

Underground explosion adds to China's appalling death toll in coal mines

Terry Cook
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A week after a gas explosion ripped through the state-owned Muchongguo coal mine in China's southwestern Guizhou province, the number of deaths is still uncertain as authorities attempt to conceal the extent of the disaster.

About 244 miners were underground on September 26 at the time of the blast, some working 200 metres below the surface. Hundreds of workers are still digging with picks, shovels and their bare hands to reach survivors after the mine officials ruled out the use of machines and explosives, saying the conditions underground were too unstable.

Last Friday the official death toll was 48. Of the 86 miners rescued, 12 were in a comatose condition. As the rescue work progressed, mine officials were forced to admit that many men were still missing and the number of dead could be as high as 160.

According to the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, a doctor at the mining bureau hospital said: "Rescuers have found plenty of bodies but they're keeping them in the mine until night-time because there are a lot of people gathered around the mine and officials don't want people to see the bodies."

On Tuesday a further report claimed that another 59 miners have been located and were being kept alive on rice porridge, soup and milk poured down to them through a pipe. The extent of their injuries is unknown. Officials stated that it would be days before rescuers reach the trapped men.

On Wednesday, officials admitted that the death toll had risen to 125.

Within hours of the explosion the central government dispatched Sheng Huaren, the State Economic and Trade Commission Minister, to the region, saying that he would lead a team to organise the rescue operation and carry out a full investigation.

The real concern of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing is to minimise the political fallout from the mine explosion. Already a campaign is underway to find a scapegoat. Immediately after the disaster the Beijing-based *China Youth News* criticised local officials in Guizhou for "turning a deaf ear" to the central government's safety regulations.

The Chinese government has always been sensitive to criticism of the country's notoriously unsafe mining industry. Up until 1980 the media was forbidden to release figures on mining or other industrial deaths, and even now the official estimates are a gross underestimation.

Beijing now acknowledges that thousands of miners are killed each year—the average annual figure is higher than the total number of workers killed in coal mining accidents throughout the rest of the world. According to the State Coal Bureau's newspaper the *China Coal News*, 665 coal miners were killed in the first quarter of this year, and 136 miners died in Guizhou alone between mid-July and mid-September in 20 separate accidents. Of these 18 were caused by methane gas explosions.

In the first nine months of 1999, 3,464 miners lost their lives and a total of 7,423 were killed in 1998. Thousands more fatalities go unreported in the country's smaller mines.

But miners are not only killed in accidents. A less publicised figure reveals that 10,000 miners perish every year from lung diseases caused by poor ventilation systems. The lack of ventilation also means that methane gas can build-up creating highly volatile conditions in China's gaseous mines.

This year the central government has promised to improve mine safety and tighten up regulations. It has threatened to sack the managers of mines where

accidents occur—but only if more than 10 workers are killed. Little else has been done. Under conditions where it is closing down mines and privatising the country's mining industry the government is not about to spend the large amounts of money needed to provide even basic safety standards.

At present there are a few thousand qualified inspectors to monitor safety standards in more than 200,000 mines. Most mines lack rudimentary fire fighting and safety equipment and have no funds to purchase them.

Beijing is attempting to blame the high number of deaths on the small unregulated and unlicensed coal mines that have sprung up during the last 20 years but some of the worst accidents have taken place in state-owned mines. The Muchongguo mine, the scene of the latest disaster, was a fully-licensed, government-regulated mine.

A mine official told the press that the Muchongguo mine, which employs 4,000 people, was in dire financial straits. “Salaries for miners have not been paid on time,” he said. According to the *Guizhou Daily* newspaper, an accident occurred in the same mine in 1983 killing 84 people.

Far from being concerned about mine accidents, the government factors deaths in state-owned mines into output targets. In 1999, the newly established State Bureau for Supervising Coal Mine Safety allowed large state-owned pits one death for every million tonnes of coal produced, medium-sized pits were permitted four deaths for every million tonnes and small mines up to eight deaths per million tonnes.

Up to June the bureau had shut down 35,000 so-called illegal or small mines claiming the closures were part of the drive to eradicate unsafe mining practices. The government's main aim, however, was to rein in the country's huge coal output, which threatens to glut markets and undermine profits. Last year China produced 1.03 billion tonnes of coal or one third of the total world production.

While cutting back output in small mines, the bureaucracy is also attempting to drive up productivity in other mines to provide cheap coal for electricity production and other industrial needs. Coal-fired power stations account for 70 percent the country's energy needs.

More accidents and deaths will inevitably taken

place.



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