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EMBARGOED UNTIL APRIL 27, 2018 (INDIA TIME)

Nine Years of Neglect: Deaths on Indian Tea Estates under the World Bank's Watch

Assam, India, April 27, 2018 – Today, two local groups from Assam, India sent a letter to the World Bank Group's independent complaint office, the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO), highlighting that the Bank's neglect over the last nine years has contributed to deaths and injuries on tea plantations in the North-East of the country. Exactly nine years ago, on April 27, 2009, the World Bank invested in Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited (APPL), one of India's largest tea producers. APPL is majority owned by the Tata Group and has 25 tea plantations in Assam and West Bengal.

"Nine years after the World Bank invested in APPL, we hear stories of tea workers – often young women and men – and their children, who have died following work-related accidents, prolonged exposure to hazardous pesticides, and a lack of adequate medical care," said Wilfred Topno, Secretary, PAD.

When the World Bank invested in APPL, it said the investment would empower workers through a worker shareholder program, improve labour conditions, and achieve a significant development impact for 155,000 people that live and work on the plantations. But the Bank has neglected its duties to ensure its public funds serve its mandate of reducing poverty.

"Recently, in APPL's Hattigor tea plantation, we documented the death of a 40-year-old worker who was assigned pesticide spraying duties even though the plantation knew of his tuberculosis. One day, he was riding his bicycle while carrying pesticide cans when he became dizzy, fell to the ground, and injured his head and neck. He died soon after," said Stephen Ekka, Director of PAJHRA.

PAJHRA and PAD's letter to the CAO documents seven such stories of death and injury by neglect in the last two years. This includes the story of a young worker who lost her baby to cardiac arrest when she was forced to deliver the baby in a car on the way to an external hospital. Her earlier requests for an ultrasound were allegedly refused by plantation hospital staff. Another case concerns a 32-year-old worker who died after severing off two fingers of his hand while operating a tea-plucking machine. He too died, after allegedly receiving poor medical care.

These stories likely skim the surface of a systemic and widespread problem. They have previously not come to light due to strict surveillance on the plantations, designed to prevent public scrutiny and keep workers from complaining. It is unclear whether local police authorities were informed and a Magisterial inquiry conducted, as required under Indian law when deaths occur allegedly due to machinery or accidents.

In November 2016, the CAO released an investigation report finding that the Bank had failed to remedy low wages, restricted freedom of association, poor housing and sanitation, and



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dangerous pesticide exposure at APPL. It also found failures in the shareholder program with respect to consultation and information disclosure. But the Bank chose to disagree with many of the CAO's findings, and has done little to address the problems.

“The abysmally low wages on Assam tea plantations – which are less than the state-mandated minimum – is a root-cause of many of the problems,” said Jayshree Satpute, co-founder of Nazdeek, a supporting organisation. “Workers are unable to afford the bare necessities, let alone the cost of medical care, which is too often necessary due to the sub-standard care provided by APPL hospitals. The Plantations Labour Act continues to be flagrantly breached.”

PAJHRA and PAD are working closely with tea workers, unions, and grassroots groups across Assam to demand a wage of Rs. 350 per day. Presently, tea workers in Assam are paid a daily wage of only Rs. 137 pursuant to a wage agreement that expired in 2017.

While the Bank points to financial constraints faced by APPL as an excuse for slow progress, the remuneration of key managerial personnel at APPL has significantly increased over the last two years. The salary of APPL's Managing Director, for instance, increased from over 9 million rupees in 2016 to over 14 million rupees in 2017.

“The World Bank has utterly failed to exercise its leverage to address the CAO's damning findings,” said Anirudha Nagar, South Asia Director of Accountability Counsel, a supporting organisation. “While APPL management lines their pockets, the Bank should be providing funding and ensuring budgets are appropriately directed towards the health and safety of workers in the face of preventable deaths. But, the Bank is neither on the Board of Directors nor on a committee established to implement an action plan. The Bank has also failed to consult workers on how to improve conditions, so it has chosen to selectively hear the skewed perspectives of APPL management. The Bank is not being the honest, neutral broker it holds itself out to be.”

Media reports suggest that Tata Global Beverages may sell its stake in the plantations.

“Moving forward, we demand that the World Bank continue to remain invested and work towards a safe, healthy, and secure future for workers,” said Stephen Ekka. “In the event the Bank sells its shares before making improvements, it cannot be allowed to profit. We demand any financial gain earned on the back of workers risking their lives be fully channelled into protecting their health and safety,” said Wilfred Topno.

PAJHRA and PAD's letter is available at: <http://www.accountabilitea.org>

For more information, please contact:

Stephen Ekka, PAJHRA, ekka.stephen@gmail.com, (+91) 9435082656

Wilfred Topno, PAD, wiltopno@gmail.com, (+91) 9435186899

Anirudha Nagar, Accountability Counsel, anirudha@accountabilitycounsel.org, (+91) 8130378869

Jayshree Satpute, Nazdeek, jayshreesatpute@nazdeek.org, (+91) 9871155098

