

Rescuers preparing for “loss of life” in New Zealand mine disaster

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Rescuers at the New Zealand mine where 29 miners remain trapped following an explosion last Friday are preparing for “possible loss of life”, authorities admitted for the first time on Monday. Police superintendent Gary Knowles, who is in charge of rescue and recovery operations told a press briefing: “We still remain optimistic, but we are planning for all outcomes and ... also in part of this process we are planning for the possible loss of life as a result of what is happening underground.” Previously, Knowles had stressed that he was overseeing a search and rescue operation at the Pike River mine, “with the emphasis on rescue”.

The company’s chief executive, Peter Whittall also declared that the situation was becoming “more and more grave with every hour that goes past” and that hopes of finding any survivors were fading.

The mine, on the remote West Coast of the South Island was rocked by an explosion near its mine entrance late Friday afternoon. It is believed to have been caused by a build-up of methane gas. Since then, there has been no contact with the miners, who were trapped two kilometres along the mine tunnel and 150 metres below the surface. Distressed family members, mostly from the nearby township of Greymouth, have now endured their fourth night with no news of the miners’ fate.

Rescue efforts have been prevented by the persistence of toxic gases within the mine. Tests also detected a fire underground, starving the mine of oxygen and making it too dangerous to send in a rescue team. Samples of the gas have been taken every half hour. Knowles said officials needed to establish “beyond reasonable doubt” that conditions were safe to enter. Pike chairman John Dow said gas samples from the mine’s main ventilation shaft were still showing high levels of carbon dioxide and methane.

On Sunday work began on a bore hole, which was being drilled to the mine shaft at a depth of 160 metres. A 15-centimetre hole is to be used to take air samples and funnel laser-imaging equipment and video cameras down to give a more precise picture of the area where the men were working.

This morning, however, came an announcement that rescuers had drilled to 142 metres but had to stop because of hard rock and

were forced to change to a diamond drill bit for the last 20 metres, to prevent sparking, which could ignite another explosion. The final drilling is estimated to take another five hours. An army bomb disposal robot sent into the mine carrying camera equipment broke down and can no longer be used. Knowles confirmed it had been deployed in the mine at 6am and had broken down after making it only 550 metres into the tunnel. He said the families of the men were understandably “frustrated”.

At a press conference on Monday, police finally released the names of the trapped miners. Among the 29 are **Joseph Dunbar**, who was working his first day underground after celebrating his 17th birthday the previous day; **Joshua Ufer**, 25, a drilling supervisor from Queensland whose fiancée is three months pregnant, and 25 year-old Scot **Malcolm Campbell**, who is due to be married in December. **Peter Rodger**, 40, who started at Pike River in April had been trapped underground for eight hours about three months ago. The oldest, **Keith Valli**, 62, a well-known and highly respected local miner, had recently told a friend he didn’t like working the Pike River mine “one little bit”.

According to a report in *The Australian* newspaper, the mine did not have any stores of food, water or specifically stationed spare air or oxygen generators—sharply limiting the miners’ chances of survival if the rescue operation were to take weeks, as in Chile last month. The Queensland president of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, Steve Smyth, said such emergency provisions were required in Australian coalmines. “If they don’t have those systems set up in this mine, it’s just unbelievable,” Smyth said. While the Pike River miners had rescue gear on their belts that generated oxygen for about 20 to 40 minutes, and compressed air tanks were used for mining operations in some locations, Smyth said these would not be sufficient on their own.

When these allegations were put to Prime Minister John Key yesterday, he immediately dismissed them as “incorrect”, without rebutting any details. Key defended the safety record of mining in New Zealand and rejected a suggestion that safety standards were below those in Australia. He went on to assert that the country’s safety record “for the most part has been very good”. He also backed a review by the previous Labour government that found having just two state-appointed mining inspectors was “appropriate”.

In an interview on breakfast television today Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee further closed ranks behind the company, denouncing criticisms of safety standards as “disrespectful” to the miners’ families. Brownlee admonished the “Australian media” for such reports, claiming that because New Zealand mining operations were much smaller than those in Australia, safety requirements were different.

