

Coal mine explosion in China kills 74

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China's notorious dangerous coal industry recorded another tragedy on Sunday. A gas explosion in the Tunlan Coal Mine near Taiyuan, the capital city of Shanxi province, killed at least 74 miners and injured another 114. The death toll is the worst since an accident that killed 105 miners in the same province in December 2007.

The blast occurred early Sunday morning when 436 workers were working underground. Most were brought quickly to the surface, but around 65 were trapped and could not be reached by rescuers until the evening. The authorities have not released details of where and how the miners died. Some who were brought to the surface died later in hospital.

According to doctors at the Xishan Hospital of Coal and Electricity, many of the miners were suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning. One young hospitalised miner, Xue Huancheng, told the Xinhua newsagency that he had not felt anything unusual before the accident, but began to choke. Someone outside the shaft told them the ventilation system had broken down. As the power supply had broken down, the miners had to walk out. Xue switched on his oxygen tank, but collapsed near the exit.

Qiu Jiong, whose brother-in-law was among the missing, told the Associated Press that the government had not informed the miners' families. He and his wife only learned about the accident via the Internet. Lu Tangyao, whose 38-year-old son was killed, told the newsagency: "No one would talk to me or tell me anything. So many people died, but nothing is being said. The government is corrupt and opaque."

President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao moved quickly to head off discontent, publicly expressing concern about the accident. Shanxi governor Wang Jun was sent to personally direct rescue work at the mine.

Underlining the real concerns of Chinese authorities, he called for an orderly rescue to ensure social stability. Vice Premier Zhang Dejiang also headed to the mine on Sunday evening to visit the miners and the families of the victims.

As the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* noted, mine disasters have become a "continued source of public discontent and a seed of social instability, which has alarmed the central government." The newspaper identified corruption and substandard safety as being behind the 3,786 deaths in China's coal mining industry in 2007.

The latest disaster was a political embarrassment for the Chinese government, which claims to have been improving safety standards. The Tunlan Coal Mine is not a small private operation, but is owned by the state-run Shanxi Coking Coal Group--the country's largest coking coal conglomerate. The mine has an annual output of 5 million tonnes of coal and was reputed to have had some of the best facilities in the country. No accident had taken place in the past five years.

The State Administration of Work Safety stated that its officials were still investigating the cause of the explosion. However, a company official told reporters that the blast was the result of a sudden concentration of methane gas in the shaft. The inquiry had barely started when the mine's manager, chief safety officer and chief engineer were sacked—a sign that authorities are more interested in finding scapegoats than identifying causes and improving safety standards.

The government has provided a standard compensation of 200,000 yuan (\$US29,000) to each of the victim's families. The amount has been widely criticised for failing to take into account the circumstances facing different families. It is in any case inadequate to meet basic needs after a family has lost its main breadwinner.

In the wake of the disaster, the state media has been quick to highlight the improving safety record in the country's mining industry. Last year's death toll was 3,200—down by 15 percent from 2007. The explosion, however, took place just one day after a conference in Shanxi province on mining safety, during which senior officials promised to put an end to all mining disasters.

In January, Zhao Tiechui, a senior official in charge of coal mine supervision, told Xinhua that 80 percent of the 16,000 mines operating in China were illegal. "Coal mines often experience the most serious accidents because so many of them are operating illegally. The industry also sees the most frequent covering-up of accidents," Zhao explained.

The explosion at the Tunlan Coal Mine underlines the fact that deaths are taking place across the board—in operations, large and small, state-run and privately owned. The basic cause lies in the drive to maximise profits, which leads to cutting corners to increase production and slash costs. The payment of bribes is commonly used to circumvent the country's limited inspection system.

A report entitled "The Bone and Blood: the Price of Coal in China" published last year by the Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin* explained: "Firstly, the system of contracting mines out to private operators on a short-term basis has led to contractors seeking a maximum return on their investment in the shortest possible time; production capacity is exceeded way beyond safe levels, investment in safety equipment is insufficient or non-existent and unskilled and untrained workers are hired as miners. Secondly, mine owners and local officials have created an almost impenetrable network of collusion that prevents central government safety measures from being enforced. Finally, mine workers have no representative body to negotiate with mine owners and management over wages, working conditions and mine safety."

Until recently, mining accidents were generally the result of demands for higher coal production to power China's vast industrial expansion. China produces 2.7 billion tonnes of coal a year and coal provides two-thirds of China's energy consumption. About 90 percent of the output comes from small mines (many of them illegal)

with capacity of less than 300,000 tonnes a year.

Now, however, China's economy is slowing rapidly as part of the global economic recession. As in other industries, shortages have quickly been replaced by excess mining capacity. Some analysts estimate that China will have an oversupply of 50 million tonnes of coal this year. Official data in January showed that national power consumption dropped by 12.88 percent from the same period last year. As a result, mining companies face greater competition and are being forced to cut costs to survive.

Negotiations over coal prices for China's five top power producers (Huaneng, Datang, Guodian, Huadian and China Power Investment Corporation) have dragged on for two months. The coal miners, headed by the Shenhua Group, demanded an increase in prices of more than 10 percent from last year. In response, the power companies started to buy more coal from abroad, lifting total imports in January by 12 percent. A domestic price is yet to be fixed.

The Tunlan Coal Mine, which produced for the steel industry, was under similar pressures. China produced 500 million tonnes of steel last year—one third of world's total—but the total capacity was 660 million tonnes. To slash overcapacity, China is shutting down obsolete facilities for making iron and steel. Under a government plan announced last month, the top five steelmakers will consolidate 45 percent of total output under their control over the next three years. The move will boost their bargaining power not only with overseas iron ore suppliers, but also local coal producers.

This constant pressure on coal mining companies to cut prices and costs will inevitably mean job losses, the erosion of working conditions, the undermining of safety standards and more tragic mining disasters.



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