

South Africa: Report cites faulty fan in mine explosion

Our correspondent
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A preliminary accident report showed that a critically important extractor fan had been faulty for nine consecutive days before the May 8 explosion at Gold Fields' Beatrix gold mine in Free State, South Africa, which killed 12 miners. Gold Fields spokesman, Willie Jacobsz, claimed that electricians could find no reason why the fan had been constantly tripping, but failed to explain why mining was not suspended until the cause was found and the fan repaired.

Chief mine inspector for the South African government, May Hermanus, said: "The stoppage of a critical fan . . . caused a dangerous situation to develop on May 8." She explained that the fire patrolman found that each day, between April 30 to May 7 this year, the fan was not operating. "He reported the stoppage to the banksman on three occasions," she said.

Hermanus also reported that on the morning before the blast a ventilation construction foreman had measured 1.1 percent and 1.2 percent flammable gas in two places near to the fan (over one percent is considered very dangerous). "Two fans, including the critical fan were not operating at the time," she said.

Methane is released by the rotting of organic material. It is odourless and invisible, and since it is of very low density compared to air, it collects in the highest places in the mine passages. Although all the miners had been given methanometers to measure air content, most did not have the sticks necessary to raise the devices to the height needed to take recordings.

On what had triggered the explosion, Hermanus said, " On the basis of the available information the most likely trigger is a spark at the electrical switchgear." She explained that standard fans and not special flameproof fans (which have spark presenters) were installed.

Hermanus said one of the disconcerting factors was

that one of those killed, shift boss Jerome Janse van Rensburg, had been concerned about the gas buildup and had not wanted to go to work that fatal day. According to the law he could have refused to work if he considered conditions were unsafe. "The question is what are the circumstances that prevented him from doing so," she said.

The report also pointed to failings in engineering provisions, training and information and the application of safety equipment.

Despite the safety hazards referred to in the report the mine was allowed to continue production last weekend, after Hermanus lifted a ban on work at the mine's two shafts that had been imposed after the explosion. She said that the management had accepted nine safety recommendations.

The preliminary report did not deal with issues of negligence or criminal or civil culpability, which will be examined in a separate judicial process.



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