

Chinese miners feared dead in flooded coal mines

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Anger boiled over yesterday among relatives of 181 Chinese coal miners trapped in two flooded mines in eastern Shandong province since Friday. Frantic relatives scuffled with security forces, demanding answers and criticising rescue efforts after a fourth day without word on the fate of their loved ones.

The disaster was triggered by torrential rain, which produced a flash flood in the nearby Wenhe River. Water poured into the Huayuan mine after a dyke burst, trapping 172 miners underground. Another 584 who were underground at the time were lucky to escape. Nine more miners are missing in a smaller nearby mine, which also flooded.

Thousands of soldiers and local residents worked frantically to seal the 50-metre break in the levee but the task was not completed until early Sunday morning. Only then were rescuers able to install water pumps to begin to drain water from the 860-metre Huayuan mine. No estimate has been given as to when rescuers might reach the trapped men.

Yesterday, two brothers of a missing miner, along with his son and two other men, smashed a reception window at the company offices then rushed into the Huayuan compound, followed by five other relatives. Prevented by guards and police from entering the main administrative building, they staged a sit-down protest to demand regular briefings by company and government officials.

“Why does the whole world know what’s going on, but we people right here don’t? We have to get on the Internet to find out,” Zhang Chuantong, one of the brothers, told the Associated Press.

The company has failed to make any announcement leaving it to government officials to provide limited press briefings. According to the Associated Press, family members have been warned by company

officials to stay at home and not talk to the media. No list of the missing has been issued, relatives said.

“They are treating people like they are things to be sacrificed,” Li Chunmei was reported by the *Los Angeles Times* as saying. “You would think an official could come and tell us what’s going on, whether there are any signs of life.” Most of the workers are from rural areas near the city of Taian.

The mine was previously state-owned but went bankrupt in 2004. It was taken over by the private Huayuan Mining Corporation, which changed its name and restructured its operations. A former accountant said there was a lot of resentment toward the company even before the accident because about 30 percent of the workforce was fired in 2004.

The accountant, who refused to give his name, said output had fallen from about 1 million tonnes a year in the late 1980s to between 600,000 and 700,000 tonnes at present. Some of the relatives told the media that the company’s financial troubles meant it had cut corners on safety. The company motto—“Absolute discipline, absolute execution of orders”—speaks volumes for its management methods.

The danger of flooding was known. According to the Associated Press, two smaller mines in the same area—the state-owned Xintai Wenhe Coal Mine and Xintai Hanzhuang Coal Mine—shut down last Friday morning because of the risk. In an effort to excuse the Huayuan management, a local government official claimed that these mines did not have the safety equipment available in larger mines.

Reportage of the disaster in China has been scant. The main state television news at noon on Sunday gave only a 30-second report. Reporters for local Chinese media were ordered to leave the site in an effort to control the release of information.

The *Australian* reported today that criticism of management and government officials was spreading through the Internet. One Huayuan miner wrote on the sina.com website: "It's not a natural disaster, as they claim. The regulations stipulate a maximum of 30 workers at each level of the mine—but there were more than 700 working there at the time."

Another wrote: "Whenever there's a disaster, the officials claim it is because of a rare natural event that has not happened for dozens of years. They always have a good excuse to brush aside responsibility."

The Chinese government reacted nervously to the public mood over the disaster. The tragedy could quickly erase the relief felt when 69 coal miners were rescued earlier this month in Henan province after being trapped underground by flooding rains for three days.

In an unusual step, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao issued a joint directive to local officials, published on Saturday, to devote every effort to rescuing the trapped miners. "There's some hope, and we will expend 100 percent, 1,000 percent of effort to carry out the search and rescue," a spokesman for the Shandong provincial government declared. Behind this superficial optimism, however, fears are growing for the men's survival.

The Huayuan mine disaster could turn out to be one of the country's worst. In the 58 years since the Chinese revolution, only the February 2005 gas explosion at the Sunjiawan colliery in the northeastern province of Liaoning had a higher toll. At least 214 workers died in that tragedy.

On average, 17 miners lose their lives every day in Chinese coal mines, which are the world's deadliest. State Administration of Work Safety statistics reveal that coal mine accidents killed 4,746 people in China in 2006. Already in the first seven months of this year, 2,163 coal miners have been killed in 1,320 accidents. The toll in China's coal mines is 2.81 deaths for one million tonnes of coal mined. The figure is 70 times worse than the rate in the US and seven times higher than in Russia and India.

In the courtyard across from the main gate to the Huayuan Mining compound, the company had a bright blue banner with red lettering, declaring: "Hold high the banner of development. Build a harmonious mine and create a happy Huayuan."

Unwittingly, these phrases expose the real implications of government's main slogan of building "a harmonious society". Rapid economic development in China has created a deep social divide, with an increasingly wealthy capitalist elite making its profits through the ruthless exploitation of the workforce. "Harmony" is only maintained through harsh discipline backed by the full force of the police and state apparatus.

Nowhere is this process starker than in the coal mines, which provide the fuel for the country's rapidly expanding demand for cheap power.



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