The tardy response of the Centre and the State of Meghalaya to the plight of at least 15 workers trapped in a rat-hole coal mine since mid-December has exposed the extraordinary indifference in government to labour welfare and the law. Two workers have been found dead in a second mine in the East Jaintia Hills district. The primary responsibility for the operation of illegal mines lies with the State government, and it should be called to account for ignoring the directions of the National Green Tribunal to close them and levy punitive royalties on those that extracted the coal. Several appeals are before the Supreme Court in connection with a ban ordered by the Tribunal on rat-hole mining and the transport of already mined coal. It should be possible at least now to put an end to it. The Meghalaya government has been evasive on the issue of the continued operation of the illegal mines, in spite of the adverse findings of the Justice B.P. Katoki committee appointed by the NGT. It avoided taking action even after a similar mine-flooding accident that claimed 15 lives in 2012 in South Garo Hills, and the subsequent ban. Although the NGT has ordered the State to deposit ₹100 crore with the Central Pollution Control Board for environmental restoration in the wake of the recent disaster at Ksan in East Jaintia Hills, the first-order priority is to close the rat-hole mines. It is the responsibility of the Centre and the State to rehabilitate the workers from impoverished communities, reportedly including some child labourers, who are ready to undertake the risky labour because of the higher-than-average wages paid. This should not be difficult, considering that the value of extracted coal stored in Meghalaya was officially estimated at over ₹3,078 crore four years ago, and mineral resources should be treated as state property.

The scale is high: as interpreted from satellite images and reported by the Katoki panel, it could be of the order of 24,000 mines, many of them illegal. If illegal mines continue to operate in flagrant violation of rules under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, the responsibility lies with the State government. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has said a ban on coal mining is not the solution, given the economic conditions in the region. Yet, the State government has done little to implement reforms and diversify employment away from dirty mining under primitive conditions over the years, in spite of judicial orders. In fact, authorities in Shillong continue to ignore such directions, as the accident at the Lumthari mine in East Jaintia Hills shows. As recently as in December, Parliament was informed that 22 States had constituted a task force to review illegal mining and act on it, but Meghalaya does not figure in that list. A clean-up is overdue.