

After clashes, riot police put Turkish disaster mine under lockdown

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Thousands of Turkish police were mobilized Saturday to suppress protests around the Soma mine, where more than 300 coal miners died last week in the worst industrial disaster in Turkish history.

The government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan put the final death toll at 301 and ordered the mine sealed on Saturday after the last body was removed. A brick wall was immediately erected at the site.

Abdurrahman Savas, the governor of Manisa province, which includes Soma, banned protests after clashes Friday between police and workers and other local residents denouncing the disaster as a crime for which the coal company and the government were responsible. The governor ordered police to use tear gas and water cannon against demonstrators, while claiming “this is not to prevent freedom of expression.”

According to a Reuters report, “Soma was under complete lockdown on May 18, after police and gendarmerie forces set up checkpoints on the main roads connecting to the town... Security forces deployed in the surroundings of Soma were reinforced by commando troops dispatched from garrisons in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Denizli. Only officials, rescuers, some journalists and relatives of miners are allowed to pass through the checkpoints set up 30 kilometers from the disaster-struck mine. Buses and private cars have all been halted and checked.”

Dozens of people were arrested Saturday and detained at a sports center in the town. Among those arrested were eight lawyers who travelled to Soma to provide legal representation for the families of the victims. At least one lawyer was beaten by police, with photographs circulated on social media.

There were clashes in the major city of Izmir, southwest of Soma, with some 40 people detained.

Demonstrators set up barricades and threw stones and fireworks.

The protests in Manisa province and Izmir marked a serious political blow to the Erdogan’s ruling party, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), which carried the region easily in both the 2011 general election and in municipal elections two months ago. The AKP headquarters in Soma was sacked by angry demonstrators.

Other protests took place in Istanbul, Turkey’s largest city, where police used tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrators, and in the capital, Ankara. Dozens were arrested in each city.

Demonstrators took up rhyming chants against the water cannon trucks, known by their Turkish acronym TOMA, and linked them to the name of the mining town.

More than 1,000 students at the Istanbul Technical University occupied the mining faculty Friday night, protesting the college’s close ties to the mining company—two Soma executives are on the advisory panel to the mining faculty.

They also demanded the resignation of one professor who said those killed by carbon monoxide—the principal cause of death in the Soma disaster—had “died beautifully.”

He told a local television station: “Carbon monoxide is lighter than oxygen, that’s why it is a favourable way to commit suicide. It is a very sweet death. You don’t feel anything.”

In response, the students wrote the names of all 301 victims at Soma on the walls of the building they have occupied, along with slogans like, “We won’t be engineers of the murderers. We will be the engineers of the people.”

In an effort to deflect public anger aroused, first by

the colossal scale of the tragedy, then by the complete indifference displayed by Erdogan and other top government officials, Turkish prosecutors ordered 19 people, including some company executives, to be detained for investigation, including the chief engineer, Akın Çelik. Company owner Alp Gumlaurkan and operating manager Ramazan Dogru are not among those arrested, however.

The real priorities of the Turkish state are demonstrated in the fact that far more people have been arrested for protesting the disaster than for perpetrating the worst industrial murder in the country's history.

The labor ministry also announced Saturday that death benefits of between \$500 and \$1,000 a month will be paid out to the families of the victims, while miners injured in the disaster will receive benefits for only three months.

The impact of the disaster in the rural mining area was reflected in the report that in the village of Elmudere near Soma, out of a total population of about 250, 11 men had been killed in the mine.

New details have emerged of the doomed miners' final horrific minutes. The last bodies removed were apparently near the methane gas explosion that triggered the disaster. Many of these victims were so badly burned that only DNA testing can identify them so the corpses can be turned over to their families for burial.

The vast majority of the miners survived the initial blast, but when they saw smoke followed emergency protocols to move deeper into the mine and await rescue or the pumping of oxygen. All these miners died of carbon monoxide inhalation after their oxygen masks ran out. Sensors showed that carbon monoxide was still at fatal levels three days after the disaster.

One press report cited a local official who claimed that only workers who violated the emergency rules and rushed through the smoke to the exit survived. The mine had no safety chamber for refuge in the event of a fire. Turkey is one of only three countries—along with Pakistan and Afghanistan—which does not require such facilities in deep underground mines.

Alp Gumlaurkan, owner of the Soma Komur Isletmeleri mining company, denied responsibility for the catastrophe at a press conference Friday. "My operations managers have done everything right in terms of the things that needed to be done according to

the law, taking the utmost security precautions," he said.

Two years ago, Gumlaurkan boasted that since privatization of the mine in 2005, he had slashed the cost of production by more than 80 percent, from \$130 per ton to under \$24 per ton. In 2012, the last year for which such figures were available, Soma Holding produced 47 percent more coal than initially planned, selling it all to the state-run Turkish Coal Enterprise, which provides a guaranteed market.

Press reports noted that Turkish coal mines operate under a 30-year-old health and safety law, which is in any case routinely ignored. The country's energy minister claimed the Soma mine had been inspected nine times in recent years, and passed every time, which only proves that the inspectors and their supervisors and government ministers should be in the dock along with the company executives.



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