

# At least 32 dead in Chinese mine disaster

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A huge gas outburst took place early on Saturday morning in the Pingyu Coal and Electric Company mine at Yuzhou in the central Chinese province of Henan. Of the 276 miners underground at the time, 239 managed to escape. So far, 32 have been confirmed dead after another six bodies were found yesterday.

Rescue operations are underway to try to find the remaining five miners. The blast blocked 170 metres of tunnel. According to Du Bo, deputy chief of the rescue headquarters, more than 2,500 tonnes of coal dust and a huge amount of gas were released. Rescue workers have restored underground transport, power and ventilation systems and are seeking to disperse the build-up of gases. The chance of finding the remaining miners alive is slim.

The miners had been drilling a hole to release gas when the outburst took place. The mine is well known to have a particularly high concentration of gas trapped in its rock formations. In August 2008, a similar disaster took place in the same mine killing 23 miners.

Mu Yifu, deputy head of the Shanxi Luan Mining Group specialist rescue team, told the *South China Morning Post* that miners needed to make tiny holes in the rock to release gas before the mine could be further explored. “As there could be a gas leak that could easily trigger an explosion, it’s extremely dangerous for miners to work in a pit at the same time that it is being tested for trapped gas,” he said.

The *Beijing News* reported on Monday: “Yesterday, some escaped miners claimed huge economic interests were the main cause of the mining disaster, as the Pingyu No. 4 Mine was known for possible gas leaks, but [the company] still proceeded to dig the high risk-operating

area. One miner who experienced the two disasters explained that the tragedy could have been avoided by simply following the operating procedures, not even adding more safety facilities.”

Survivor Chen Jiaguo told the newspaper: “There was no rescue equipment in the tunnels, on food or water and most of the time the safety zones were filled with scrap metal and debris. Other than that, the ventilation fans were not strong enough and did not ventilate the air enough.” He said that when miners go underground each was required to carry a self-rescue kit, including a small positioning device, but he did not know how to use it. The newspaper pointed out that the lack of training was a widespread problem.

China’s coal mines are notoriously dangerous. The country is the world’s largest producer of coal which is required to fuel its burgeoning energy needs. Coal accounts for 80 percent of electricity generation capacity. In 2009, China produced 2.965 billion tonnes of coal. In the first three quarters of this year, production had reached 2.442 billion tonnes and will reach 3.38 billion tonnes for 2010 if the high rate continues.

High demand and high coal prices hold out the prospects of huge profits. As a result, management in both private and state-owned mines often cuts corners to boost productivity and production. According to the brokerage firm CLSA, China accounts for 70 percent of the global death toll in coal mines. Last year there were 2,631 deaths in China. Up until the end of June this year, 1,192 workers have died—up 6.7 percent from the same period last year.

In the wake of the latest disaster, angry comments appeared on the Internet comparing the success of the recent Chilean rescue operation with the deaths in China. “The Chinese miners should have worked in Chile,” one person declared on sohu.com. “Chile! Why? How come

we don't have refuges [in mines] in China?" another wrote.

"The Chilean miracle has signed the death warrant of the mine safety system in China. If we don't fundamentally resolve these mine security issues, the accidents will not stop and we will be unable to avoid deaths and injuries," a third person remarked on sina.com.

In fact, the trapping of the Chilean miners was also the result of inadequate safety measures. The San Jose gold and copper mine was notorious among miners. Chilean President Sebastian Pinera seized on the rescue operation to boost his own credibility and cover up his government's record on safety. In the same way, the Chinese government used its own "miracle rescue" in April when 115 workers were rescued from a flooded mine to obscure its failure to end the annual carnage in the coal mines.

After each mine disaster, Beijing promises "tougher" regulations and a crackdown on illegal operators. The government has ordered that over the next three years that all mine owners must build emergency shelters with provisions for water, food and alternative air supplies. Safety experts told the Xinhua news agency that the high cost of such work meant that the requirement was unlikely to be met.

In July, Premier Wen Jiabao drew attention to "serious" work safety problems in China's coal mines and ordered that a manager work side-by-side with workers in the pits to ensure safety regulations were observed. But the new order is routinely ignored or circumvented by appointing an underground miner as "a manager". At the Pingyu Coal and Electric Company mine, workers told the *Beijing News* that managers who went down the shaft in accordance with the order generally only remained for two or three hours.

Beijing is also shutting down small coal mines supposedly to improve safety. Xinhua reported last week that 1,355 mines with a total output of 125.2 million tonnes had been shut by the end of September. The chief reason for the closures is to consolidate and boost production through large conglomerates. The Pingyu Coal and Electric Company mine is a sizeable state-owned enterprise, not a small private mine.

Like the rest of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucracy, the mining sector, including its safety bodies, is riddled with corruption at every level. In an article in July, the Chinese business magazine *Caixin* commented: "Coal mining is a dangerous business. Add in the combination of millions of yuan in bribes for licences, conflicts of interest and blind regulatory agencies, and cover-ups of disasters become ordinary occurrences in the industry."

*Caixin* noted that in 2008, Li Jiuchen, a high-ranking safety official in Henan, was placed under administrative arrest and indicted on 13 charges of misconduct. The most serious involved the illegal sale of coal-exploration licences and safety production licences. The court found that Li had accepted or demanded bribes 53 times and received large sums of money, shares and other gifts.

Li was in charge of both the Henan Coal Mine Safety Supervisory Bureau and the Henan State Administration of Work Safety. These bodies are responsible for issuing licences, enforcing regulations, conducting inspections and carrying out investigations into accidents in Henan Province—where the Pingyu Coal and Electric Company mine is located.

In the wake of the latest tragedy, the CCP leadership will make the usual professions of concern over the deaths and promises to improve safety in China's coal mines. The CCP's priorities, however, are profits and growth. Given that coal is necessary to fuel China's hothouse economy, nothing will be permitted the drive for greater production, including the continuing death toll in the mines.



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