

Evidence mounts of criminal negligence in Turkish mine disaster

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More than a week after the disaster that killed 301 coal miners in western Turkey, evidence continues to emerge of criminal negligence of the Soma mine owners and top officials in the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

While feigning sympathy for victims and their families and ordering the arrest of several managers and engineers at the mine—not including chief executive Alp Gurkan—the government is working to conceal the causes of the worst mining and industrial disaster in Turkish history and protect those responsible.

Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has spearheaded the drive to privatize and deregulate coal mining and other industries to strengthen the country's bid to enter the European Union and satisfy the demands of the IMF. After the Soma mine was privatized in 2005, Gurkan waged a brutal cost-cutting campaign—with the blessing of the AKP government—sacrificing the lives of miners to boost profits.

Nearly 2,000 university students, some wearing hard hats, called on the government to resign Monday in the capital, Ankara, where Erdoğan gave a speech to commemorate Turkey's war of independence in 1919. In the past few days, the government has responded to popular opposition with a violent crackdown in Soma and Turkey's three largest cities—Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. The intent is to send a signal to international investors that Turkey will remain a cheap labor platform.

The *Hurriyet Daily News*, *HaberTurk* and other Turkish newspapers reported Monday that prosecutors and inspectors had confiscated data indicating that sensors showed dangerously high levels of toxic gas in the mine for days before the May 13 disaster. Company officials did not record the high levels in logbooks or

take precautionary measures. Several survivors confirmed this, telling the Associated Press that supervisors ignored rising gas levels.

Higher heat readings were also recorded—a sign of an ongoing fire and the danger of an imminent methane gas or coal dust explosion. However, company officials continued to operate the mine, according to the report.

Prosecutor Bekir Şahiner said Saturday a preliminary report indicated that coal had been smoldering days before the disaster, causing the roof to collapse in one part of the mine and unleashing poisonous gases throughout the mine. On Monday, he said the fire had not been caused by an explosion in a power distribution unit, as originally announced, but was due to the collapse of burning coal.

The fire started at 3:10 p.m. on May 13, but firefighters were called 57 minutes after this, while the emergency line was called 63 minutes late, according to data collected by prosecutors.

The miners were trapped 400 meters (1,312 feet) underground as the electricity powering mine elevators to the surface failed. The miners' gas masks reportedly only worked for 45 minutes, indicating that the delay in the call for help was a fatal. In addition, some of the masks did not work. Most of the victims were said to have died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

More information has come to light about the brutal conditions faced by miners, whose average monthly wage was just 1,200 Turkish Lira (€420 or US\$575). On Tuesday the *Guardian* posted an interview with a miner who has worked at the Soma pit for nine years. Using the pseudonym Veli Yilmaz to protect himself from retribution, he said the miners work in a climate of fear and intimidation, with regular punishments and fines used to control behavior.

“The owners and the authorities collude in staged

safety inspections, the workforce is told how to vote and the drive for profit overrides elementary safety concerns, according to the miner's account," the *Guardian* wrote.

Quoting the miner, it continued, "Work safety? There is no work safety. They cut corners wherever they can. The foremen receive a bonus if we produce more coal than planned. So all they worry about is working faster and extracting more coal."

Yilmaz said inspections are announced weeks in advance so the company can correct obvious violations, cover up poor working conditions, and pass the tests. "We always prepared for these visits, cleaning everything, temporarily closing dangerous shafts, hiding faulty machines. In our mine, we are not allowed to use diesel-fuelled machinery. These machines were hidden away for the inspections. We were also instructed to tell them that everything was just fine, that we were happy," the *Guardian* quoted the miner saying.

The miner said after the disaster, the company forbade workers from speaking to journalists and outsiders about anything concerning the mines. "We are just workers. Expendable. Those who get fired won't be able to find work in a mine in Soma again. I have many friends who are unemployed because of this. There are no jobs left outside the pits. It's all we have."

Any "inquiry" by the government will be a whitewash. The company and the government are no doubt counting on the economic fears—9,000 out of 10,000 miners in Soma reportedly have debts to pay—to intimidate workers and limit the exposure of conditions at the mine. *Der Spiegel* reported that many women in nearby rural areas who lost their husbands in the Soma mine disaster will have no choice but to work in the fields as day laborers to feed their children. The German magazine reported from Elmadere, a remote village in the mountainous Soma district, where at least one male member of every local family in the impoverished town of just 120 houses, work in the mines, including many who started as soon as they turned 18.

All that was left of Asli Yildirim's husband was a blue garbage bag filled with his smoke-filled clothing and his work boots that was delivered to her door. When the governor of the neighboring province of

Izmir came for a photo-op he had to be protected from angry residents by police.

Angry Elmadere residents denounced him, with one saying, "We won't remain silent any longer. You can only get away with this because we never say anything. Because we're poor and weak. But Erdogan will pay for this."

Soma Holding's attempt to force 3,200 miners back underground Tuesday at its three mines—including the site of the disaster—provoked widespread anger, forcing the main miners union in Soma to call on workers to put down their tools until all sites were inspected. Other mining facilities in the region have also told miners to return to work.

"We want mining affairs directorate inspectors to carry out inspections and we will walk out until this has been done," Tamer Küçükğencay, the regional head of the Maden-?? mineworkers union, told reporters.

"After the press meeting, Küçükğencay himself faced reactions from some angry local protesters, and he was forced to take shelter in the town hall," *Hurriyet* reported.

A group of striking miners—from the I??klar and Ata Bacas? coal mines, both of which are also managed by the Soma Coal Mining Company—interrupted the press conference in front of the Soma Governor's Office. The miners stated that working conditions at their mines are much worse than those in the mine where the disaster occurred and declared that they would not enter the mines until working conditions improved.

Arif Karabaca, a miner who quit working at ?mbat mine coal mine near Soma, said a catastrophe could occur where he used to work. Karabaca said his former mine, which employs 6,500 workers, is filled with poisonous gas that spread there from the mine in Soma. Another disaster could happen, he said, if the necessary precautions are not taken.



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