

Corporate, government profiteering caused Soma mining catastrophe

Our correspondent
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The catastrophic explosion at the mine in Soma, Turkey that caused at least 274 deaths and became the worst industrial accident in Turkey's history was an entirely preventable catastrophe.

As Turkey developed as a cheap-labor manufacturing platform for global finance capital, however, Turkey's money-mad corporate and government elites refused to spend any money on critical safety equipment.

In an interview two years ago with *Hurriyet*, Soma Kumur owner Alp Gurkan boasted that, since the privatization of Turkish mines in 2005, his company had been able to slash the costs of mining coal from \$130-140 to \$23.80 per ton "thanks to the operation methods of the private sector." Gurkan said he also paid royalties to the state-run firm Turkish Coal Enterprises (TKI).

Neither Soma Kumur nor the Turkish state spent any of the resulting profits to purchase and operate equipment that would have prevented Tuesday's explosion. The blast occurred when a short at a power distributor ignited methane gas that had built up to dangerous levels within the mine. The explosion cut off power to ventilation and transport systems inside the mine, trapping hundreds of doomed miners inside a raging inferno releasing poisonous carbon monoxide gas.

Methane gas build-ups were a major risk in coal mining during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and machinery is now widely available to prevent the build-up of the methane gas that provided the fuel for the explosion.

"The one thing we can say is that for decades now, the means of controlling that environment in terms of the technology has been available," Andrew Watson of UK-based firm Mines Rescue Service said of the Soma catastrophe. "When the methane reached a certain

point, the power should have automatically cut off. So that was either not in place here, or it has not been managed properly."

This lack of proper safety procedures is not a feature only of the Soma mine. It characterizes all of Turkey's mines, which are the most dangerous in the world—even more dangerous than those of far poorer countries, such as China.

Though China has more mining fatalities due to its larger size, miners are more likely to die in mine accidents working in Turkey than in China, according to a remarkable 2010 report of the Economy Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV).

"While the number of deaths per million tons of coal produced is 7.22 in Turkey, it stood at 1.27 in China and 0.02 in the United States" in 2008, the TEPAV report stated. "Improper air conditioning systems, lack of escape routes, insufficient personal safety precautions, inefficient infrastructure, and low technology pave the way to death for miners."

Yesterday, as rescue operations continued in Soma, another fatal mining accident occurred in Turkey. An illegal coalmine in Zongdulak province collapsed, trapping one worker, Mehmet Aygun. When rescuers were able to reach him, he had already died.

Aygun had retired two years ago, but he reportedly continued to work in order to pay his two daughters' university fees, earning 2,000 liras (US\$969) per month.



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