

# Thirty-three killed as fire erupts in Ukrainian mine

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At least 33 miners were killed when a fire erupted in the Ukraina mine in the Donestk region of eastern Ukraine on Sunday, July 7. Two others were injured by the fire that broke out 670 metres below ground at the mine, near the town of Ukrainsk.

The immediate cause of the fire is as yet unknown, but the Interfax news agency said reports indicated that it may have been caused by coal dust spontaneously combusting near a conveyor belt.

Some 107 miners were working underground at the time of the blaze. Oleksiy Pechenkin, spokesman for the Emergencies Ministry, said, “Thirty people were in a trolley that was going down and three others were found near it ... killed by smoke inhalation.”

In a major rescue operation, 24 rescue teams were mobilised to free the trapped men who were at risk from carbon dioxide fumes. Seventy-four were finally brought to the surface, including the two injured men, who were suffering from gas inhalation. Their condition was reported not to be life threatening.

Almost immediately a special government commission was assembled to investigate the incident, whilst President Leonid Kuchma pledged financial assistance to the victims’ relatives.

Such measures will bring little reassurance to the country’s 600,000 miners, many of whom are concentrated in the Donestk region. The World Bank has said Ukraine’s mines are amongst the world’s most dangerous, with an average of 300 miners dying each year.

Its description is particularly chilling, given that the bank led the demands for the type of sweeping cuts in industrial funding that has sent safety standards at the country’s mines into freefall, as part of their programme for restoring capitalism in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse and the Ukraine’s

independence in 1991.

Subsequently 435 miners have died in Ukrainian pits, many in fire tragedies. In June 1991, 31 miners were killed by carbon monoxide poisoning when a fire broke out in the Yuzhnodonbasskaya-One mine. Fifty-eight died in June 1992 when methane and air ignited at the Sukhodolskaya-Vostochnaya pit near Krasnodon, and a methane gas explosion at the Skochinsky mine in April 1998 killed 63 miners.

Another methane gas explosion in the Barakova mine, Luhanske killed more than 80 miners in March 2000—the country’s worst mining disaster to date.

The death toll continues to mount. Sixty-four miners were killed in two separate gas explosions in the Kirov and Zasyadko mines in May and then August 2001.

Since the beginning of 2002 more than 40 miners have died in similar incidents. In February five were killed in a fire damp explosion, and 35 miners died in another explosion at an eastern Ukrainian coal face in July.

Only hours before the latest mass fatality, 60 miners had to be evacuated from the Rodina mine, near the town of Kryvyi Rih, in southeastern Ukraine after a wooden prop caught fire more than 1,000 metres below ground.



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