

Twelve die in South African gold mine disaster

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Twelve mineworkers were killed in an explosion at the Beatrix gold mine on Tuesday May 8, in South Africa's worst mining disaster in two years.

The explosion at the mine near Welkom, 280km southwest of Johannesburg, occurred about 850 metres underground and tore apart a development area where the men were working. Two more miners suffered serious burns, one of whom is in a critical condition in a local hospital. Six others escaped unharmed. Four thousand men were working in the mine at the time of the explosion and all have been accounted for. As news of the disaster spread, hundreds of anxious relatives telephoned the mine to find out whether their loved ones were safe.

The immediate cause of the disaster is thought to have been a methane gas explosion. A broken fan had been reported the night before, which would have reduced air circulation and increased the danger of a gas build up. Four senior members of staff—two electricians, a vent officer and a production supervisor, who had been sent down the mine to investigate the breakage, were among the dead. The other eight fatalities were construction workers repairing tracks. The disaster comes 51 weeks after a similar explosion killed seven at the same mine on May 15 last year.

In a statement, Gold Fields Free State divisional manager Dana Roets claimed that the lessons of last year's disaster had been learnt and the four senior members of staff were equipped with devices used to measure the presence of methane gas. He said that the deadly gas is "lighter than air and so in a haulage area methane can be quite high overhead and difficult to detect". He added that the lack of circulation caused by the broken fan could increase the danger of a methane build up.

The government has announced that there will be an

investigation into the explosion. One question that must be addressed is why work at the mine had not been stopped, at least in the vicinity of the broken fan, when the danger of a build up of methane was known. With 4,000 miners underground at the time, the disaster could have been far greater.

South Africa's deep-level gold mines are among the most dangerous work environments in the world. The death toll this century is reported as anything from 69,000 to 100,000, with more than one million workers injured in South African gold mines.

The gold is reached by blasting, which destabilizes the overhead roofs and creates a constant danger of rock falls. Methane gas explosions and fire are also serious hazards, causing many deaths.

In the industry's last major accident in July 1999, a methane gas explosion at a mine in the gold belt southwest of Johannesburg killed 19 miners. The country's worst mining disaster was in 1986, when 177 workers were killed as a result of a polyurethane fire at a mine east of Johannesburg. A total of 313 miners were killed in 1999, 372 in 1998 and 424 in 1997.

At the time of the accident in July 1999, a BBC report gave some idea of conditions underground: "All of South Africa's significant gold deposits are very deep underground, miles down, at depths that ordinary human beings find hard to comprehend.

"The shafts are so deep that the rock is hot to the touch. The devil's workplace. And like the devil's workplace, working at these depths is very dangerous. Newspaper reports talk of mine cave-ins and shaft collapses. The real thing is far nastier, where the pressure builds up in deep level rock until the whole tunnel explodes inwards, footwall, hangingwall, sidewall, the lot, crushing completely anything in its way."

The end of the apartheid regime has brought the introduction of better safety regulations but the unions complain that there are still not enough inspectors to enforce them, and that some mine managers still put output before safety.

Even though there has been some improvement in the industry's safety record since 1994, over the past three years the death rate has averaged more than one miner killed everyday in South Africa's gold mines.

The South African gold industry has to compete on the world markets with modern, open cast gold production in North America and Australia. Here miners cut the tops off low-grade mountain deposits, which are then crushed, soaked in cyanide and the precious metal extracted from the liquor. This low cost, low labour production threatens the very existence of the South African gold industry and increases pressure to maximise production at all costs, resulting in disasters like the one at the Beatrix mine this week.



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