Indonesia: Fire in state-owned gold mine claims 13 lives

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On March 8, rescue teams retrieved another body from abandoned mine shafts at the state-owned PT Aneka Tambang (Antam) gold mine at Mount Pongkor in West Java. The latest recovery brings the known death toll to 13, while many miners remain missing. The gold mine is located 45 km west of Bogor, which is just 50 km south of Jakarta, the Indonesian capital. The deaths result from a fire on March 3 at Antam's disused Kubang Kicau mine, where over 90 miners were reported to have been working illegally. The inferno caused thick black smoke that filled shafts some 500 metres above the base of the mountain. It is believed that all 13 men died from smoke inhalation. The presence of one Antam employee among the dead has not yet been explained.

It is likely that many more miners perished because the deserted mine is littered with hundreds of man-sized holes that have been excavated during illegal operations. Mining officials say the holes would have to be checked one-by-one. But the continuing presence of smoke is causing high carbon monoxide levels, hindering search and rescue efforts.

One illegal miner who escaped the carnage told the media he was asleep in a shaft until awoken by the smoke. His two friends, who were further away from a ventilation hole, died. "We brought their bodies out. They weren't stiff and their noses were black with smoke," he said. His brother-in-law was among those missing. One rescue worker said that clearing the mine could take many days. "Conditions in the shafts were unbearable," he said.

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, illegal miners accused Antam staff members of having set fire to piles of rubber tyres and rubbish at the mine's entrance, at the base of the mountain, to cause smoke to rise through the mining complex. The purpose was to "flush out" miners digging illegally for gold.

A senior company official immediately denied the accusation. "We wouldn't have set a fire that will hurt our own people," he said. But the prevailing official hostility toward illegal mining and the circumstances gradually coming to light indicate that the company may well have been responsible.

In the first hours, both the company and local authorities attempted to play down the extent of the tragedy, denying that many miners were in the mine at the time of the fire. Antam corporate secretary Dohar Siregar rejected claims that 90 men were working in the shafts. Bogor's district police chief M. Taufik told news services that only nine people, other than four dead miners brought out earlier, had been working.

Another company official, Eko Warman, attempted to blame the miners for the disaster. "Many of them (illegal miners) stay inside the mine for days," he said. "Sometimes they bring cooking equipment and logs to make a fire for cooking." Even if this were the case, it would hardly explain the intensity of the fire. It produced an enormous amount of thick black smoke, which engulfed the mine within hours and persisted days after the incident.

Rescue operations had to be abandoned for a period three days after the fire because carbon monoxide levels in the shafts suddenly leapt from 153 ppm (parts per million) to 500 ppm. This far exceeded the official tolerable rate of 25 ppm. The massive increase occurred despite the company using two of its main exhaust fans to blow air into the tunnels. Such high levels point to the burning of toxic synthetic materials such as tyres.

A statement by Siregar one day after the fire expressed the company's indifference toward the lives of the illegal miners. "The how and why of what happened is unclear," he said. "But they are illegal

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miners, without permits. They don't care about work safety." He expected the fire "would do little to hurt output" because mining operations at the official Ciurug mine, located 1.6 km away, which was also affected by smoke, would return to normal within days.

If the company were indeed responsible for the fire, it would not be the first time that Antam has resorted to extreme methods to drive illegal miners from the area. In July 2000, gangs of company staff members severely beat illegal miners and the company used explosives to demolish the shafts in which they had been working.

Illegal miners emphatically denied lighting fires that caused the tragedy. While they admit that they are driven by their impoverished circumstances to take many risks, they said they would not endanger the lives of their fellow workers. One of the miners who escaped the disaster, 23-year old Irin, told the media: "The smoke is not our risk—we know our risks, like landslides or falling rock, but not smoke."

Irin, who has worked as an illegal miner for seven years, made reference to the grinding poverty in Bogor and other regions, which drives many hundreds of people to continue risking their lives and health to eke out a living by illegally mining gold and other metals.

Despite the recent tragedy he would return to the mine because he had no other way to provide for his wife and children. "When we are successful we can earn enough for a month in one day," Irin explained, but most times "our profits are no more than a daily worker."

According to a recent report in the *Jakarta Post*, 66 illegal miners have been killed at Mount Pongkor since 1997 in landslides and cave-ins. The toll is probably far higher because the bodies are often hidden or unaccounted for.

While PT Aneka Tambang (Antam)—like other state-owned and private mining companies across resource-rich Indonesia—has extracted large profits out of its Mount Pongkor operations, the surrounding community remains poverty-stricken. Mining operations have disrupted traditional means of making a living and devastated large areas of natural forest. Antam extracts about four or five tonnes of gold and up to 30 tonnes of silver annually from Mount Pongkor and has confirmed that there are enough deposits to last another 12 to 15 years.

In 2000, the company, fearing the growth of illegal mining and its impact on profits, promised to initiate a number of community programs. These included repairs to damaged public facilities and infrastructure close to Pongkor and in the Nanggung District near Bogor, and the promotion of small enterprise and cooperatives.

These projects did little to overcome the high-levels of poverty in the area, which result from the mining operations themselves, as well as the pro-business agenda carried out by successive Indonesian regimes. Since 2000, the company has undertaken major restructuring and downsizing to cut production costs and boost profits. At the same time, government spending cuts have dismantled or slashed the already scarce social services across Indonesia.

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