CEO Whittall, however, admitted that the only food the men would have had was their packed lunches, and that while there was always some water accumulated in the mine, “it would not be the first place I’d go for a drink.” Company chairman John Dow earlier said the mine had safe rooms, and miners were equipped with breathing kits powered by their own breath. However, emergency oxygen supplies in the mine are reportedly of limited volume. The mine has only two emergency exits, and it was not clear if these would be accessible to the 29 trapped men.

Further evidence of the profoundly unstable nature of the operation at Pike River emerged yesterday. Just three weeks before, the nearby state-owned Spring Creek mine had been forced to close for four days because of the elevated risk of a spontaneous combustion.

According to a report in Monday’s *Dominion Post*, a West Coast geologist warned about the threat of explosions from gas in the Pike River mine more than three years ago. A second mining expert said initial investigations of the mine were inhibited because of its location in Paparoa National Park, meaning the company’s evaluation of the site would have been inadequate.

Western Exploration director Murray Cave said in 2007 that the geological risks at the underground site included a pit bottom with deep, highly gassy coals and the associated risk of “outbursts”, or gas explosions. He warned of the presence of an underground fault that had to be crossed at the mine site, and pointed to Solid Energy’s short-lived Mt Davy mine, which was shut in 1998 after three miners were killed in two accidents. Cave said the Pike River coal was at the “higher end of the scale” for gaseousness, and each tonne contained about 10 cubic metres of gas. A limit of 2-3 cubic metres per tonne is generally considered to be a “safe” level.

New Zealand’s Canterbury University engineering and mining geologist David Bell also pointed out that the fault running through the mineshaft allowed pockets of methane to build up. The Hawera Fault had traps and pockets where methane could collect in splintered coal seams, he said. “The early work on Pike suggested it was a very simple situation where basement rocks were thrust up over the coal seam, but the reality they found was there were splinters that had not been picked [up].... They didn’t do a whole lot of [investigative] drilling earlier on because it was inside a national park, so you have very tight restrictions on where you can go and what you can do,” Bell claimed.

At least three of New Zealand’s worst mining disasters have

occurred in the region, two of them on the same seam now mined at Pike River. The first was the Brunner Mine disaster, which claimed 65 lives in 1896 when an unauthorised detonation triggered an explosion of methane. Many of the miners who were not killed by the force of the explosion, died when they tried to escape and were overcome by methane. Thirty years later, another explosion on the same coal seam at the Dobson mine resulted in 9 deaths. The most recent disaster, the 1967 Strongman mine explosion, which killed 19 men, occurred on the opposite side of the Paparoa range to Pike River.

Politicians from all the political parties, along with the unions and pseudo-left outfits, have united in insisting that any inquiry into the circumstances of the tragedy be set aside until, in Key’s words, “another day”. However, questions about the readiness of the company to respond to a potential disaster and its actions in this particular case, are both pertinent and urgent. It is entirely possible that a cover-up of the tragedy and the company’s response is already underway.

A “timeline of events” published in the weekend newspapers suggests that, at the very least, the company was slow to react and its safety procedures may have failed. The first reports of the explosion were received at 3.45 pm on Friday. According to police, electrician Russell Smith, who went into the mine to investigate a power outage, discovered a loader driver who had been blown off his machine about 1500 metres into the mine shaft. According to earlier reports, Smith manually pulled the mine alarm at 3.50 pm.

Whittle announced later that evening (at 7.14 pm) that communication with the afternoon shift had been lost at 4.10 pm. There is no explanation about the time lapse following the activation of the mine alarm. Nor has anyone clarified exactly when emergency services were alerted, but their first response was timed at 4.53 pm, an hour after the alarm. Following this, the first unconfirmed reports of miners being trapped came through at 5.09 pm, nearly an hour and a half after the alarm. The escape by the two miners who crawled out of a ventilation shaft was acknowledged at 5.51 pm, though it is not clear when and where they were actually discovered.

Police say officers were notified an hour after the men failed to report “which was the practice in such emergencies”. Exactly how long it took management to get the rescue operation underway is a critical, but as yet unclarified, issue. Every hour’s delay will have added significantly to the dangers facing the miners still trapped in the mine.



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