

# Mexico: miners trapped after explosion

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The fate of 65 miners in a Mexico mine is still unknown, three days after an explosion trapped them underground during the early morning of February 19.

The explosion occurred in the San Juan Sabinas coal mine in Coahuila, Mexico, 220 kilometers (135 miles) south of the Texas border city of Eagle Pass. The explosion caused the collapse of the roof of the mine along a 250 meter tunnel, 150 meters (480 feet) below the surface.

As of the writing of this article, rescue workers are using picks and shovels in dim lighting for fear that any electrical or gas-powered device could set off another explosion.

Preliminary reports suggest that what fueled the explosion was an accumulation of methane gas. Eighty miners were inside the mine at the time. As of Monday there had been no explanation as to what may have sparked the explosion. The Mexican Army has surrounded the mine, and the flow of information is being restricted.

Scores of friends and family members of the trapped relatives have maintained a watch at the mine entrance, waiting for any shred of news, and ambulances stand ready to receive any survivors. Federal troops block anyone but rescue workers from entering the mines.

The explosion occurred between 2:00 and 2:30 a.m. on Sunday. About a dozen miners near the entrance escaped with burns and broken bones—the rest were buried deep underground. Hopes that the miners are alive rest on the possibility that the miners found air pockets after the explosion, or were able to construct barricades to conserve fresh air. However, toxic quantities of carbon monoxide and methane are presently in the mine, and there are no confirmed reports of any contact with any of the miners buried underground. The six-hour supplies of oxygen in their emergency tanks would have long since run out.

Mining executives for Industrial Minera Mexico, a

unit of Grupo México, the firm that owns the mine, have been telling relatives and the media that there was a 12-hour emergency supply of electricity and they think the ventilation system is operating normally and providing enough clean air into the mine to ensure the miners' survival. However, a local power outage on Tuesday morning shut down this ventilation system temporarily.

Relatives of the miners have become increasingly angry at what many view to be a lack of information and openness on the part of the mine owners. According to the Associated Press, a local paper ran a headline Tuesday morning that quoted another miner who said, "They are all surely dead." This created further anxiety among the relatives and contrasted with the more rosy picture presented by the mine owners.

The AP reported on Tuesday that family members "threatened to rush past soldiers into the pit" because they were not being given any information. "Men and women in a crowd of about 600 shouted at state Civil Protection Director Arturo Vilchis until the official took refuge behind a line of five soldiers guarding the entrance," the AP wrote.

As with nearly all mine disasters in recent memory, there are indications that this tragedy could have been averted if better safety precautions had been taken. Accidents are common in Mexican coal mines because of the poor working conditions. Wages are substandard, in many cases less than US\$5.00 per day. Many workers are nonunion, hired through labor contractors, and are poorly trained. Of the 65 trapped miners, 31 are nonunion. Under the terms of their contracts, mine management is under no obligation to compensate their wives and children, were they to die.

The "Pasta de los Conchos" mine is considered one of the most technically advanced in Mexico. It began operations in 1984 and up until today had reported no major accidents. Government records show that it was

last inspected on February 3. At the time inspectors found 43 safety violations, supposedly of a minor nature, and indicated that management had fixed the problems.

An account of the inspection issued on February 7 reported high levels of methane coupled with only occasional monitoring by company personnel. Government officials have not explained why the mine was not shut down at that time.

The workers and their relatives confirm the above. Many say that they repeatedly told management of safety problems and they were ignored.

Reporter Tim Gaynor of Reuters noted, “Off-duty miner Salvador Estrada said workers complained to engineers of a gas smell underground last week but were told to get back to work.” There is also a long history of conflict between the company and the National Miners’ Union over dangerous safety conditions.

Mexico Daily *La Jornada* quotes family members and former miners denouncing conditions at the mine. One former miner, Zacarias Cruz, whose brother and brother-in-law are among the 65 trapped miners, said: “I would tell them all the time that this mine is unsafe, but our need for work forced us to enter the mine. I worked for five years at this mine and there was always too much gas; this mine was a time bomb.” One of the injured miners spoke from his hospital bed denouncing safety conditions at the mine.

Many of the family members do not believe the assurances of mine managers and government officials that the miners will be rescued alive.

Rosa María Mejía Rivera, married to Rolando, a trapped miner with 19 years seniority, said, “We do not know if my husband is alive or not. He often had to work overtime because he gets paid very little, 56 pesos a day (US\$5). When he left on Saturday he told me that he would not work over that night. He did not return and I don’t know if I will ever see him again.”

Ernesto Cabral, a technical officer for the municipality of San Juan de Sabinas, in charge of inspecting the mine, blamed management for the explosion. “The mine did not meet minimum safety and hygiene standards,” he told *La Jornada*.

The company running the mine, Grupo México, is Mexico’s largest mining company, with operations across North and South America. In 1999, it bought

ASARCO, formerly an American company based in Tucson, Arizona, and presided over a vast reduction of the wages and benefits of ASARCO employees. Meanwhile, the company’s executives and stockholders have recently seen huge profits—profits jumped from US\$958 million in 2002 to over \$2 billion in 2004. Germán Larrea Mota-Velasco, one of the wealthiest men in Mexico, controls Grupo México. Larrea has built his economic empire through the ruthless exploitation of miners in Mexico, Peru and the United States.

This is not the first mining disaster in the Coahuila area, which is the primary source of Mexico’s coal. In 1908, more than 200 miners from San Juan Sabinas were killed in the Mina Rosita Vieja Number 2 shaft—Mexico’s worst mining disaster. In the Mina de Barroterán, 153 workers were killed on March 31, 1969. Another mining explosion in 1998 killed 37.

It is estimated that nearly 1,000 miners have lost their lives in the state of Coahuila in the past two centuries. Coahuila holds over 90 percent of Mexico’s coal reserves.

In 1998, mine workers at Cananea, another mine near the US-Mexican border operated by Grupo México, conducted a sit-down strike to protest the elimination of hundreds of jobs. Four convoys of Mexican soldiers were dispatched to force the miners out, and in the days that followed, 120 strike leaders were blacklisted—singled out and turned away once operations resumed at the mine.



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