

Another series of coal mine disasters in China

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The flooding and cave-in of two separate coal mines in south-western China last Saturday killed at least four workers and left around another 40 trapped. A fire at another coal mine in eastern China yesterday trapped at least 36 miners.

The tragedies are a further indictment of the Chinese government and the country's coal mining industry, which both treat workers as expendable raw material to maximise production and profit. The first two accidents occurred under conditions of floods and heavy rain, when the mining companies apparently ignored obvious dangers and sent workers underground.

The first accident occurred on Saturday morning at the privately-owned Niupeng mine in Guizhou province. The mine suddenly flooded while 29 workers and 2 visitors were underground in the two shafts. Only 8 managed to scramble to safely.

A rescue team of 2,000 workers has been battling for five days, but hope for the trapped is fading. A swollen nearby river is contributing to the continuing flooding of the mine's passageways. Although rescuers are using 37 pumps to extract water from the mine, the water levels remain high.

Lan Zhiming, who was working at the mine, told *China Daily* on Tuesday that he was suffering from diarrhea on Saturday, but mine owner Zhang Jiaqing refused him sick leave. Lan was so ill, however, that he had to leave, saving his life. "After I heard about the accident, I immediately called some of the trapped men's families in my hometown. Some cried as soon as they heard the bad news," he said.

Another worker, Lei Shifa, said he was one of the eight who escaped because they had been just 170

metres underground. When they suddenly realised that flooding had blocked their exit, an older miner, He Deyue, urged the others to gouge an opening. "[T]he rising floodwaters were already chest-high on the other side. We ran through the water as fast as we could," Lei said.

The other 23 miners who were working deeper were less lucky, as the mine's drainage system failed to deal with the flooding. The police have reportedly detained the mine owner.

As family members of the trapped workers arrived on Sunday, local authorities sent more than 500 personnel to "look after" them. In reality, the purpose is to prevent them from protesting or denouncing the government's continuing failure to protect the lives of miners.

While privately-run coal mines in China are notorious for ignoring basic safety, the site of the second accident, the Heshan mine in Guangxi province, is operated by a major joint-stock mining conglomerate, Guangxi Heshan Coal Mining Company.

Only 49 of the 71 miners managed to escape when the mine collapsed, apparently because of heavy rains, according to the initial investigation. Three days after the collapse, four workers had been confirmed dead and 18 remained trapped, with their fate looking increasingly grim.

Yang Tiantai, a local official, told Xinhua news agency that the "ground has been drenched by continued rain since June 28." The build-up of water caused the ground above the mine to subside last Saturday, creating a hole 30 metres wide and 50 metres deep, and dumping water and soil into the mine shafts.

Mine safety expert Zheng Zhao'an said a lot of rainwater mixed with cinder and mud had also gushed into the mine via abandoned shafts.

Guangxi Heshan Coal Mining, the province's largest coal producer, is mainly owned by Hong Kong investors. It operates 20 coal mines and seven plants making cement, mining machinery, chemicals and special steels, employing over 10,000 workers. Unlike the small illegal mines where operations are primitive, the company boasted of its mechanised mining processes.

Director Yang Yaodong apologised for the tragedy and declared the company would do its utmost to rescue those caught below. The company has offered the rescue team 2 million yuan (\$US300,000) for each miner they pull out alive. It has also signed compensation deals with the victims' families in a bid to silence them.

However, the fact is that these miners were asked to go underground despite clear dangers of flooding and mine cave-ins. China has been in flood season since mid-June. More than a million people have been displaced and over 200 recorded as dead or missing. In Shaanxi province, a rain-triggered landslide killed 18 on Tuesday.

Heavy rains hit Heshan from June 29 to July 1, dumping 280 millimetres in the mining area. On June 29, 67 workers were trapped by flood waters on a construction site in Heshan city, and were lucky to be rescued. However, authorities did nothing to stop the local mining operations.

Last Friday—a day before the accidents in Guizhou and Guangxi—did the Work Safety Commission of the State Council in Beijing order a cosmetic crack down on illegal mines. This was after four coal mine floods had left at least eight miners dead within two weeks in the provinces of Hunan, Liaoning, Anhui and Shandong.

It was only after the latest accident that the Guangxi provincial authority ordered inspectors to determine whether coal mines were safe to operate during heavy

rains.

The underlying cause of China's mining disasters, which killed at least 2,433 coal miners last year, is the country's hothouse capitalist economy that requires ever more energy resources and drives mining companies to put production and profit before the lives of workers.

A fire yesterday in the Zaozhuang Fangbei Coal Mine in Shandong province left at least 36 miners trapped underground. An air compression device 225 metres underground apparently caught fire in the supposedly low-gas mine. Just last October, the mine was given approval to expand output to 150,000 tonnes a year.

China's benchmark coal price has risen by 10 percent in the year to June 20, taking it to 840 yuan (\$US130) a metric tonne. The increase has been fuelled by the high demand for electricity, 70 percent of which is generated by coal-fired plants. According to State Grid Corp. of China, the power shortage this summer could exceed the most severe record in 2004.

These statistics indicate that the miners' death toll is likely to rise.



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