

33 Dead in Meghalaya Illegal Mine Blast; Judicial Commission Formed



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Shillong, February 16, 2026: The death toll in the devastating explosion at an illegal coal mine in East Jaintia Hills has risen to 33, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma confirmed on Monday during a suo-motu statement in the State Assembly.

The tragedy occurred on the morning of February 5 in the remote Mynsngat-Thangsko area, where an illegal “rat-hole” coal mine reportedly exploded, allegedly due to the unauthorized use of explosives inside narrow underground tunnels. The incident has triggered widespread outrage and prompted the state government to constitute a high-level Judicial Commission of Inquiry.

Initial rescue operations carried out by the NDRF, SDRF and local police recovered 18 bodies on the first day. Over the following week, the toll increased as more bodies were retrieved from the site and several critically injured workers succumbed to their injuries at hospitals in Shillong and Guwahati.

Although rescue operations were formally concluded on February 9, verification of two additional deaths reported by families pushed the confirmed toll to 33, making it one of the deadliest mining disasters in Meghalaya’s recent history.

In response to public outcry and mounting political pressure, the government has set up a Judicial Commission under the Commission of Inquiry Act, 1952.

The panel will be headed by Justice (retd) RS Chauhan, former Chief Justice of the Uttarakhand and Telangana High Courts. Retired IPS officer H. Nongpluh and retired IAS officer Peter Dkhar have been appointed as members. The commission has been given six months to submit its report.

The inquiry will investigate the causes of the February 5 explosion, identify those responsible for running the illegal mine, and examine possible administrative lapses that allowed operations to continue despite a 2014 ban by the National Green Tribunal on rat-hole mining.

Alongside the judicial inquiry, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by the DIG (Eastern Range) has been constituted to pursue criminal charges.

Authorities have arrested at least seven individuals linked to the illegal mining operation. In a statewide crackdown, police have registered 62 FIRs and seized over 15,000 metric tonnes of illegally extracted coal. Large quantities of gelatin sticks and detonators were also recovered from labour camps in the district.

The state government has initiated financial assistance for the bereaved families. As of February 16, ₹24 lakh has been disbursed to the next of kin of eight victims. The Chief Minister stated that compensation for the remaining families is being processed through the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF).

Despite the decade-old ban on rat-hole mining, the hazardous practice has continued clandestinely in parts of Meghalaya. The latest explosion has once again raised serious questions about enforcement failures and regulatory oversight.

Addressing the Assembly, Governor CH Vijayashankar said the state is working toward a transition to “regulated and scientific mining,” with three projects already approved and 20 more in the pipeline. However, for the families of the 33 workers who lost their lives in Thangsko, the promised reforms offer little consolation.

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Assam Times Staff. editor@assamtimes.org

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