

Tragic mine explosion adds to China's grim toll of death and destruction

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A huge gas explosion at the state-owned Chenjiashan Coal Mine in Tongchuan city in Shannxi province on Sunday is the latest tragic disaster in China's notorious mining industry. Of the 293 workers working underground at the time, only 127 escaped—45 were hospitalised, including 11 with serious injuries.

After three days of frantic rescue efforts, officials ruled out any hope of finding the 101 missing men alive and put the death toll at 166. It may take days before the remaining bodies are retrieved, as dangerously high gas levels and the risk of further explosions have hampered rescue workers.

Regional coal industry chief Hou Shichang told a press conference yesterday: "In an environment with a high density of coal gas and carbon monoxide, it is impossible that the miners still trapped underground can survive." The terrible death toll makes the disaster the worst in the coal industry in recent years.

The announcement provoked an angry reaction from relatives and fellow workers who marched to the government office of the local Miaowan township where a rescue command centre had been set up. When officials refused to meet with them, 40 or 50 of the protesters stormed the building, smashing windows and breaking office furniture and equipment.

Yan Mangxue told Agence France Presse (AFP): "They're very angry. They haven't seen their loved ones dead or alive... They want to beat anyone in sight... The situation is very dangerous." Local police and a unit from the army's Peoples Armed Police were dispatched to break up the demonstration.

The protesters blame the mine's management for the disaster, pointing out that a fire had taken place in the shaft the previous week and that gas densities in the mine remained dangerously high even after it had been put out. "If they had stopped production and ventilated the shaft to reduce the gas density, the Sunday explosion would not have occurred," a village party official told the *China Daily*.

The accident was not the first. A similar disaster occurred at the Chenjiashan mine just three years ago in which 38 people were killed and 16 injured.

Family members spoke to the *Chengdu Wanbao* newspaper. A 66-year-old retired miner Qian Wenjiu said both his sons had been killed in the same mine—one in 2001 and his oldest son in

the latest accident. Underscoring the management's lack of any compassion, he explained that last time the company paid only 1,500 yuan (about \$US180) as compensation. "I guess it will be no different this time," he said.

Wang Xiaoling who was waiting for news of her husband was crying and had fallen unconscious several times. She told the newspaper that her husband was a contract worker. "We have been married eight years and have three children—the oldest is 8 and youngest is only 8 months. Now who is going to look after us?" she asked.

The latest tragedy provoked considerable public outrage. Despite the country's heavy Internet censorship, more than 2,000 messages were sent to Sina.com—China's major Internet news portal—denouncing the government's indifference. Accidents like this, one declared, "make the lives of Chinese people seem cheap". Others criticised the lack of official inspections.

The mine explosion was particularly embarrassing to Beijing as it came the day before a showcase conference by the Work Safety Inspection and Administration Authority. The aim had been to blame the country's appalling death rate in mining on the thousands of small privately-owned and often illegal operations. But the accident at Chenjiashan—a major state-owned mine—made clear that the same lack of safety plagues the entire industry.

The Chinese leadership felt compelled to issue orders for urgent rescue operations and to promise an investigation by a top-level team appointed by the State Council. The preliminary finding put the blast down to "negligence" and "greed". It also confirmed that the mine's managers had taken no action after a fire broke out on November 19, or when gas densities in the shaft continued to exceed the safety level.

There is every indication, however, that the official investigation will simply be a whitewash. The Chenjiashan mine management will be made the scapegoat for the disaster so that the broader responsibility of the Beijing bureaucracy for the ongoing carnage in China's mines can be swept under the carpet.

As the explosion was taking place at the Chenjiashan mine, fire fighters had just put out a fire in a coal mine in Fenxi County in Jiangxi province that had been raging for three days

and killed seven miners. Yesterday, 13 more miners died and another two are still missing after a mine blast in southwest Guizhou province.

On November 13, 12 coal miners were killed in a gas explosion at Pengzhou in Sichuan province. The previous day, another 33 died in a mine blast in central Henan province.

