

Coal mine blast in Indonesia kills at least 32

Carol Divjak
24 June 2009

A gas explosion at the PT Dasrat-owned Sarana Arang Sejati coal mine in the Sawahlunto district of West Sumatra on June 16 killed at least 32 people. The tragedy is the outcome of the appalling safety standards that prevail in much of the Indonesian mining industry.

The blast sent flames 50 metres into the air and left a huge crater on the surface. Rescue efforts inside the 150 metre-deep mine were hampered by rock slides and dangerous concentrations of methane and carbon dioxide.

Many bodies were pulled from narrow paths deep in the mine and were so badly burned they could not be identified. Sixteen workers were saved from the scene, but five died later in hospital. More than 40 miners were working underground at the time.

Police and disaster officials are investigating the cause of the blast. According to a report in the *Jakarta Post* on June 18, there is speculation that a short circuit in a power generator or a miner lighting a cigarette may have triggered an explosion of methane gas, which had reached dangerously high levels in the mine. In the meantime, police have sealed off the mine.

The Sarana Arang Sejati mine has a history of safety problems. The head of the Sawahlunto Mining Agency, Syafirwal, told the *Jakarta Post* that another explosion at the site in 2007 had killed three workers and the agency had recommended its closure. Instead, a licence for mining at the site was given to PT Dasrat in December 2008, which subcontracted production to the same local businessman who had previously operated the pit. The mine produced about 1,500 tons of coal a month, supplying local paper and power companies.

The mayor of Sawahlunto, Amran Nur, claimed that he had advised the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources in December about the risks of a methane explosion at the mine, but the warning was ignored. “They did not listen to us,” he said. “They kept on sending miners to the site.”

Ultimately, the only action taken by the local government was to send a letter to PT Dasrat asking that it install additional ventilation in the mine shafts. “But we didn’t know whether they had abided by it or not. We didn’t check it again,” Amran admitted.

Priagun Rahmanto, an analyst from the Reforminer Institute, told the *Jakarta Globe* that had proper safety measures been taken, the disaster could have been prevented. “The owners should be the main party responsible for the accident. The blast must have happened because there were incorrect procedures and safety measures in place,” he said.

If one changed the Indonesian names and places, the tragedy in Sawahlunto could be yet another of the accidents in China’s coal mining industry that kill thousands of workers every year. Disregard for safety measures, poverty wages and corrupt government officials who collude with mine owners are the social conditions that produce the deadly disasters. Indonesia does not have the same death toll as China only because most mines in the country are open-cut, rather than underground operations.

The Sawahlunto coal fields are rich in reserves and have been worked since 1892. The burgeoning global demand for coal, however, particularly from China, has led to a vast expansion of mining. Indonesia is now the world’s second largest coal exporter after Australia, with a projected output of 230 million tonnes this year,

more than double the 100 million tonnes produced in 2002.

Miners today have to dig far deeper to access high-grade coal, creating greater dangers from lethal concentrations of methane gas and unstable mine structures. Moreover, the prospect of lucrative profits, however short-term, has seen large numbers of small and often illegal operations started up.

The Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Program (RMAP) web site at the Australian National University published a short report last year titled, “Illegal Mining in Indonesia”. It estimated that there were approximately 77,000 illegal mines in the country, employing 465,000 workers in diverse industries such as tin, gold, diamond and coal. The report noted that Indonesia’s Central Bureau of Statistics recorded the average number employed in the informal mining sector in 1997-2002 to be 324,000—about 10 times higher than the 34,000 workers employed in the formal sector. The “informal” miners are poorly paid and approximately 10 percent are children under 17 years of age.

The conditions in the illegal mines are shocking. The RMAP cited the example of gold miners in Kalimantan, who “never use diving equipment or protect their bodies with wire while diving in the bottom of river; rarely use gloves and allow their skin to contact directly with hazardous mercury and often inhale it; never use ear caps despite 6-8 hours non-stop of heavily vibrated mechanical sounds; never use boots or appropriate clothing to protect their bodies while they are submerging in the water river; never filter the water they drink from the river—which is in fact contaminated by mercury; and prefer to see a traditional healer (dukun) to cure them when they are sick rather than a doctor”.

RMAP pointed to the likely relationship between major corporate concerns and the small illegal mining operations. The report suggested that many of the local businessmen who hired poverty-stricken farmers, fishermen and the unemployed to work in mines functioned as intermediaries for larger investors, including foreign companies.

Referring to the illegal mining of close to 30 million tonnes of coal in South Kalimantan between 2001 and 2003, RMAP wrote: “It is most unlikely that, given the national income per capita of \$US725, locals were able to self finance billions of rupiah worth of mining operations—with trucks, excavators, 20HP machineries, smelters, or even ships. Along the coasts of Batulicin, Tanah Laut, and Tanah Bumbu, there lay illegal stockpiles and ports where barges are waiting to ship coal to investors’ destinations, mainly to China and India.” In regions like West Papua, the Indonesian military directly controls the illegal gold mining operations and reaps significant profits from them.

Following the explosion, the Sawahlunto authorities belatedly ordered a halt to mining at 12 other coal mines in the region, which employ some 1,000 workers. “Company operations have been temporarily closed until they comply with proper mining procedures and ensure the safety of miners,” mayor Amran told the *Jakarta Post*.

The production halt, however, is unlikely to last for long. Government officials and businesses are calling for mining to resume as quickly as possible in order to guarantee coal supplies to the local power plant. Moreover, authorities in Indonesia view mining—both legal and illegal—as an important source of revenue, whether in the form of taxes or kickbacks. The least important concern in deciding when production will restart is the safety and lives of miners.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact