

China's worst mine explosion in more than 60 years

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At least 212 Chinese coal miners died in a massive gas explosion at Sunjiawan coal mine near Fuxin City in the northeastern province of Liaoning on Monday afternoon. Three workers are still missing despite frantic rescue efforts and hopes for their survival are diminishing. Another 29 miners were rushed to hospital with burns, broken bones and gas poisoning. At least 30 traumatised family members have also been hospitalised.

Some 180 rescue workers tried to reach the trapped miners. Progress was hampered by freezing night time temperatures, poor ventilation and high concentrations of gas. The explosion took place about 242 metres from the surface. By Thursday, most of the bodies had been retrieved and around 160 had been identified—44 were migrant workers from poor rural areas.

Beijing, which has repeatedly promised to improve safety in China's deadly mining industry, is extremely nervous about the public response to the latest disaster. It is the worst reported accident in the history of the Peoples' Republic of China.

President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and other senior leaders have all expressed their "concern", ordering "whatever available" means be used to rescue the Sunjiawan miners. Provincial governor Zhang Wenyue and a team of central government officials reportedly interrupted their Chinese New Year holidays to supervise rescue operations.

Zhao Yunfu, a local doctor treating the injured, told the *China Daily*: "I really can't believe it. I thought the mine had stopped production." The doctor was caught by surprise because most Chinese workers take a week-long holiday during the Chinese New Year.

However, like millions of coal miners in China, those at Sunjiawan could not to take leave. The state-owned mine was under pressure to produce to meet the

country's surging demand for energy. The miners had to work or face losing their job.

Fuxin, a city of one million, is part of China's northeast "rust belt" where the massive restructuring of state-owned industries in the 1990s resulted in widespread unemployment and poverty. With few alternatives and little financial assistance, many laid-off workers have ended up in coal mines. Zhang Qiang, a local resident, told Associated Press: "Mining is just too dangerous, but it's a struggle to find work here."

The government has promised compensation for the families of the victims—in order to "ensure stability of the region". It fears that the latest disaster, coming less than a month after a mine explosion in the province's Diaobing City killed seven workers, could trigger social unrest. A 400-member taskforce has been dispatched to the area to placate the families of the dead miners.

The region has witnessed some of the country's most militant struggles in recent years. In February 2000, after three days of street battles involving 20,000 laid-off miners, armed troops were sent to Yangjiazhangzi, also in Liaoning, to suppress the unrest. In March 2002, tens of thousands of workers in the industrial cities of Daqing, Liaoyang and Fushan staged mass demonstrations against lay-offs, official corruption and plant closures.

Following the Sunjiawan accident, paramilitary police units were sent to the area to prevent any protest by the victims' family members and fellow workers. The Central Propaganda Department issued an order that restricted media coverage to the official Xinhua news agency. Local residents, however, have managed to leak out information about the disaster via the Internet and other means.

A staff member at the mining company's hospital

told the Sound of Hope Radio Network, associated with the Falun Gong movement, that many of the victims were rural migrants. According to the hospital worker, mining operations had been outsourced to the mine's directors and supervisors who were making large profits. Management believed that it was cheaper to pay compensation to accident victims than to spend money on improved safety.

The state media reported that the cause of the latest explosion is still under investigation, but it is unlikely that management will be held accountable. Even before the inquiry was complete, Zhang Yunfu, the vice general manager of the state-owned Fuxin Coal Industry Group, which owns the Sunjiawan colliery, tried to pin the blame on "a minor tremour" that supposedly took place 10 minutes before the explosion.

Whatever the exact trigger for the explosion, the underlying causes of the tragedy lie in the unfettered market forces that Beijing has unleashed over the last two decades. Workers desperate for any job are being driven underground to mine coal under appalling conditions to meet the frenzied demand for energy produced by a flood of foreign investment into the country.

China is now the world's largest producer of coal. But the average output of a Chinese coal miner is just 321 tonnes a year—only 8.1 percent of the output of a South African miner or 2.2 percent of an American miner. As in many other Chinese industries, it is cheaper to employ large numbers of low-wage miners than to buy machinery to mine coal more efficiently and safely. In addition, in order to boost output and profits, basic safety measures are frequently not implemented.

Some of the worst mine disasters have occurred in recent months. In November, 166 workers died in a mine explosion in Shaanxi province—following an accident that killed 148 a month earlier. On December 13, the day that the State Council held a national conference on "safe production", two mine accidents in the southwestern municipality of Chongqing killed 8 workers. This occurred just days after another mine explosion in Yanquanyu County in Shanxi province killed 33.

Mining companies, private and state-owned alike, are killing thousands of workers every year. The official toll last year was 6,027. Even an editorial yesterday in

the official *China Daily* had to admit: "Something is wrong in the whole industry. The state must strengthen supervision, and production safety law must be unswervingly enforced—for the sake that no more avoidable accidents occur." Such statements of concern and calls for action are, however, largely cosmetic.

Since 2002, the Chinese government has had one "campaign to promote mining safety" after another. In December, it announced another package of 51.8 billion yuan (\$US6.2 billion) over the next three years. Even if it actually materialises, this money, like the "billions" to help the unemployed or rural poor, is unlikely to have any significant impact. Mining companies are notorious for flouting the limited existing regulations and laws on safety, labour rights and minimal wages.

China's worst mine disaster in 1942 also took place in the country's northeast, in what was then Japanese-occupied Manchuria. Officially 1,549 miners died in an accident that was a direct consequence of the ruthless system of exploitation imposed by the Japanese rulers. It is an indictment of the present Beijing regime that it has created a situation in China's mines which finds its only parallels in the barbarities of wartime Japanese imperialism.

Just one day after Sunjiawan accident, another blast in an illegal coal mine in Songlin village in south western Yunan province killed at least 24 miners and injured another 14.



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