

Rat-Hole Mining in Meghalaya - II

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What is the issue?

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The Meghalaya government must urgently ensure that all illegal mines are shut down and employment of the mining workers are diversified.

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What are the concerns with illegal mines?

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- 15 miners were recently trapped inside a rat-hole coal mine in the East Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya.

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- The primary responsibility for the operation of illegal mines lies with the State government.

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- However, there has been no word on the miners by the state administration although search and rescue operations are still continuing.

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- This has exposed the extraordinary indifference in both central and state government to labour welfare in the state.

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- The National Green Tribunal has directed Meghalaya to close these illegal mines in 2014 and to levy punitive royalties on those that extracted the coal.

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- Despite this, illegal mines continue to operate and hence the state government should be called to account for ignoring the directions of the tribunal.

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What does the committee report reveal?

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- The Meghalaya government has been evasive on the issue of the continued operation of the illegal mines.

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- Hence a committee was appointed by the NGT headed by Justice B.P. Katoki committee to report on illegal mining in the state.

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- The committee recorded that mining activities are on and extraction of coal from the mines continue even after the ban, imposed by the NGT in 2014.

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- The committee also stated that in 11 districts of Meghalaya, 2,712 coal-laden trucks were seized since the ban was imposed, while 1,139 cases were registered.

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- Therefore, it is evident that despite the ban imposed by the NGT, transportation of illegally mined coal is going on and a large number of cases have been detected and registered.

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- Taking the report into consideration, the NGT recently asked the Meghalaya government to deposit Rs 100 crore with the CPCB for environmental restoration.

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What should be done?

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- The Government of Meghalaya should consider closing the rat-hole mines as its first-order priority.

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- It has already avoided taking action even after a similar mine-flooding accident in 2012 in South Garo Hills.

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- Many mining workers are ready to undertake the risky labour because of the higher-than-average wages paid.

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- Thus, it is the responsibility of the Centre and the State to rehabilitate the workers from impoverished communities, reportedly including some child labourers.

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- The Katoki panel reported that nearly 24,000 illegal mines are present in

Meghalaya as interpreted from satellite images.

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- The value of extracted coal stored in Meghalaya was officially estimated at over Rs. 3,078 crore four years ago.

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- The state government has also said that a ban on coal mining is not the solution, given the economic conditions in the region.

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- Yet, it has done little to implement reforms and diversify employment away from dirty mining under primitive conditions over the years, in spite of judicial orders.

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- If illegal mines continue to operate in violation of rules under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, the responsibility lies with the State government.

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- Recently, Parliament was informed that 22 States had constituted a task force to review illegal mining and act on it.

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- Meghalaya does not figure in that list and it is inevitable for the state to constitute its own task force to reform the plight of mining workers.

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Source: The Hindu

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