

China's coal mining deaths spiral

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China's notoriously dangerous coal mining industry claimed yet another 18 victims in the closing days of July when a methane gas explosion ripped through an unlicensed mine in the country's southern province of Guizhou.

Despite the Beijing government's repeated promises to crack down on unsafe working conditions and the closing down of thousands of small mines, this year's death toll continues to spiral.

Official figures show that in the first six months of this year 3,393 miners perished in accidents that occurred on an almost weekly basis. The victims suffered the most hideous deaths in gas explosions, roof collapses and mine flooding in private mines, both legal and illegal, as well as government-operated mines.

The four months to the end of July saw a sharp increase in the rate of deaths and the frequency of accidents. April began with 21 miners dying in an explosion at the Xinfeng mine near Yuzhou city in China's Henan province. This tragedy was followed by the deaths of 31 miners in two separate mines only hours apart in Jixi City in Heilongjiang province.

The carnage continued through May, with the deaths including 21 miners killed in an accident in an unlicensed coal mine near Hejin City, in China's Shanxi province. The single most serious accident so far this year occurred in June when 115 men were killed and 24 injured in a gas explosion in the government-owned Jixi Coal Mine in Jixi City. Official figures show that, in July, 126 mine accidents claimed 329 lives.

However, the official statistics only serve to camouflage the real death toll, which some unofficial estimates put at almost twice the reported level. Officials at both national and local levels, many with direct financial interests in the hazardous mines, do everything possible to hide the actual number of fatalities. The only media allowed at mining disasters

are the closely-controlled government press and television. Overseas reporters are kept away, normally with the excuse of protecting their safety.

According to an increasing number of reports, mine owners, often with the aid and knowledge of local officials, are going to even greater lengths to cover up deaths at their enterprises. One such attempt occurred on May 4, following an explosion and flooding that trapped 21 miners in an unlicensed coal mine at Hejin City, in Shanxi province.

Rather than begin a rescue operation, the mine owner spent his time destroying miners' employment records and covering over scorch marks from the blast. The owner finally reported the accident to the local authorities on May 12 but failed to tell them that miners were still trapped in the shaft. When a rescue operation was finally mounted, all 22 men were found dead.

Subsequent investigations found that most of the victims had not died from drowning, following the blast as was first thought, but perished either from lack of food and water or asphyxiation. The miners could most probably have been saved had a timely rescue attempt taken place.

Proof of another gruesome practice has recently come to light: the dumping or hiding the bodies of victims. One such case was recently reported in the media after the management was seen trying to dump the bodies of 37 miners in five places along a riverbank after an accident at the Yixingzhai Gold Mine in Fanzhi County, Shanxi province. Most of the 47 killed were immigrant workers from other districts. After the incident was reported, the mine owner fled the area.

While in this case the incident happened at a gold mine, Frank Lou of the Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy confirmed that many coal mine accidents, especially the deaths of migrant workers, go unreported. "The mine owners just bury them and pay off the relatives," he said.

Most of the mining disasters are a direct result of the refusal of the government and private owners to provide proper safety equipment. Many mines in some of China's most gaseous regions lack proper ventilation, making methane gas explosions, with their accompanying high death toll, a forgone conclusion.

Some media reports reveal an almost total lack of rescue equipment and expertise. Most rescues involve miners' friends and families using primitive tools or their bare hands in desperate attempts to dig out men trapped underground. Miners who die instantly in gas blasts are considered better off than those who suffer long and agonising deaths trapped in air pockets or in rising water waiting for rescues that never come or arrive too late.

While the government blames the unsafe conditions in mainly small or illegal unregulated mines for the escalating death rate, increasing numbers of miners are being killed in large state-owned mines, which authorities claim have high safety standards.

For example, the government-owned Jixi City mine where the 115 miners died received an official award for safety shortly before the disaster.

An interview conducted by the *China Labour Bulletin* with the widow of one of the victims revealed that workers were deeply concerned about unsafe working conditions. Her husband told her that management cared nothing about safety. "They care just for a bit more money and the miners lost their lives for that," she said.

Asked if her husband had ever mentioned the danger of a serious accident, she replied: "He did. He said there was a lot of gas there." She said everyone knew that mine officials pushed the miners to work as much as possible under the pretext of earning more money.

"Even working so hard and risking their lives, the miners don't earn much. My husband used to make 700 to 800 yuan a month (about \$US100) but now he has lost his life for it." She accused the mine officials of being "pretty corrupt".

The government's drive to close down thousands of illegal and small mines has not been motivated by safety concerns but with reducing production levels. It has sought to raise the domestic price of coal, which provides over 70 percent of the country's energy. In the first 11 months of 2001, 11,822 mines were closed.

However, the resultant leap in coal prices has led to

the owners of hundreds of illegal and small coal operations reopening their mines to cash in on the bonanza, despite running the risk of prosecution.

Managers in the government mines have also begun further cutting corners on safety in order to push up production to take advantage of the domestic price increase and opportunities that have opened up internationally. According to one recent report, Chinese coal now fetches up to \$US23 per tonne on the world market and is beginning to challenge major producers such as Australia for supply to South Korea and Japan.

The appearance of millions of tonnes of cheap Chinese coal on global markets will inevitably have the sharpest consequences for miners worldwide as mine operators in other coal producing countries move to cut jobs and roll back working conditions in a bid to remain competitive and maintain profit margins. As in China, safety will continue to be one of the major areas that will suffer.



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