

Workers buried alive in Vietnamese quarry disaster

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In the latest in a long line of mining disasters in Vietnam, dozens of workers were buried under 5,000 cubic metres of limestone at a privately-owned quarry on April 1. Eighteen bodies, including those of 11 women, were later recovered. Six other workers were taken to a local hospital for emergency treatment, suffering severe wounds and broken bones.

When the landslide occurred at the Len Co quarry, in the coastal province of Nghe An, 40 workers were present, of whom 35 were buried. Hundreds of villagers and relatives gathered to look for their loved ones. The rescue operation was placed under the control of the military, however, and was poorly organised. Explosives, chainsaws and cranes were used to blast, cut up or move large blocks, endangering the miners still trapped alive.

The *VN Express* website posted horrific videos and pictures of the scene. One video clip showed military personnel using charges to blast a giant rock under which workers were believed to be buried. Workers who had survived could have been killed or injured by explosion, underscoring the lack of proper emergency measures.

The *VN Express* also published the tragic stories of some of the quarry victims. Nguyen Thi Ngan, 33, one of the 11 women killed, left behind four small children. Her husband was working as a miner in a mountainous district. Her cousin explained: “My sister earned 50,000-70,000 dong (\$US2.40-\$US3.30) a day, and had not enough to eat during the day.”

Tho Nguyen Phoung, who lost his two sons, Nguyen Tho Hoang, 28, and Nguyen Tho Vu, 21, said: “They were very young. Hoang was married and had one child. Vu was married as well. They provided meals to us with the money they earned from the quarry.”

Nguyen Dang Tinh, a local resident, said of Tran Thi Sau,

a 51-year-old woman buried under the rock: “Two years ago, her husband died with an illness. Her home is the poorest in the village. Her children are of school age, yet they are now orphaned again.”

More than 300 police and military personnel were deployed, not just for the rescue operation but to prevent protests against the quarry owners, Chen Men Limited Company, and the authorities that have allowed the dangerous conditions that gave rise to the tragedy.

The next day, *Than Nien news.com* reported: “Initial investigations show that the owner of the Len Co mining site did not quarry rocks downwards as regulated, but mined at the foot of the mountain, triggering the rockslide.”

On the same day, in order to placate mounting popular anger, Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who is also the National Assembly chairman, personally sent “condolences” to the victims’ families. “I am very sad to hear the news of the landslide in Nam Thanh commune,” he stated.

Three days later, the police arrested quarry owner Phan Cong Chin for “violating labour safety.” Local police chief Thai Van Binh declared: “Despite being warned by local authorities several times, he did not abide by labour safety regulations.” While he undoubtedly bears a share of the responsibility for the disaster, the owner is simply a convenient scapegoat for the authorities.

Hundreds of quarries are permitted to operate in Vietnam without proper safety measures. Chin Men, a private firm that sells limestone for construction of roads and houses, is just one example. The quarry owners leased the mine from the provincial government in August 2007, and then outsourced the operations to sub-contractors. The quarry had been sanctioned twice for safety breaches, but nothing had improved.

In February 2010, Vietnam's state inspectorate recommended that the prime minister revoke permits for 241 poorly regulated mines and quarries in Nghe An province for violations such as having no contract to rent land or causing environmental damage. The inspectorate was responding to 12 accidents that killed 29 workers in the region during 2009.

The latest disaster underscored the fact that safety standards have continued to be flouted. Inspections, warnings or suspension of mining permits are largely cosmetic measures for public consumption.

On April 5, in another display of official concern, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung ordered cities and provinces to carry out inspections of mining operations producing construction materials, and to suspend any quarry that violated safety regulations.

The regime's actual indifference toward workers' safety can be gauged from the paltry compensation of \$239 paid to each victim's family, with even less, \$144, for each injured miner. Such is the worth of a worker's life in the misnamed "Socialist Republic of Vietnam," which has become a cheap labour platform for transnational corporations.

TuoiTrenews.vn on April 3 published photographs showing the primitive conditions at some quarries. A shocking picture showed a miner, holding a single rope, climbing to the top of a quarry, probably hundreds of metres above the ground, to position dynamite to blow up the rock face.

Another photograph showed a miner on the top of a quarry, holding a rope to avoid slipping. A third picture showed two female miners, one wearing gloves and the other bare-handed, pushing a giant stone grinder under a dangerous rock face. Neither wore boots, just slippers, nor masks to protect them from inhaling dust, just pieces of cloth across their faces.

Such brutal conditions have resulted in many deadly accidents, and not only in Nghe An province. In October 2008, three workers died after the collapse of a stone quarry in the south-central province of Phu Yen. Another quarry landslide killed seven miners in October 2009, in the north-central province of Thach Ha. Just two months later, a landslide killed nine workers in another north-central province, Ha Tinh.

Desperate poverty drives rural people into the stone quarries. According to *TuoiTrenews.vn*, stone miners in Nghe An received just 100,000-200,000 dong (\$4.8-\$9.6) a day, which was considered a relatively high income in the province. The web site reported: "Though they know only too well how dangerous their work is, local stone miners say they must continue doing it to support themselves and their families... [S]till devastated by the accident at the Len Co quarry, stone miners on nearby Bup Mang Mountain have courageously resumed their daily business." The report added: "[A]n extra shift at noon gives stone miners an additional VDN20,000 (96 cents) a day."

Approximately 90 percent of Vietnam's poor live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, the Canadian Hunger Foundation estimates. As many as 70 percent of the poor are concentrated in the northern regions of Vietnam, which include Nghe An province. The province has 17 districts, of which 10 are mountainous areas with poor infrastructure and high levels of unemployment, forcing impoverished farmers to accept any work they can find.

Vietnam's mining and quarrying industry is currently booming, literally on top of the bones of these workers. The sector accounted for more than 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product in 2008, and the total workforce reached 477,000 in 2009. The number of stone and mineral mining companies tripled from 362 in 2000 to 1,447 in 2008.

The unsafe conditions in the quarrying industry are just part of the broader social disaster facing the Vietnamese working class. Last July, the Labour Ministry estimated that about 12,000 people had died in 120,000 to 130,000 workplace accidents between 2005 and 2010.



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