

China's latest coal mine explosion kills at least 105

Carol Divjak
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China's coal mining centre, Shanxi province, has been the site of another disaster—a gas explosion that killed 105 workers last Wednesday in Hongdong county, near the city of Linfen.

The deaths at the privately-owned Ruizhiyuan Coal Mine were a direct consequence of the company's gross violation of basic safety regulations in order to maximise production and profits. Some 128 miners were underground—more than double the officially allowed maximum of 60 people per shift—when the explosion occurred. Only 38 were able to escape.

Instead of calling in mine rescue services, management compounded the tragedy by sending 37 of their own workers, untrained in rescue work, into the shaft to search for survivors. Of those, 15 were quickly killed by the toxic carbon monoxide produced by the gas explosion. Management only finally asked for assistance from the authorities five hours later—a delay that meant the best chance for saving any trapped miners was missed.

Yang Tianming, a miner, told *Beijing News*: “Many people went to rescue the others, but they blindly gave up their lives.” Another worker, Zhao Jinsheng told *West China Daily*: “We didn't know anything about conditions down there.” His brother was among the missing.

Nie Mingsheng, a 50-year-old miner, told Xinhua newsagency he was working underground and smelt something strange. Someone called his mobile about the accident, but he was quickly overcome by a cloud of gas. He was one of the fortunate few to be rescued.

Another miner, Yao Pingui from Chongqing, told the newsagency that the mine owner had put money before lives, provided no safety equipment to most workers and no professional training for emergencies. Others pointed out that even workers who had safety

equipment did not know how to use it and were among the victims.

The police have detained 35 people, mainly management staff and operators. The police are still hunting for the owner and manager, who have fled from the site.

The accident has again shocked the country. Despite all the government's promises to increase safety, the Chinese coal mining industry remains the world's most deadly.

Li Yizhong, the director of the State Bureau of Safety and Inspection, angrily declared on December 9 that the Hongdong accident was among the worst since 2006. Ruizhiyuan Coal Mining was privatised in 2004. Its registered output is 210,000 tonnes per year. Actual production, however, was more than double that figure—over half a million tonnes last year. Even the output for the first seven months of this year surpassed the officially approved annual level.

Li's report explained that the management systematically breached regulations. The company had approval to dig into “level two” of the mine's coal reserves. However, management designed and constructed the main shaft to be able to reach the depth of “level nine”. In order to evade inspection, the company used steel plates to conceal the real depth of the shaft and drew up false documents and plans for inspectors. The last inspection took place only six days before the accident.

The company did not test the level of gases in the hidden shaft or its structural stability. There were no independent ventilation systems or gas detection systems. As many as 54 vehicles were operating underground, but none were equipped to prevent the ignition of mine gases. Even more dangerous were two illegally constructed explosives stores, which if ignited,

would have produced a greater explosion.

Aside from the flouting of safety standards, the mine's shift system was "chaotic". Management outsourced production at different levels to contractors who hired labourers from the local area and other provinces. The company paid the outsourcers 55 yuan (\$US7.4) per tonne of coal—a profit margin of just 2 yuan. In turn, the outsourcers could contract out to others who had even tighter margins.

The whole production system was designed to maximise output with no concern for safety or other conditions of the miners, who earn very little. As many as 10 outsourcing teams were working underground before the explosion. As a result, the police have been unable to compile a full list of all the men employed at the mine.

Following the explosion, the Chinese government issued a "five point" instruction for enforcing safety regulations, including the closure of "illegal" coal mines and the takeover of small mines by major mining groups. The government will also pay 215,000 yuan in compensation to the families of the victims. Shanxi Communist Party boss Meng Xuenong called for "public supervision" of illegal mines and promised rewards of up to 100,000 yuan for their exposure.

On average, 13 Chinese workers are killed every day in mine cave-ins, explosions and other disasters. In cases that provoke public outrage, government officials often adopt postures of concern and anger. In the worst cases, senior Chinese leaders such as Premier Wen Jiabao sometimes shed a tear for the TV cameras. Occasionally, minor managers and officials have been punished for their crimes.

In reality, however, these token actions are designed to placate the public and have done nothing to end the barbaric conditions in the industry. Near the same city of Linfen, there have been two major mining incidents this year. On March 28, an explosion at the Yujialing coal mine killed 26. On May 5, a blast at the Pudeng mine killed 28.

In early November, the Chinese government released data showing that in the first 10 months of the year 3,069 miners died—19 percent less than last year. A number of critics, however, insist that the figures are not credible, because many deaths go unreported to avoid mine closures. Alongside mine disasters, diseases such as lung cancer, tuberculosis and asthma also claim

a high toll. Unofficial estimates put the death rate in China's mining industry as high as 20,000 a year.

Shanxi province houses three of China's most polluted cities—Linfen, Yangquan and Datong. In Linfen, life expectancy is 10 years below the national average. Economic analysts have calculated that if the costs of polluted water and air were factored in, Shanxi province's annual growth rate of 10 percent-plus would be almost zero. Despite government plans to create large mining groups, smaller and often illegal mines continue to emerge or re-emerge because of China's rising energy demand. The country now consumes one third of the world's coal.

The government has strengthened mine safety regulations over the past few years—on paper at least. But enforcement is lax and corruption among inspectors and other party officials continues to be widespread. According to the *AsiaNews.it* web site, 95 percent of party officials who were brought to trial last year over mining accidents were eventually acquitted.

The latest mine disaster in Hongdong county will also be quickly brushed aside amid the drive for greater output, which will inevitably produce fresh tragedies.



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