Coal mine explosion in Ukraine kills at least 37

Stefan Steinberg
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At least 37 miners were killed and 20 injured August 19 in a pit explosion in the Ukraine. The disaster occurred when coal dust and methane gas combined in a lethal mixture and exploded.

At least 10 miners remain missing after the blast at the Zasiadka complex, the largest of Ukraine's 209 mines, located near the eastern city of Donetsk. Some 259 miners were working in the vicinity of the blast. Most were brought to the surface, and 22 were admitted to hospital. Of these, at least four were seriously injured.

The death toll in this year's worst mining accident in Ukraine is expected to rise. Extremely high temperatures more than half a mile below ground prevented rescuers from getting within 100 yards of trapped miners, and further excavation efforts were stopped late on Monday. One miner described seeing "piles of bodies" while escaping to the surface.

The latest explosion is one in a long list of disasters at Ukraine's run-down and under-financed mines, which are considered to be the most dangerous in Europe. A blast at the same pit two years ago killed 50 miners.

In March last year a similar methane-coal dust explosion at the Barakova colliery in Sukhodolsk, also in eastern Ukraine, left 82 miners dead. It was Europe's worst pit disaster in 20 years.

On the May 7 this year, eight miners were killed in a methane gas explosion at a mine in eastern Ukraine. Over the same weekend three other miners died in unrelated accidents at three coal mines in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Yesterday's blast brought the death toll in the industry to at least 120 this year, with 318 killed last year and 657 killed in the two years before that. Experts have calculated that five miners die in Ukraine for every million tonnes of coal extracted.

Following the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in 1987, and a number of other severe incidents at Ukrainian nuclear power stations in the 1990s, the country was increasingly forced to rely on its substantial deposits of coal as a source of power. The Donbass coal region in the Ukraine is one of the most intensively mined areas in the world and employs more than half a million people at its 209 pits. Only eight of these mines have been modernised in the past 20 years.

At the same time the industry, largely privatised following the collapse of the Soviet Union, is drastically under-financed and starved of investment. Miners have gone unpaid for months and valuable materials are routinely pilfered to be sold at local markets either by the pit management or by desperate miners. Mine management in the Ukraine also has a reputation for flouting safety rules and knowingly exposing employees to lethal risks in order to boost profits.

Before the break-up of the Soviet Union, costs for health care and treatment at the mines were generally guaranteed by the state. Since 1991, miners have increasingly had to pay for their own health care. In addition to the usual respiratory ills that afflict miners, tuberculosis, a disease associated with poverty and a poor diet, has also been on the increase in the Donbass region.

In 1999 some 200 miners staged an underground strike at the Barakova mine to demand the payment of overdue wages. Several threatened to commit suicide. When they surfaced, many bore self-inflicted knife wounds.

As has become routine in such cases, the Ukranian president, Leonid Kuchma, ordered a government inquiry into the disaster. Previous inquiries have generally concluded that negligence and disregard for

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safety rules by ordinary miners caused the accidents.

This time, authorities may have more difficulty shifting the blame. Workers at the Zasiadka mine and their relatives reported that the build-up of methane had been taking place for some time. Despite warnings, the pit management took no effective action, and instead insisted on achieving production norms. Moreover, the Zasiadka mine is partly owned by a close business and political associate of Kuchma, former Prime Minister Yefim Svyagilsky.

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