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For Your information

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Court finds Unicef and government responsible for Assam child deaths

The Guwahati High Court rules that both Unicef and the Assam state government are to blame for the death of more than 30 children who were administered vitamin A vaccines in the state

In a judgement delivered this week, the Assam High Court has held both Unicef and the state government responsible for the death of more than 30 Assamese children. The children died after they were administered vitamin A vaccines in November 2001. Many became ill after taking doses of the vitamin.

A two-judge bench of the Guwahati High Court in Assam pronounced its verdict on a public interest case filed by two Assam residents against the state government and Unicef.

The court has asked the state government to pay compensation to the families of the children who died. It ordered compensation at the rate of Rs 20,000 over and above the paltry Rs 5,000 that each family has been already paid.

Chief justice of the high court, P P Navlekar, and Justice AH Saikia said in their judgement that Unicef had introduced stronger doses of the vaccine by replacing the traditional two-millilitre spoon with five-millilitre cups.

Although Unicef maintains that there was nothing wrong with the vaccines it supplied to the Assam government, the health workers involved were not properly trained and briefed, leading to the administration of greater doses that many of the sick children could not tolerate.

According to the court verdict, there was an element of negligence in the way the Assam health department had administered the vaccines, leading to the death of so many children.

Assam government officials have refused to comment on the court verdict. They say they will abide by its ruling.

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With best Wishes for a Happy New Year and personal regards

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