

Australia: New evidence of safety concerns as hopes fade for miners trapped underground

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Tragically, the worst fears of the family and friends of three miners trapped nearly one kilometre underground at the Beaconsfield Gold Mine in Tasmania's Tamar Valley since Tuesday are being realised. The body of one miner, Larry Knight, 45, of Launceston, was located by rescuers at around 7.30 a.m. yesterday and recovered 12 hours later.

Grave concerns remain for the two other miners, Todd Russell, 35, of Beaconsfield and Brant Webb, 37, of Beauty Point. The men were trapped when seismic activity registered at 2.1 on the Richter scale triggered a "significant" rock-fall at around 9.30 p.m. on Tuesday. Another 14 miners working at a lower level were able to scramble to the surface in a mine vehicle. One of the survivors told media: "There were these two loud bangs—it sounded like ammo going off—and then rocks and dust everywhere".

Even as the rescue effort was underway, serious questions began to emerge not only about the general safety at the mine but as to whether it should have been operating at all.

The earth tremor that triggered the rock-fall was not a natural occurrence. University of Tasmania geophysics lecturer Dr Michael Roach said the seismic disturbance was directly related to mining activity at Beaconsfield. Roach explained that the area beneath the mine was under significant stresses, with pre-existing zones of weakness in the underground rock.

"When we cut an excavation in the rock, we redirect those stresses, so that the stresses are now not even but are concentrated in particular regions somewhere around the mining area. And that re-concentration of stress can result in earthquakes adjacent to the mine—and this is what happened in this case," Roach said. The company had installed monitoring equipment, "but the problem, as with any earthquake, is that you

can't make short-term predictions".

The mine's owners were fully aware of the risks involved. Last October, another tremor measuring 2.1 on the Richter scale occurred shortly after blasting activity, triggering a similar rock-fall. Even then, the management did not stop production while an inspection and review by the mine's geo-technical consultant took place. Activity ceased only on a number of high-grade slopes. According to one report at the time, "production continued unabated from other areas of the mine".

Following the review, a revised mining method known as checker-boarding was introduced. It involved the extraction of short panels before backfilling to lessen the risk of rock falls. Additional ground support was introduced in seismically-prone areas. The measures, however, clearly did not eliminate the possibility of mining activity triggering deadly seismic activity.

Management at the time admitted that until the revised methods had been in place for a considerable period, "some uncertainty" would remain about their effectiveness. However, with an eye to profits and to reassure shareholders, the company declared that the measures would not materially affect the mine's production rate or direct costs. Despite the October rock-fall, it was not until earlier this year that the management adopted a policy of waiting 12 hours before allowing workers to reenter the mine after blasting.

It is now known that miners had repeatedly raised safety concerns. A former loader driver at the century-old mine, Mata Pfab, told the media that one of the trapped miners, Todd Russell, had raised questions "about the ground conditions, the way it was being mined, and with seismic [activity]". Management had

refused to listen. “It was like talking to a brick wall,” she said.

Substantial profits and direct financial pressures were at stake in maintaining production at all costs, even to the extent of gambling with miners’ lives. The mine is majority owned and managed by Allstate Explorations, which has been dubbed Australia’s most profitable company in bankruptcy administration. According to one media report, “Allstate, despite being insolvent, made a net profit of \$33 million in 2004, much of it going to repay a debt to Macquarie Bank.”

The mine, which closed in 1914 because of flooding problems, was reopened using new flood-control equipment in 1999. At the time, gold prices stood at around \$US253 an ounce but had begun to climb. Since then the price has spiralled to exceed \$600 an ounce.

The gold veins at Beaconsfield are rich by Australian standards. While the average yield nationally from a tonne of gold-bearing ore is about three grams, the Beaconsfield operation was producing about 17 grams of gold for every tonne of rock mined.

After early losses resulting from problems with its gold production mill, Beaconsfield Gold NL posted a \$7 million profit in 2001-02. In 2004, the company reported a significant upgrade in ore reserves, with the site’s total gold resources estimated at 786,000 ounces.

While in 1999, large quantities of gold were reported about half a kilometre underground, the company began mining down over one kilometre. In the wake of Tuesday’s tragedy, Trevor Allen of Geoscience Australia said “deep-mining” and “fast extraction” increased the chances of triggering seismic activity.

For now, all operations at the mine have ceased and the Tasmanian state Labor government has foreshadowed a full investigation into the tragedy. Resources Minister Bryan Green said inspections by Workplace Standards and the Inspector of Mines would determine “when and if the mine re-opens”.

Green’s statement begs the question: why didn’t the government carry out an independent inspection after the October incident? Why, despite the warning signs of a potential disaster, did it allow the mine to continue operations?

Likewise, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) has announced it will conduct its own investigation. AWU national vice-president Paul Howes claimed the union had had serious concerns after October’s seismic

shock. “Our membership has informed us that a lot of the concerns they raised with management between that time and now weren’t addressed.” Why then didn’t the union act to ensure the miners’ safety concerns were addressed, or carry out its own investigation after last October’s incident?

The answer can be found in the mining unions’ deepening collaboration with employers over the past 15 years to make the enterprises “internationally competitive”. The result has been the sharp deterioration of safety standards and working conditions and a string of tragedies such as the one at Beaconsfield. Howes himself conceded that the mining industry as a whole was unsafe, with 143 fatalities across Australia in the past nine years.



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