

A week of coal mine disasters in China

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At least 19 miners were killed and 24 trapped by a mine explosion in the central Chinese province of Henan on Wednesday evening. The disaster occurred as rescue workers were still battling to save at least 153 construction workers trapped underground by a flood inside Shanxi's Wangjialing coal mine project last Sunday.

It has been a bloody week for China's coal industry, with four reported accidents. On Tuesday, 10 workers were trapped when the Shajihai mine collapsed in Hoboksar County in the north-western region of Xinjiang. On Thursday, nine workers lost their lives during a fire in Shaanxi province's Quanzigou mine.

Wednesday's explosion occurred at 7:20 p.m. in a pit illegally operated by the private Guomin Mining Company in Yichuan County. Around 90 miners were working underground. According to a rescue worker, however, it was impossible to establish the actual number of trapped miners, as the blast destroyed the duty roster. Fifteen underground workers have been confirmed dead, together with four working in a light house on the surface. About 50 miners escaped.

Gases leaking from underground reached the mine entrance, where they were ignited probably by some kind of spark. The blast was so powerful that a nearby two-storey building caved in, and electricity supplies were disrupted to four surrounding villages. According to local residents, the explosion could be heard for three kilometres.

The official Xinhua news agency reported that the mine owner, Wang Guozheng, has disappeared. The authorities ordered his assets frozen, while the Yichuan county chief and three work safety officials were fired in an attempt to placate public anger. Henan provincial governor Guo Genmao personally took charge of the rescue and insisted that the trapped miners could possibly be saved.

According to the Henan Work Safety Administration, the mine with annual production capacity of 150,000 tonnes, was ordered to suspend its operations last May after a gas outburst that killed two miners.

Four officials were sent to the mine to enforce the ban, supposedly on a 24-hour basis, but the mine continued production. None of the officials reported the illegal action, and disappeared after Wednesday's disaster. Undoubtedly they were bought off by the mine boss, while county officials simply ignored the ongoing, dangerous mining operations.

While official corruption is certainly a factor in China's mine accidents, the scapegoating of junior officials and individual managers is a diversion from the real cause of the mounting death toll—a reckless drive for profit from the over-heated economy's soaring demand for coal.

The Wangjialing mine is an obvious example. It operated by a state-owned company and is a priority project in Beijing's 15th "five-year plan". The management was clearly under pressure to complete the project and to meet production and profit targets.

Last Sunday's flood was caused by the company trying to complete the mine's construction five months ahead of schedule, despite warnings of water leaking into the shafts. Some surviving workers estimate that the number of trapped workers could be as high as 260.

Surviving workers told the State Work Safety Administration that management at the Wangjialing mine completely ignored safety standards. One worker told Xinhua that 90 percent of the workforce had never been trained to use their personal self-rescue equipment. The management required workers to pay a bond of 300 yuan (\$US44) for the gear, so workers only wore it to show safety inspectors and then took it for fear of damaging the

equipment.

Similar pressures are the likely cause of Tuesday's collapse in the Shajihai mine in Xinjiang that was under construction. The region's work safety bureau spokesman admitted that the prospects were grim for the trapped workers. "The collapse site is as deep as 700 metres underground, and the collapsed part is estimated to be 500 to 600 cubic metres. The geological structure underground is very loose. In addition, water has begun gushing into the shaft."

Behind the criminal practices of mining companies and government officials is the fact that profit is put before the lives of workers. China's hothouse economy, driven by government stimulus packages, cheap bank credit and real estate speculation, has created soaring demand and prices for coal.

Earlier this year, China's two largest coal miners—the Shenhua Group and China National Coal Group Corporation—wrote contracts with power plants that raised prices from 540 yuan per tonne to 570 yuan. International prices are rising even faster, with an expected 40 percent surge during 2010–11.

In addition, because of the severe drought in southwest China, CLSA Research Ltd has calculated that coal-fired power stations may need an additional 35 million tonnes of coal to compensate for a 15 percent drop in hydroelectricity production. This will further drive up domestic coal prices.

With coal accounting for 80 percent of power generation, compared to 17 percent for hydro, the demand for more energy, driven by market anarchy and profit-making, will inevitably lead to more deaths in China's coal mining industry.



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