A massive gas explosion in October at a major state-owned mine at Dapin, Zhengzhou City, in Henan province killed 147 miners. An official State Council inquiry blamed management for the lack of proper ventilation. It also ordered the closure of small mines and the reduction of production levels at larger ones.

These accidents are just the tip of the iceberg. According to official statistics, 4,153 workers have been killed in coal mines in the first nine months of the year. The Hong-Kong based *China Labour Bulletin*, however, estimates that the death toll is far higher—up to 20,000.

Through its free market policies and economic restructuring, the Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing is directly responsible for the terrible death toll in the country's mining industry. As foreign investment has flooded into China, turning the country into the "workshop of the world", the demand for electricity and thus for coal has risen dramatically.

China is now the world's largest coal producer and consumer, with production expected to reach 1.9 billion tonnes this year. Coal remains the main source of electricity in China, accounting for about 70 percent of its total generating capacity of 440 gigawatts—the second highest in the world.

However, even with this massive power industry, China is confronting severe shortages and the worst electricity crunch since 2002. For the last quarter of this year, the shortfall is estimated to be 10-13 gigawatts of power. Rail and road transport has been strained to breaking point to provide coal to power stations and the mines themselves are under enormous pressure to produce, regardless of safety concerns.

In the past, investors speculated in manufacturing parks or export zones. Now local governments and entrepreneurs are eagerly seeking profits in power production, leading to a rash of new projects. The Energy Bureau of National Development and Reform Commission estimates that, without central government approval, construction is underway on power stations with a total capacity of 120 gigawatts or 30 percent of last year's national output.

As a result of increasing market demand, the price of coal has jumped 30 percent this year. In a rush to benefit from the price rises, thousands of small, illegally-operated mines—previously closed under an earlier "safety crackdown"—have reopened. Larger state-owned coal mines companies also ignore basic safety regulations as management seeks to boost production to cash in on the demand.

The Chenjiashan mine is a case in point. According to an investigative reporter with the *Chongqing Morning Post*, Hu Yong, the mine's director was promised nearly \$US50,000 if

production was increased by an extra 400,000 tonnes above the annual quota, which had been fulfilled by the end of October. That required an output of 200,000 tonnes a month for the remainder of the year, as against an average of 180,000 tonnes over the previous 10 months. "If they stopped production due to the fire [last week], their bonus would be gone," Hu explained.

Beijing insists that by encouraging foreign investment in the mining sector it can introduce a new "safety culture" in the industry. In the first eight months of this year, \$13 billion has been invested in mining but there is no sign of any fall in the toll of death and injuries. Just as in the sweatshops in the free trade zones, investors are being attracted to China's mines by the prospect of extracting large profits by exploiting cheap labour free of restriction and regulation.

More than half of the country's existing coal mines are small, privately-owned operations with little modern equipment. One third of the state-owned coal mines reportedly have old, outdated facilities. The workforce is often poorly trained and recruited from nearby villages where people are desperate for a job, even at the risk to their lives. Officials at the local, provincial and national levels turn a blind eye to the imposition of safety regulations to ensure that production and profits keep flowing.

Added to this, some 9,000 of China's mines or 30 percent of the total are officially classified as high-gas density—that is prone to explosion—and the result is a terrible price paid by workers. According to official figures released in early November, 80 percent of the world's deaths in mine accidents over the past year occurred in China. The death rate of one per million tonnes of coal mined is 100 times higher than the US and 30 times greater than South Africa.

The health problems confronting China's coal miners are also appalling. According to official statistics, there are 600,000 miners with lung diseases, and an estimated 70,000 miners are added to the list every year.

It is farcical to claim, as Beijing still does at times, that the Chinese economy is in any way "socialist". The annual toll of death and destruction in the mining industry is a particularly tragic and graphic demonstration that what is taking place in China is capitalist exploitation in its most naked and brutal form.



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