

# Mexican government suspends search for trapped coal miners

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On Saturday, February 25, Mexican authorities announced the suspension of rescue efforts for the 65 miners trapped underground after the February 19 explosion at the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila, about 85 miles southwest of the US border. With the lack of breathable air and no sign of the miners after more than a week, it is presumed the 65 men have perished.

Government and company officials who met last Friday say they think the miners were killed by the initial force of the blast, based on their estimates of the methane gas concentration in the mine. Initial press reports said rescuers found methane levels to be explosive but not lethal. Subsequent tests, however, found much higher levels deeper in the mine—up to 52 percent—which are deadly.

It now appears that a series of explosions took place at the 1000 meter level (3300 feet). If this theory proves correct, it is likely that the miners were buried under tons of rubble and that the bodies may never be found.

The suspension of the rescue effort was the latest in a series of actions and conflicting announcements that have demonstrated the government's indifference towards the plight of the trapped miners and their family members, many of whom have camped out at the mine since the day of the explosion. Even as the suspension was being announced, Mexican President Vicente Fox was declaring that the rescue effort would continue.

Until Friday, when according to the company, family members were informed one by one that the men were presumed dead, company, government and union officials had deliberately avoided the hundreds of family members assembled at the mine's gates and largely spoken to them from behind police and army lines. Relatives loudly demanded information about the

fate of their loved ones but they were chiefly ignored. Many family members denounced the suspension of the search and believe that what is actually being planned is the sealing and permanent closure of the mine.

It now appears that government officials had concluded much earlier in the week that the miners had died. A fleet of ambulances on stand-by to rush possible survivors to area hospitals was removed two days before the search was called off, and local cemetery workers began digging fresh graves.

The tragic loss of 65 miners at the Coahuila mine underscores the criminal negligence of the mine owners coupled with lax enforcement of safety standards by the Labor Ministry. A representative of Section 13 (Coahuila) of the Miners and Metal Workers Union (SNTMM), which plans to launch its own investigation into the mine explosion, indicated that there have been 14 strikes against mines owned by Grupo Mexico, chiefly for safety violations. He said management routinely ignored reports of high levels of methane gas at the mine before the explosion.

Hervey Flores, a miner who survived the blast, explained that at the time of the disaster Pasta de Concha miners were discussing launching a strike against the abysmal safety conditions at the site.

During a February 3 inspection several safety violations, including high methane levels, were found at the mine. Twelve days before the explosion, on February 7, Coahuila's Labor Secretary, Ruben Escudero, issued a report detailing the dangerous conditions. Nevertheless operations were not suspended. Despite the report, Federal Labor Secretary Salazar Saenz insisted for several days after the explosion that the mine was in compliance with safety regulations and possessed highly advanced equipment to monitor and control methane gas.

Surviving miners report that, while such equipment did exist at the mine, the sensors had been placed too close to the floor of the tunnels, which prevented their proper functioning. Many miners suspect the equipment was tampered with to give false low readings and prevent alarms from going off. SNTMM officials now charge Saenz and the Labor Ministry with trying to cover up “multiple violations that have come to light due to the accident.”

In addition, the union officials themselves now admit that they had turned a blind eye to the use of casual labor in the mines—thirty six of the sixty five miners were non-union casual workers. Grupo Mexico had reached arrangements with union officials that allowed the use of these temporary workers, in return for higher dues paid by the company to the union. These workers are often poorly trained, work for lower wages and have no benefits.

Privately, agents for the mine officials have approached some of the relatives with offers of monetary compensation—US\$ 71,000 (ten years salary), plus university scholarships for the miners’ children. The relatives report they were asked to keep quiet about the offer, but many denounced it as an attempt to buy their silence over the suspension of the rescue.

According to a report by the Mexico City daily newspaper, *La Jornada*, Grupo Mexico, the transnational firm that owns the mine, was formed in 1965 as a subsidiary of the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO). It is now a holding company with mining and railroad properties in the United States, Mexico and Peru.

Its board of directors includes a who’s who of Mexico’s political and business elites which had close ties with the government of ex-president Carlos Salinas. Beginning about twenty years ago Salinas pushed through the privatization of the nationalized mining industry and other state-owned industries and handed them over to Grupo Mexico and other conglomerates. Men such as Grupo Mexico’s German Larrea, Luis Téllez Kuenzler, Valentín Díez Morodo, Claudio X. González, Antonio Madero Bracho, Rómulo O’Farril Jr, Prudencio López and Juan Gallardo Thurlow owe their wealth to that process that transferred the country’s mineral wealth into private hands.

Some of these men who sit on Grupo Mexico’s board

of directors and the boards of other major Mexican corporations were part of the Salinas government and the Zedillo government that followed it. There they helped prepare the legislation that made possible the transfer of public assets into their hands. Previous to the Salinas-Zedillo regimes, 80 percent of Mexico’s mines were in government hands. Today virtually all of them have been transferred to Grupo Mexico and other capitalist corporations.

While Napoleon Gomez, president of the SNTMM union, promises greater vigilance on the part of the union, he himself was connected to the Salinas-Zedillo regime and collaborated in the wave of privatizations. Like many Mexican labor leaders, he is an important figure inside the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, that ruled Mexico between 1929 and 2000. Throughout that period it established a corporatist regime in which so-called labor leaders help ensure the exploitation of the Mexican working class in the profit interest of industrial and financial elites.

Gomez inherited the SNTMM presidency from his father in 2002. He holds a doctorate in economics from Oxford University in England. His career parallels that of Zedillo himself, who graduated from Yale. Like other labor bureaucrats, Gomez is far removed from the workers he supposedly represents.

According to government figures every year there are over 50 major accidents in Mexico’s coal mines, resulting in the deaths of 13 miners each year. These figures, however, are widely discredited, and experts believe the annual death toll is much higher. For the most part the names of the lost miners are never known. Even in this tragedy, a complete list of the names of the dead has yet to be published.

Grupo Mexico reported profits of more than US\$5 billion in 2005. At the Pasta de Concha mine the workers were forced to endure unsafe working conditions while earning wages of between US\$160 and US\$310 per month.



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