

## Residents living above century old mine fires to be shifted

The Jharkhand government and Coal India Limited (CIL) are preparing a rehabilitation package for 67,000 families to shift them from the Jharia mine area where fires has been raging below the ground for almost a century.

Jharia is in Dhanbad district, around 270 km from state capital Ranchi. It has huge deposits of coal, under the control of Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL).

According to BCCL officials, in Jharia 70 major mine fires have been raging underground in an area of around 400 sq km.

The BCCL officials have said the company has lost 37 million tonnes of coal worth Rs.30 billion due to the fires.

The fires have made the earth's surface unstable and dangerous to live on. Cave-ins are frequent. Over a dozen houses have been destroyed and at least 30 people killed over the years.

According to experts, 1,000 million tonnes of coal are still available in the Jharia mines, but they can be extracted only when people are shifted out and efforts made to extinguish the fires.

Jharia mines have been operational since 1896. The fires that started soon after spread in the 1970s.

'We have almost completed the rehabilitation package,' said Jay Shankar Tewary, state mines and geology secretary. 'Around Rs.4,000 crore (Rs.40 billion) will be spent in the next ten years in shifting of people from the mine fire area and rehabilitating them to safe places.'

According to officials, CIL - the parent company of BCCL - will pay Rs.25 billion for the rehabilitation, and the rest will be shared by the state government and funds generated from the coal conservation and development fund.

The state government officials said 23,000 of the 67,000 families staying in the danger zone do not have any documents proving their rights to the plots on which they live. 'The rehabilitation package will deal with both legal and illegal landholders, but their packages will be different,' they said.

Earlier rehabilitation packages were not accepted by the residents of Jharia. On many occasions, they held demonstrations seeking adoption of scientific methods to extinguish the fires without shifting them.

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