

High death toll continues in China's coal mines

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China's notoriously dangerous mining industry has exacted a terrible toll in the first four months of 2003. A series of accidents reported in the press have resulted in the deaths of more than 200 miners through cave-ins, flooded mine shafts and gas explosions.

These deaths are just the tip of the iceberg. Last year, official figures revealed that 5,971 miners perished in accidents. Unofficial estimates, however, put the toll as high as 7,000. Accidents are deliberately covered up by mine owners to avoid prosecution and compensation payments. They also go unreported by authorities seeking to play down the crisis.

The latest accidents in April claimed the lives of some 30 workers. In early April, 17 miners died in a flood at a state-owned mine in Lianyuan, Hunan province, while another 13 perished in a fire in the Dongshangeun Coal Mine in Hebei Province. As well as the seven men killed underground, six rescue workers choked to death in the dense black smoke that engulfed the mine's entrance.

One of the worst disasters took place at the Mengnanzhuang coal mine in the Luliang District, Shanxi Province on March 22 when a massive gas explosion killed 72 out of a workforce of 87. The circumstances, reported in the *China Labor Bulletin*, epitomise the utter contempt of state and private mine operators, as well as government officials, for the lives of miners.

Many of the Mengnanzhuang miners had detected a strong smell of methane gas and tried to leave the mine before the explosion. Concerned about the loss of production, a mine manager ordered the workers back into the pit. The 15 miners who survived only did so because they defied the manager and fled the site.

The build-up of methane gas followed an electrical failure in one the mine's secondary shafts used for

ventilation and escape purposes. The fault, which occurred a full two hours before the blast, rendered vital ventilation equipment inoperative. Many of the mangled bodies were left on the ground for three days after the accident and began to decompose under plastic sheets.

About 500 armed police cordoned off the mine after a visit by high-ranking provincial officials, anxious to cover up the extent of the disaster. The unsafe conditions were well known to local authorities who had officially ordered the mine closed in late January because of safety breaches. However, the mine had continued to operate.

A similar tragedy took place at the Muchonggou coal mine in Shuicheng County, Guizhou province on February 24. A gas explosion killed 40 miners and injured scores of others, many critically. Again the mine's faulty ventilation equipment was the likely cause—this time a faulty seal in a safety pipe used to tap off methane gas.

Muchonggou apparently was notorious for lax safety standards and equipment failures. Prior to the blast, the miners were working at least 12 hours daily, with only three or four rest days each month. The latest disaster is not the first at the mine. In September 2000, a breakdown of ventilation equipment and leaking extraction pipes resulted in a gas explosion that killed 162 workers.

The ongoing carnage makes a mockery of the Chinese bureaucracy's claims to be enforcing stricter safety standards in the mining industry.

Last year, the State Administration for Coal Mine Safety (SAWS) issued a statement claiming that mine fatalities had declined by 20.4 percent to 4.86 deaths per million tonnes of coal produced in 2002. But the figure is deliberately deceptive as production has

increased but the high death toll continues: 5,798 deaths in 2000, 5,395 in 2001 and 5,791 in 2002.

The government also publicised its closure of thousands of small illegal mining operations. The measure was not motivated by safety concerns but by the need to slash production to overcome a glut of coal and falling prices. The subsequent price rise only encouraged illegal operators to reopen closed mines to cash in on the bonanza.

While small legal and illegal mines, worked by private operators or village committees, do contribute to the death rate, a large number of workers are killed in state-owned mines. These mines are being run down in preparation for closure or privatisation. Aging safety equipment, including ventilation, monitoring and alarm systems, is not properly maintained or updated.

Of 47 serious mining accidents in 2002 listed by *China Labor Bulletin*, 14 occurred in state-owned enterprises, accounting for more 400 deaths. All of the incidents involved 10 or more deaths. A gas explosion at the state-owned Chengzihe Coal Mine, in Jixi city, Heilongjiang last June resulted in 124 deaths and was the country's fourth most serious mining accident.

Recently Chinese government spokesmen have highlighted the new Work Safety Law passed last June and implemented in November. As this year's deaths demonstrate, the new regulations have changed little. Vested interests at all levels of government ensure that the new legislation is not effectively enforced.

In many cases, small village-run mines constitute the community's only source of revenue. Starved of funds, the villages are unable to afford safety equipment. Cash-strapped authorities in provinces heavily reliant on mining also turn a blind eye.

The bureaucracy in Beijing issues edicts on mine safety but does not provide the necessary funds. An official report published last September noted that in recent years safety investment in China's key mines "had fallen between 3 and 4 billion yuan (about \$US400 million) short of previously set targets". In Heilongjiang province alone, investment in safety was 507 million yuan short of the planned target. Heilongjiang is one of the worst provinces for mine disasters along with Shanxi, Hunan, and Guizhou.

Beijing is also responsible for creating the conditions where tens of thousands of workers have no alternative but to work in dangerous mines. Millions of jobs have

been destroyed through the closure or restructuring of state-owned enterprises. In the countryside, many small farmers have been forced to look for work following the closure of state-assisted farming communes and the end of government assistance.

The situation is set to worsen. When it entered the World Trade Organisation in December 2001, Beijing pledged to remove most of the remaining barriers to the operation of foreign corporations by 2006. A new round of closures and job losses will drive millions more in a desperate search for employment, including into the country's unsafe coal mines.



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