



WORLD NEWS | Tue Aug 30, 2016 1:18am EDT

Sustainability certified India tea

Sustainability certified India tea estates violate worker rights: report

By Anuradha Nagaraj

CHENNAI, India (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Tea estates in southern India are hiring temporary workers during peak plucking season and denying these laborers basic rights as required by law, said a report released on Tuesday.

A survey in the southern state of Tamil Nadu at two tea estates - both certified by the international nonprofit Rainforest Alliance - found that in 2015, up to half of the workforce were temporary workers, and most were migrants or retirees.

Focus group discussions and individual interviews with the workers showed the casual laborers did not receive a bonus, contributions for their children's school fees, a pension fund, crèche facilities or other social security benefits given to permanent workers.

"Tea workers around the world are facing dangerous and degrading working conditions," said the report by India-based Glocal Research and The India Committee of the Netherlands, non-governmental organizations working on labor and human rights.

Tea plantations in India - the world's second largest producer of tea after China - employ an estimated 3.5 million workers, the report said.

The report focused on the Nilgiris district in Tamil Nadu, one of the main tea-growing belts in India with approximately 200,000 tea plantation workers.

Up to half of the workforce are migrants from other parts of India.

According to the Indian Plantation Act of 1951, all workers, temporary and permanent, should be treated equally. However, poor enforcement by government authorities has allowed estate managers to deny workers their rights, the report said.

The report also raised concerns about advances paid once a year to workers to meet their expenses for education, marriage, house construction and emergencies.

Temporary workers have to repay the advance in full if they want to leave the estate for other work, creating a cycle of debt bondage in some cases.



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The report found that risks of injury or illness remain high, particularly among female workers.

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It also found that overtime hours and compensation do not comply with legal requirements or the criteria of the Rainforest Alliance and the Sustainable Agriculture Network of non-profit conservation groups.

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Responding to the findings, the Rainforest Alliance said they had formally complained to the two certified plantations, and an investigation had been initiated.

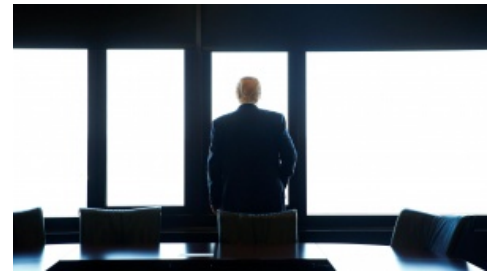
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(Reporting by Anuradha Nagaraj @AnuraNagaraj, editing by Alisa Tang. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's

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