

People living above mine fires refuse to move

The residents of Jharia in Jharkhand's Dhanbad district, who are living on top of coal mine fires that have been raging for 92 years, have refused to accept a rehabilitation package prepared by the state government and Coal India Ltd (CIL).

On May 6, the state government, CIL, and Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL) officials finalised a Rs.60 billion rehabilitation package for the residents.

According to a report prepared by the state government, 67,000 families live in Jharia where fires have been raging in a maze of mines.

Under the package, the people who do not work for BCCL will be given a house or land. The package is silent about how the authorities plan to rehabilitate shopkeepers.

The government and CIL also plan to shift a highway and a railway track passing through the area.

To oppose the package, Jharia residents observed a shutdown Sunday. The residents are not in favour of shifting the entire town to another place.

'The state government and coal companies have virtually done nothing to extinguish the mine fire. Shifting the entire town is not a solution,' said Saurabh Kumar, a resident.

A few years ago, the authorities had prepared a plan to divide the town into areas affected by the mine fire and other areas. The plan was not implemented.

Pinaki Rao, secretary of the Jharia Bachao Samiti (JBS) said: 'There are two areas in Jharia. One is the coalfield area and the other is township area. We are not against shifting of the (people in the) coalfield area. But there is no need to shift the township area. CIL is trying to shift township area to extract coal for commercial purposes.'

According to JBS, there is confusion in data over the number of families. 'The state government says 67,000 families in both coalfield and township area while another data says 79,000 families,' said Rao.

In 1997, a public interest petition on the subject was filed in the Supreme Court. The data in 2003 reveal that there were 37,373 families of those who work for BCCL and 16,373 others, while there were 12,719 families who were described as encroachers. The total came to 65,300.

Jharia has a huge deposit of coal that belongs to BCCL. According to BCCL authorities, the company has lost 37 million tonnes of coal worth Rs.30 billion due to the mine fires.

According to experts, the Jharia region has about 1,000 million tonne of coal that can be extracted only when people are shifted and efforts made to extinguish the fires underground.

The first mine in Jharia was opened in 1896 and the first underground fire detected in 1916. During the 1970s, the fires started spreading. They have engulfed over a dozen houses and killed at least 30 people over the years.

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