

Inflation forcing 100 mn more towards malnutrition: Unicef

Nearly 100 million additional people, a significant number of them Indians, are at risk of malnutrition as food prices skyrocket across the world, the United Nations Children Fund (Unicef) has said.

'The price of food is skyrocketing around the world, and it's women and children who are most at risk because of the emerging food crisis,' Unicef USA said.

Branding it an 'emergency of enormous proportions', officials in the UN body said in an email to IANS that it was a 'silent tsunami'.

According to the global childcare watchdog, the price of rice has more than doubled in the last year, while wheat has increased over 130 percent.

For every percentage point that the price of staple foods increases, the number of people who become 'food-insecure' increases by 16 million, it warned.

'At the current rate, we can project that 1.2 billion people would become chronically hungry by 2025.'

Authorities at the Unicef India office here said the rise in food prices was a major crisis, given the huge population and the existing level of malnutrition in India.

'The increase in food prices is adding another layer of vulnerability, particularly among women and children,' said Victor Aguayo, chief of child nutrition and development, at Unicef India.

'Policy action and programme action need to be implemented to mitigate the impact of increasing food prices,' Aguayo told IANS.

He said two out of every five undernourished children worldwide were Indians; the addition of another layer of such population would be a huge burden for a country like India.

Inflation in India rose to a new high of 7.61 percent for the week ended April 26 from 7.57 percent for the week before, making food prices spiral. Currently, inflation is at an over three-year high.

From steel prices to food items, rising prices are creating a huge problem for people below the poverty line. Nearly one-fourth of Indians live on less than a dollar per day.

At least 46 percent of Indian kids below five years of age suffer from malnutrition.

'I am sure the Indian government can control the situation. But if food prices continue to increase it will lead to people skipping meals and staying hungry,' Aguayo added.

He said increasing food prices would have a negative impact on pregnant and lactating mothers, and children below three years of age would suffer the most.

While the US has blamed India and its growing middle class for the current food price crisis, Unicef said that there were many causes for this - weather, higher energy costs, population growth and increased use of grain for bio-fuels.

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