Miners trapped underground in Turkish coal disaster

Mike Head
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Northern Turkey became the site of the world's latest coal mine disaster on Monday, when 32 miners were trapped underground by an explosion at the state-run Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises (TTK) mine at Karadon, near the Black Sea port of Zonguldak.

More than 40 miners were reported to have been working in two separate areas at a depth of about 540 metres when a large explosion occurred at 1:30pm. Eleven injured miners were rescued, but there has been no communication with the trapped miners, and hopes are fading for their survival.

Initial rescue efforts failed after a passage dug by rescuers collapsed, forcing the rescue team to try to approach the victims through a different route, more than 2,000 metres from the site of the blast. Turkish broadcaster NTV said there were further complications, and fears of another explosion, because high levels of methane gas remained in the mine air. The Turkish newspaper *Today's Zaman* reported that a rescue team member collapsed due to the lack of oxygen.

On Tuesday, mine chief engineer Husnu Unal told the media that air had been pumped into the mine to try to dispel the gas, but the trapped miners' "chance of staying alive is fading". He revealed that the explosion might have been triggered by the use of dynamite to extend a mining chamber.

Yesterday, TTK head Burhan Inan told reporters that rescuers need at least four more days to dig through to the trapped men, further dashing hopes of finding them alive. He said rescue workers were coming up against blocks of stone the size of cars.

Scuffles broke out between police, protesters and distraught relatives of the trapped miners yesterday, when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid a visit to the scene. Relatives have been holding a vigil in a tent near the mine. The clashes are an indication of the public anger over the disaster, and Turkey's long record of coal mine tragedies.

More than 2,700 Turkish miners have been killed since 1955. In the worst catastrophe, a gas explosion killed 270 miners near Zonguldak in 1992, not far from the latest tragedy. Monday's explosion was the third in the past six months. In February, a methane gas explosion collapsed an underground chamber in a mine in the northwestern province of Bal?kesir, killing 13 workers. Last December, 19 miners died in a similar accident in neighbouring Bursa province.

According to *Today's Zaman*: "Both accidents led to national grief when images of the workers' families weeping helplessly hit television screens. However, little has been done to take necessary measures to prevent another such tragedy from happening."

Past disasters have been attributed to disregard for safety rules and lack of official inspections of private mines. Monday's explosion, however, is linked even more directly the government's responsibility because the Karadon mine is run by the state-owned TTK.

Media interviews with victims' families at their vigil near the mine's entrance gave a glimpse of the economic pressures that push miners into work that they know could kill them. Ay?e Aklin, whose son, son-in-law and nephew are trapped underground, said: "I told my son not to go and work in the mine and that I would take care of him by selling milk, but he took this job." Gül?en Karabekta?o&;lu, who was accompanied by her six-year-old daughter Ebrar, said: "My husband faced danger when he passed out a month ago after being poisoned by gas. However, he could not quit the job because we are renting our house. He, in fact, is a cook but started working there almost five years ago due to financial difficulties."

As people across Turkey watched the news of the

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latest disaster, Erdogan's Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government was under intense pressure to be seen to be organising a major rescue operation. At the same time, it was denying that the blast resulted from safety breaches. Labour Minister Omer Dincer said there was no visible violation of safety rules. However, Turkey's state-run news agency Anatolia admitted: "Safety violations and outdated equipment have been factors in past mine accidents in Turkey."

The Civil Servants Trade Union (Memur-Sen) issued a written statement following the blast, saying the incident had led to immense sorrow across Turkey. It offered no opposition to the government, however, instead pleading for an end to inspection deficiencies, official negligence and violation of safety measures.

Approximately 20,000 miners work in the hard coal basin around Zonguldak, a city of 120,000 residents. Some 15,000 are employed by TTK, while around 5,000 work in private mines. TTK operates five deep mines in the region, and produces, processes and distributes about 3.5 million tonnes of coal annually, mostly for the Turkish steel-making industry.

Another state-owned company, Turkish Coal Enterprises (TKJ), has the majority market share in the production of lesser-quality lignite coal. Restructuring of the coal sector has been underway since the 1990s, with the ultimate goal of privatising TTK and TKJ as well as closing down smaller, less profitable mines. Already, between 1990 and 2000, the number of workers in Turkey's coal industry fell from 63,993 to 35,665.

Over the past year, there has been mounting opposition to the pro-market policies of Erdogan, which have sought to attract foreign capital through privatisation and deregulation, as well as by lowering wages, which have declined in real terms over the past 15 years. Under the impact of the global economic crisis, the government has also begun to cut social spending to pay for pro-business stimulus packages.

Yesterday, in a bid to head off public anger, President Abdullah Gul issued a brief media statement, instructing the State Audit Board to conduct an inquiry into Monday's explosion and the two previous mine accidents in the past six months.

Globally, this is the fourth major coal mine disaster in less than two months. On March 28, at least 37 miners died in a flood inside the state-owned Wangjialing coal mine project in China's Shanxi province. On April 5, 29 US coal miners were killed by a blast at the corporate-owned Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia. On May 8, two explosions killed at least 66 Russian miners at the privately-owned Raspadskaya mine in the Kemerovo region in southwestern Siberia.

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