

Pay hurdle for Assam tea workers



Guwahati: The Indian Tea Association (ITA), the apex tea association, has informed the Assam government of the industry's inability to pay the interim relief to its workers because of financial adversity.

A delegation led by ITA chairman Azam Monem along with vice chairman Vivek Goenka, former chairman C.K. Dhanuka, secretary general Arijit Raha and secretary of Assam branch ITA Abhijeet Sharma, met Assam chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal, finance minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and industries minister Chandra Mohan Patowary, on Saturday night to discuss several critical issues confronting the Assam tea industry.

"We have expressed our inability to pay the interim relief of Rs 30 to the workers and have told the government," Monem said. The ITA, which also represents the Consultative Committee of Plantation Associations, has 325 gardens as members. He said the association will discuss the issue with tea unions and the labour department.

"Nobody wants the industry to die and the industry does not want to pay badly as well. The market is very depressed now," he said.

The Assam government had issued a notification on July 3 asking the tea industry to pay a minimum amount of interim relief of Rs 30 per day with retrospective effect from March till the finalisation of the revised minimum wages. At present the industry is paying Rs 137 as daily wages.

Monem said the organised sector is constrained by high overhead costs and unremunerative prices which has resulted in many estates sustaining losses and being compelled to compromise the developmental activities in tea estates like replanting/rejuvenation of old bushes, investments on worker welfare and others. Assam tea accounts for over 50 per cent of tea exports.

Another ITA official said the tea industry had in principle agreed to consider an interim pending finalisation prospectively.

"However, pursuant to deliberations at the meeting a proposal to pay from April was under consideration. The quantum was not decided. This high increase was not envisaged. We had given Rs 17.50 in Bengal. The level was expected to be around that level," he said.

Monem claimed the government has agreed to compensate the losses of the industry by helping in welfare provisions like ration and said the industry is happy to learn that the state government has decided to provide free medicines to estate hospitals under health benefit schemes like the Atal Amrit Abhiyan.

The association said the industry is under acute stress because of tea prices remaining stagnant over the last five years ..

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