

Railway contractors refuse to return to Assam rebel-infested areas

Hit by a spate of killings, railway contractors engaged in several major projects in Assam Sunday refused to return to rebel-infested areas until normalcy returns, throwing ongoing schemes worth Rs.16.77 billion into jeopardy.

Contractors engaged by the Northeast Frontier Railway in a major gauge conversion project - from metre to broad gauge - in the 201 km-long Lumding-Silchar sector in southern Assam pulled out workers from project sites in the North Cachar Hills district after Black Widow rebels massacred 10 railway workers and at least 12 others last fortnight.

'Our workers have said they would move the Human Rights Commission if we put pressure on them to return to work. We have, therefore, decided not to resume work in the stretch of rail track passing through North Cachar Hills district,' Sankar Das, general secretary of the NF Railway Construction Contractors' Association, said Sunday.

The contractors' decision came even as the NF Railways Sunday resumed train services through North Cachar Hills district after suspending operations for a week. This came in the wake of reports of a food shortage in the southern Assam districts and the adjoining states of Tripura and Mizoram that the train link serves.

The association, comprising 16 contracting firms, Saturday met senior NF Railway officials in Guwahati and urged them to liaise with the government and arrange for demobilization of machinery and other material lying 'unprotected' at remote project sites.

According to estimates provided by the contractors, they have incurred a loss to the tune of Rs.500 million so far following disruption in work due to attacks and threats by insurgents in the area. The gauge conversion project in the sector began in 1997 and was set for completion by 2010 after the project cost escalated to Rs.16.77 billion due to delays beyond the control of the railways.

The Dima Haram Daogah (Jewel faction), popularly known as the Black Widow, announced a truce with the government until June 25 and has called upon railway authorities and truckers to resume services to the southern district of North Cachar Hills where its cadres had carried out the fresh attacks starting May 10.

The Assam government has since rejected the group's truce offer and decided to intensify security operations in the area. A decision has also been taken to raise an 'auxiliary force' of 1,000 men comprising former militants to combat insurgency in the North Cachar Hills and elsewhere in the state.

A loose band of fighters, the Black Widow was formed in 2003 after a faction headed by rebel commander Jewel Garlosa broke away from the parent group, the Dima Haram Daogah.

This happened after the group entered into a ceasefire with the government and agreed to begin peace negotiations.

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