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Bangladesh Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation

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The tea workers in Sylhet region are at high risk of tuberculosis (TB) due to unhygienic living, malnutrition and lack of awareness.

Meanwhile, the country along with the rest of the world is going to observe World TB Day tomorrow.

“I was suffering from cough, chest pain and fever for several weeks. I took paracetamol and Napa but to no effect. Lastly I came to TB centre in Sreemangal upazila town and they found TB after checking me on March 13,” said Mithun Roy, 28, a tea worker of Kalighat tea garden in Sreemangal upazila of Moulvibazar.

Dhumketu Tanti, 45, of same tea garden, said, “I used to take drugs from my youth. At one stage I was attacked by TB. I am now okay after long treatment. I no longer take any drugs.”

According to HEED Bangladesh, 14,703 tuberculosis patients were found including 2,233 people among the tea gardens workers in 16 upazilas of Sylhet, Habiganj and Moulvibazar last year while 13,385 patients were found including 1,382 people among the tea gardens workers in the same area in 2016.

The non-governmental organisation is working in three districts under Sylhet division from 1980, said Munuru Jacob, project director of Challenge TB under HEED Bangladesh that works with the cooperation of GFATM (Global Fund for Aids, TB, and Malaria).

Challenge TB project covers 184 tea gardens and 72 Punjees (villages with betel plantations) located in 16 upazilas. So far, 1.43 lakh and 784 patients have been cured through the HEED-run projects, he added.

Countrywide, 221 people in every lakh suffering from tuberculosis but it is over 300 in Sylhet tea gardens, he said, adding that the number of TB affected tea garden workers is increasing because they cannot meet the basic requirements of life.

Dilip Ranjan Kurmi, president of Sylhet Cha Jonogosthi Chhatra-Jubo Kalyan Parishad, said around 95% tea workers take illegal and unhealthy homemade drugs, costing a good portion of their daily wage of Tk 85 and they can hardly afford nutritious foods.

Makhon Lal Karmokar, president of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union, said there is lack of drinking water facilities in the tea gardens, along with other problems, which make the workers vulnerable to TB and other diseases.

Dr Md Abul Kalam Azad, deputy civil surgeon of Sylhet, said awareness, healthy living and timely treatment is needed for dealing with tuberculosis.

Saytakam Chakrabarty, civil surgeon of Moulvibazar, said living in congested and dirty environment and lack of healthy food is responsible for high prevalence of tuberculosis among tea garden workers.

They are reluctant to take treatment facilities outside certain boundaries of tea garden areas, he added.

TB is caused by a bacterium called Mycobacterium tuberculosis, which usually attack the lungs, but it can attack any part of the body such as kidney, spine, and brain, experts said. Not everyone infected with TB bacteria becomes sick.

Two TB-related conditions exist: latent TB infection and TB disease.

If it is not treated properly, TB disease can turn fatal.