

Hospital blast in China kills at least 33

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In the early hours of April 12, two tonnes of explosives being illegally stored in the car park of the staff hospital of the Xuangang Coal and Electricity Company detonated and tore through the facility. The explosives were intended for use in an illegal coal mine operation.

The death toll from the blast now stands at 33. Most of the dead were hospital staff and their relatives. A two-storey hospital residence above the car park was completely destroyed, along with six houses in the vicinity. A nearby five-storey apartment block was badly damaged. A doctor told Agence France Presse that he heard a “loud bang” and that windows from his building, located some 500 metres from the blast site, were blown out. Buildings within a one-kilometre radius were affected.

The state-run Chinese media estimated that between 40 and 200 people were injured in the explosion, some of whom were nearby villagers. Among the 30 people who have been hospitalised, two are in a serious condition. They have been transferred to Beijing for medical treatment.

The hospital is in the city of Yuanping in Shanxi province, China’s largest coal mining area. In order to placate public anger, the Yuanping city government has promised to pay 200,000 yuan (\$US25,000) to the families of each of the victims. The local government has provided accommodation for more than 140 people who have been made homeless and is paying them a daily subsidy of 50 yuan (\$6.24). This paltry sum is supposed to compensate for the destruction of the residents’ possessions and homes.

Wang Jinsheng, a hospital administrator was responsible for storing the explosives in the car park. Wang had originally bought them for use in his private coal pit, which closed on March 10. He then shifted the explosives and more than 10,000 detonators to the hospital. Residents in Xuangang told Chinese

reporters that there are dozens of small illegal coal mines in the area. Wang opened his mine several years ago and rapidly made a considerable amount of money. He had brought a car and sent his son overseas to study.

Wang and his chauffeur have been arrested and police are still looking for another person who they claim sold the explosives to him. The local police claim that the explosives were homemade and substandard. They contained chlorate—a substance that produces heat when mixed with other elements and is thus prone to spontaneous explosion.

Wang’s flagrant abuse of his position and disregard for the safety of employees and patients at the hospital is not surprising. Corruption in the hospital system has become pervasive in China since the introduction of a “user pays” system in the 1990s.

According to official statistics, average annual healthcare spending per person rose from 11 yuan to 442 yuan from 1978 to 2002, while the government’s share of healthcare spending fell from 32 percent to 15 percent. People are forced to pay as much as 68 percent of their medical costs.

The result is profiteering through arbitrary charges of patients by hospital administrators. A scandal last November in northeastern Harbin city forced the Chinese ministry of health to sack nine officials. A hospital fabricated medical reports in order to bill a dead patient’s family 1.3 million yuan (\$173,000) for unnecessary procedures. Other hospitals are accused of forcing women to have caesarians instead of natural births as they cost more.

The other factor in the tragedy in Yuanping is the fact that the government turns a virtual blind eye to the rampant operations of illegal coal mines.

In Shanxi, illegal mining has provided opportunities for well-connected entrepreneurs at the expense of both workers and the environment.

China’s demand for coal is burgeoning. According to

an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on July 7, 2005, local authorities estimate that alongside large state-owned mines, about 15,000 illegal or so-called cottage mines have opened up across Shanxi province in the last several years. More than 500,000 people work in the industry. Some of the pits are less than 20 feet deep. Some are dug by families who sell the coal to local wholesalers, while others are relatively large-scale operations that produce as much as 10,000 tonnes per month. The province produced a quarter of the two billion tonnes of coal consumed in China last year.

The illegal mines are notorious for the lack of protective equipment and ignoring health regulations. Over the past three years, the Chinese government has carried out campaigns to shut down small illegal coal mines in the name of improving safety. It is normal practice, however, for mine owners to bribe officials to have them reopened.

The provincial government has turned a blind eye to the industry because illegal mining provides urgently needed jobs for the growing army of the unemployed and cheap energy for industrial development. Illegal coal is sold for only \$10 a tonne—20 percent less than normal market prices.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* article provided a detailed account of the conditions that face workers in the Shanxi mining industry. “In the villages around here, it’s easy to tell which men—and sometimes children—are working in the mines. Their hair and clothes are covered in soot, and their gait seems strained because of the weight of the heavy equipment they use all day. Their breathing is raspy and their eyes yellow from the toxic gases that get released when coal is quarried,” it stated.

A doctor, Ma Junsheng, told the *Chronicle*: “We are dying early here. It’s dry. There’s coal dust everywhere, which causes lots of diseases—lung cancer, tuberculosis, and asthma. And then there are the accidents. I’ve been here 16 or 17 years and there is one every month. The most common problem is collapses. Sometimes people don’t know about the gasses that get released and so explosions also happen.”

Despite the Chinese government’s frequent cosmetic crackdowns, as many as 6,000 miners die every year in disasters because both private and state-owned enterprises ignore basic safety standards that get in the way of making a profit.

This is the climate that produced Wang, a typical representative of Chinese businessmen. He had no hesitation about putting lives at the hospital at risk in order to pursue his own personal enrichment. Wang and other coal mine owners are used to operating in an environment where they can literally get away with murder, sending men to extract coal from illegal and unsafe pits. The deaths of dozens of innocent people in Xuanggang are another demonstration of the destructive character of capitalist relations in China.



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