

Trapped miners found dead in Turkey

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22 May 2010

Early Thursday morning, rescuers in northern Turkey found the bodies of 28 miners who had been trapped by an explosion at the state-run Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises (TTK) mine at Karadon, near the Black Sea port of Zonguldak, on Monday. Two miners remain missing, but little hope is held for their survival.

The discovery of the bodies, 540 metres underground, extinguished the hopes of the men's families who had maintained a vigil at the mine entrance for nearly four days. Television images showed loved ones weeping. Some fainted and were taken to hospital. The deaths caused anguish and anger in Zonguldak, a mining-based city of 120,000, and across Turkey. Media outlets spoke of "countrywide grief" and reported that messages of condolence began to flow in.

Funerals for many of the deceased were held Thursday and Friday. The badly damaged bodies of three of the miners have yet to be delivered to their families, with authorities saying DNA tests might be required to establish their identities.

The men were killed by yet another methane gas blast in a Turkish mine. Announcing the deaths, Energy Minister Taner Yildiz said: "We believe they died from carbon monoxide poisoning when the accident happened." Methane explosions cause extremely high temperatures and gas poisoning.

Although the Karadon mine is state-owned, those killed were employed by a private company contracted to perform specific tasks in the mine, including dynamiting new sections.

Turkish coal miners have suffered a rising death toll in recent years. According to TTK statistics, 2,687 people died in mine accidents between 1955 and 2009, and 326,321 others were injured. But the numbers soared in 2008, when 43 miners died in 38 accidents that were reported in 22 Turkish provinces. Last year was even worse—62 accidents occurred in 24 provinces, resulting in 92 deaths. Just in the first five months of

2010, there have been 26 accidents in 16 provinces causing 65 deaths.

Turkey has the highest death rate from mining accidents in Europe, more than four times the European average and about twice the rate of Portugal, the second most dangerous state. Only China and Russia have worse records internationally. Nearly all Turkey's accidents have involved methane gas explosions, cave-ins and gas poisonings.

Ordinary people's anger has been further fuelled by the provocative remarks of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan during his visit to the scene on Wednesday. Speaking at the mine gates, Erdogan declared that deadly accidents were simply the "fate" of mining communities, in which sons routinely followed their fathers down the pits. "The people of the region are quite used to events like these," he claimed. "This profession has this in its destiny. The workers get into the profession knowing that these kinds of incidents may occur."

Scuffles broke out between police, protesters and distraught relatives during Erdogan's visit. Protests by miners' families also erupted when Labour and Social Security Minister Ömer Dinçer arrived at their vigil at the mine entrance.

Far from willingly accepting their "fate," miners and their families are forced by economic pressures to endure unsafe conditions. It is a sign of the desperate conditions facing all Turkish workers that men continue to go down the pits, where the work is not only highly dangerous but also very poorly paid. Taci Alkaya, a mine union official in Zonguldak, told journalists that the 28 dead miners had probably each earned only 800 to 1,000 Turkish lira (\$US550 to \$684) a month. He added that the Karadon mine operated 24 hours a day, with three or four alternating shifts.

Tragic details have begun to emerge about the dead men. Hasan Akbaha, for example, was a 48-year-old

father of two children. A former construction worker, he had retired but was then forced to keep working to pay off the debt on his house. He had planned to quit in two months' time. Now his family, like the others, will receive only 10,000 Turkish lira from the government in compensation, and will have to live on small monthly social security stipends or pensions.

Erdogan's Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government bears central responsibility for the worsening mining death toll. Since the adoption of the 2004 Mining Law, the country's coal industry has been increasingly privatised and outsourced to contractors. The number of miners working for private corporations has risen from 10,367 in 1995 to some 40,000 in 2009.

The drive for higher profits has produced "flexible work conditions," inadequate training of unskilled new recruits, and slack safety inspections. Labour Minister Dinçer admitted on Friday morning that there are 44,000 mines in Turkey, but only 550 inspectors. A report published in March by the General Miners Union estimated that 98 percent of Turkey's mine disasters are preventable. It identified the lack of inspections as the main problem, alongside management mistakes and inadequate safety education.

Energy Minister Taner Yıldız claimed on Thursday that the government would "take hard measures, especially against the coal mines that do not obey the rules". He did not disclose what measures the government planned, however. A day earlier, President Abdullah Gul instructed the State Audit Board to conduct an inquiry into Monday's explosion and recent mine accidents, in order to address "the public's suffering".

But it is already clear that the government will not reverse course on its pro-market program. Energy and Natural Resources Minister Taner Yıldız yesterday denounced claims that privatisation was to blame for the latest catastrophe, accusing government critics of "making politics".

During a ruling party meeting yesterday, Erdogan defiantly repeated his reference to the incident as "fate" and went further, asserting that further tragedies were simply inevitable. "It is impossible to prevent a methane gas explosion 100 percent," he declared, denouncing newspaper columnists who criticised his initial statement. "Unfortunately this is the fate of this profession in many places throughout the world."

The trade unions bear their share of responsibility for the latest miners' death. Despite the government's intransigence and contempt for miners, the unions have called no action over the disaster. DISK, one of Turkey's largest labour federations, merely issued an impotent plea for a halt to the practice of contracting jobs to private companies in state-owned mines.



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