

Rescue crews find no survivors in Colombian coal mine

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Nine days after a catastrophic explosion at the San Fernando coal mine in Amagá, Colombia, rescue crews ended their work. Seventy-three bodies were removed from the mine. The mine is located 20 miles south of the city of Medellín, in the Department of Antioquia.

The explosion took place at 10:45 p.m. on Wednesday, June 16, during a shift change. It is the worst mine explosion in a Colombian mine since July 1977. That explosion, also in Amagá, caused a flood that drowned 86 miners. Colombian authorities believe that all the fatalities resulted from the explosion itself and not from suffocation following the explosion.

According to official reports, 79 second-shift workers were leaving the mine when the explosion occurred. Only six survived.

The general consensus is that the cause of the explosion was a dangerous accumulation of methane gas and coal dust that was set off by a spark, possibly from machinery. The mine owners, Carbones San Fernando, a division of the electric utility GenerCauca, insist that the mine met all the safety requirements. Antioquia Governor Luis Alfredo Ramos agreed, declaring that San Fernando was a model, technically advanced mine.

In announcing the creation of a special commission to investigate the mine explosion, Hernán Martínez Torres, minister of mine and energy for the national government, declared that a June 9 inspection reported the absence of gas detectors and ventilation tubes in the mine. The Antioquia mine secretary, Nicolás López, angrily denied this, stating, “The Antioquia Mining Department is autonomous and knows first-hand the conditions in the mine, while the national Mine Minister never visited this mine and does not know what he is talking about.”

The commission, which began its work June 22, is

charged with producing a report in 15 days.

López and other officials pointed out that the mine had passed three previous inspections, including the one on June 9, a week before the explosion. All of the inspections had reported normal gas levels. The secretary was quick to point out that Colombian law did not require that the mine be equipped with gas sensing equipment. The law that regulates coal mining in Colombia was last revised in 1987.

From the standpoint of the Departmental authorities, the explosion could not have been avoided. Governor Ramos and Nicolás López referred to similar accidents in China and Japan, which also resulted in many deaths, as evidence that coal mines are inherently risky. Both officials even suggested that the miners themselves were to blame for the explosion. “There is the distinct possibility that the mine personnel did not follow security protocols and caused the accident,” declared López.

Miners and their families disagree. Many pointed out that a smaller explosion had occurred a little over a year before. Many miners indicated that the interior of the mine was often so dusty that it was impossible to see ahead of them. Many miners had quit the mine over these conditions and, according to these workers, company officials were dismissive of safety complaints.

The miners also deny the claim that the trapped victims died from the explosion itself, citing at least one case in which they could hear one of their comrades crying out for help while they desperately dug to reach him. “Our compañero kept asking for help,” one mine said, “but each time his voice was weaker. After four hours he died. Later we pulled him out, lifeless.”

The layout of the San Fernando mine itself—a main

tunnel leading to smaller tunnels, each of which branched out into 80 individual tunnels where groups of three miners worked per shift, one handling explosives, two digging—did not provide alternatives to exit the mine other than the main tunnel, parts of which collapsed in the explosion.

Coal production in Colombia grew by 6 percent last year as the nation's mines have accelerated production. Exports are expected to reach 80 million tons this year, up from 72 million in 2009. For the San Fernando mine, production was increasing from a daily average of 670 tons per day to as much as 1,000 tons this year.

The increasing exploitation of coal miners is part of a worldwide trend. In Colombia, mine safety and miners' health increasingly takes a back seat to the accelerating production requirements in response to increasing global demand. For Colombia this means an increasing human cost. The gruesome toll continued three days after the San Fernando tragedy, when two miners at the El Totumo coal mine in the Department of Boyacá choked to death from accumulated gasses.



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