

Chinese mine disaster kills at least 164

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A massive explosion on November 27 killed at least 164 workers in a state-owned mine at Qitaihe, in the northeastern Chinese province of Heilongjiang. The mine had been named as one of the safest in the country. Ten miners are still missing.

Just weeks before, the water supply of the nearby city of Harbin and its nine million people was threatened by a major chemical spill. Both disasters highlight the destructive consequences of Beijing's free market agenda.

The disaster at the Dongfeng coal mine, which is operated by the major state-owned Longmei Mining Group, is believed to have been caused by the ignition of a massive build-up of coal dust in the shafts. The mine was producing at levels far in excess of what the ventilation system had been designed to cope with.

The television footage from Qitaihe following the explosion showed tragic scenes. Distraught families and friends of the workers maintained a vigil outside the mine for hours, begging rescue workers to try to save their loved ones. Their hopes steadily diminished as rescue efforts were delayed by thick gas in the mine and freezing temperatures. More and more dead bodies were brought to the surface.

Local hospitals confirmed that they were treating 50 workers, three of whom were in a critical condition. One survivor, Dong Baoliang, told *China Daily*: "I didn't know where to go and just staggered aimlessly. Several times, I tried to wake up some co-workers but failed." After reaching a shaft where there was more oxygen, it took him and another worker close to 12 hours to find a lift that could take them to the surface.

A young miner, Yang Dayong, told *China Daily* on November 30 that his father, two uncles and brother-in-law were working in the shafts when explosion occurred. He had hoped for a "miracle", but none of his family members survived. Yang had only finished his own shift a few hours earlier.

Yuan Yongqing, a retired miner whose brother was among the dead, said: "This industry is too corrupt. Safety is no good." Another of his brothers had been killed in a previous mine accident.

Zhang Yaowu, a former miner whose son was killed, told Associated Press: "There is nothing we can do about it. We need to work, and the work is dangerous." An aunt of the same victim declared "this country is unfair", but was stopped from talking further by other victims' families so she would not get into "trouble".

The provincial government is paying each victim's family just 200,000 yuan (\$US25,000) in compensation.

According to the official Xinhua news agency, the mine's chief engineer told government investigators that management had discovered the build-up of coal dust at least five days before the blast, but nothing had been done to address the problem. Investigators have found that not even the attendance registry was correct. While records show that 254 workers were on duty on the day of the disaster, only 221 lamps had been issued. In other words, it is not known exactly of how many men were down the pit.

After an initial investigation, Li Yizhong, Minister of State Administration of Work Safety, drew the obvious conclusion on December 1: "Intense mining was undertaken with the object of high production to detriment of safety. There were a lot of different shifts underground, performing too much work at the same time, which led to the high casualties."

The Chinese government has since arrested the mine director Ma Jinguang and the company's Communist Party secretary and charged them with "dereliction of duty". However, the two officials are simply being made scapegoats to deflect attention from the responsibility of the Beijing regime for its failure to ensure adequate safety standards in the country's mines.

In March, a blast at Qitaihe had killed 18 workers. Last May, another explosion killed 12 miners. Despite this record, the Heilongjiang government named the Dongfeng operation a “star mine”—one of the highest safety awards. The mine’s director, Ma was praised just two weeks before the latest accident as one of the nation’s “outstanding” managers, at a national coal mine industry conference in Beijing.

According to official figures, an average of 18 workers died every day in China’s mines last year. By the end of September, 4,226 miners had been killed in 2,367 accidents this year. The government regularly blames thousands of illegally-operated and unlicensed private mines for the carnage. The latest accident in Qitaihe, however, shows that even the largest state-owned companies systematically violate basic safety standards if they stand in the way of production.

Behind the disregard for safety is the soaring demand for coal in China. Seventy percent of the country’s electricity is generated by coal-fueled power stations. As industrial output has expanded and urbanisation accelerated, so has the demand for energy. From 1999 to 2003, China’s electricity demand increased 56 percent. Power consumption is expected to rise 11 percent next year to 2.73 trillion kilowatt-hours.

China is the world’s largest coal producer, with an output of 1.94 billion tonnes last year, but it still had to import 18.6 million tonnes in order to supply its energy industry. Consequently, the wholesale price of coal rose 40 percent in 2004. A November report by the central government’s Development and Research Centre forecast that profits in China’s coal industry will rise by 12 percent in 2006 to over \$7.3 billion. The report also noted that many mine owners and managers in the coal-rich provinces have accumulated enormous wealth.

Beijing is currently restructuring the state coal mines to improve productivity and profitability. China’s top ten coal mining companies only produce 15 percent of national output, far less than the proportion in countries like Australia, where a few large mining groups control most production.

Beijing is merging companies with the aim of creating six to eight mining conglomerates, each with a capacity of producing 100 million tonnes of coal a year by 2010. The Heilongjiang Longmei Mining Group, the parent of the Dongfeng coal mine, was formed in

December 2004 by the combination of four firms. Its production amounted to 55 million tonnes of coal. In order to boost the group’s tonnage, workers have paid with their lives at Qitaihe.

In order to placate public anger over the high number of deaths and injuries in coal mines, the Chinese government has allocated just three billion yuan (\$US375 million) to improving safety and established a national inspection team. The prospect of large profits, however, combined with official corruption, has rendered these measures largely cosmetic. In November’s national inspection, 100 percent of mines qualified as “safe”, while the ventilation systems in 95 percent of mines were declared to be compatible with official standards.



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