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Railway Protection Force reports 80 deaths on Shramik trains

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ht Anisha Dutta
Hindustan Times, New Delhi



There have been 18 deaths in the North Eastern Railway zone, 19 in North Central zone and 13 in East Coast Railway zone. (ANI Photo)

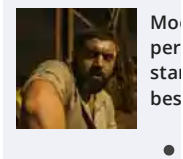
There have been almost 80 deaths on board the Shramik Special trains (for stranded migrant workers) between May 9 and May 27, according to data from the Railway Protection Force reviewed by Hindustan Times.

The trains were launched on May 1, and till May 27, 3,840 have been run, transporting around five million migrant workers back home. On Wednesday, there were reports of nine deaths on these trains over the previous few days, but the rail ministry clarified immediately that most of those who died were “chronic disease patients” many of whom were actually in the cities for

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“medical treatment” and could come back only after these special trains were launched. It was responding to some reports that claimed the passengers died of exhaustion, heat, and hunger.

This is the first time, though, that details of more deaths are emerging. An RPF official confirmed the numbers and said that an initial list has been compiled, however, a final list will soon be issued after coordinating with the states.

A spokesperson for the ministry of railways, upon being specifically asked about the 80 deaths, said the “chairman railway board had responded to the query in the press conference.”

At a press conference on Friday, railway board chairman VK Yadav said: “Anyone’s death is a big loss... Indian Railways has a control system where the train is immediately stopped if someone is found ill and they are sent to the nearest hospital base to try and save their lives. Many such passengers were attended to and many deliveries also took place. I can imagine the plight of labourers travelling even in these conditions. In case of deaths, the local zones investigate the reason and without an investigation, there are allegations that they died of hunger when there was no shortage of food. Some deaths occurred and we are compiling the figures... we will issue the figures in a few days.”

He did not mention any number. To be sure, the RPF data will need to be vetted and validated by the ministry.

According to the data reviewed by HT, the deaths were recorded from May 9 till May 27 across several zones including the East Central Railway zone, North Eastern Railway zone, Northern Railway Zone and North Central Railway zone; and the ages of the dead ranged from 4 to 85. The list also mentions the co-morbidities or accidents that caused the deaths in a few cases. Data between May 1 and May 8 was not available.

There have been 18 deaths in the North Eastern Railway zone, 19 in North Central zone and 13 in East Coast Railway zone. Nearly 80% of total Shramik trains are destined for Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and ply on these zones.

The Railway ministry, in response to reports of the nine deaths, said in a statement on Friday morning: “Indian Railways has been running Shramik special Trains on a daily basis throughout the country to ensure that migrants can travel back to their homes. It has been observed that some people who are availing this service have pre-existing medical conditions which aggravates the risk they face during the Covid-19 pandemic. A few unfortunate cases of deaths related to pre-existing medical conditions while travelling have happened.”

“Heat, exhaustion and thirst are among the primary issues faced by the passengers on board these trains. We have seen several of such cases over the past month,” a zonal railway officer said, requesting anonymity, referring to the 80 deaths reported across the country.

According to RPF data, there have been 10 deaths in Northern Railway zone. “I am not aware of the total numbers but in all the cases that we know of there were health conditions like one person had heart valve replaced, one had hypertension. But to say that the primary reason of deaths is hunger is not correct,” said Northern Railways’ spokesperson.



On Friday, railway minister Piyush Goyal also issued a statement appealing to people suffering from ailments to avoid travel by Shramik Trains.

“I appeal to people suffering from serious ailments, pregnant women & those above 65 years and below 10 years of age to travel only when necessary in Shramik Trains. Railway Parivaar is committed to ensuring safety of all passengers,” he said.

In several cases reported by the railways the reasons for the deaths are pre-existing illness. In the case of 23-year-old Parbina Khatun, from Katihar District in Bihar the report says, “travelling from Ahmadabad to Madhubani with her sister, died due to her illness. Body was detained for further action.” She died on May 25.

In West Central Zone, on May 16, Javed Ahmed aged 55 years, was found dead aboard a train. The ministry’s report said: ” He fell unconscious between Itarsi-Piparia of Jabalpur division/WCR GRP Jabalpur took custody of the deceased body for further course of action. District administration has been informed and they are checking his family.”

On Thursday, in an interim order, the Supreme Court said states where the workers are boarding trains and Indian Railways should provide food and water to the migrants.

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