds for water supply, whereas the reality is that since the launch of the National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) in 2009, Rs. 1,20,000 Crore has been invested by Centre and States on into rural drinking water, and Rs. 40,000 Crore has been invested by the Central Government on urban water supply since 2005. In addition, about Rs. 40,000 Crore are devolved every year to rural local bodies (through fourteenth finance commission) to provide basic services, including water and sanitation. Further, most states have invested heavily with their own resources on drinking water, both for rural and urban sectors.

The above are only a few examples of the inaccuracies, sweeping generalizations and biases revealed in the UNSR's rambling report (often confusing between rural and urban) on human rights and water supply and sanitation in India, which has been produced after only a two week visit with fleeting trips to a few states and including some anecdotal references. The Government has the highest commitment to human rights in general and particularly in the water supply and sanitation sectors and strongly rejects the claims in the UNSR's report and press statements.

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