

Mine explosion in China kills 15 workers

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1 November 2016

At least 15 workers have been killed and another 18 are missing as a result of China's latest coal mine disaster late yesterday morning. Only two of the 35 miners working underground at the time managed to escape.

The deaths were the result of a gas explosion in a mine run by the privately-owned Jinshangou Coal Industry Company in the Yongchuan district of the southwestern Chinese city of Chongqing.

The state-owned Xinhua news agency reported that more than 200 rescue workers, including firefighters, police and specialist mine rescuers, were at the site trying to reach those trapped underground.

Few details are available. A local official told the Associated Press by phone that the condition of the trapped miners was not known.

Chongqing authorities ordered the suspension of all mine operations within the municipality, pending fresh safety inspections. China's State Administration of Work Safety (SAWS) sent officials to the mine site to oversee rescue operations and ordered an investigation.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that local inspectors recently cited a Jinshangou coal mine in the Yongchuan district for "safety hazards" and ordered a halt to its mining operations. The inspections in early October found faulty sensors and communications systems, as well as a lack of repairs to the ventilation system and shafts. It is not clear that the mine was the one involved in yesterday's explosion.

The gas explosion took place as a national conference of work safety inspectors was underway in Beijing, where President Xi Jinping called for greater efforts to reduce industrial accidents and deaths. "Development should not come at the cost of safety," he declared.

China, however, is notorious for mine disasters. Despite Xi's empty exhortation, safety is often compromised by the drive for profits and production. While the country's small mines, legal and illegal, are

the worst offenders, serious accidents have also taken place in mines owned by large state-owned enterprises.

The Chinese government highlights the falling annual death toll in coal mines as proof that safety standards are improving. According to the official SAWS statistics, the figure fell from 6,995 deaths in 2002 to 768 in 2015. In the first half of this year there were 207 coal mine-related fatalities.

In part, the falling number of deaths is a product of the slowing Chinese economy and cutbacks to production, with a focus on shutting small, inefficient and often dangerous mines. The government has plans to close more than 1,000 coal mines by the end of the year and wind back capacity by 500,000 tonnes in the next three to five years.

Employment and welfare minister Yin Weimin announced in March that 1.3 million coal miners, along with 500,000 steel workers, would lose their jobs in a bid to slash overcapacity in state-owned enterprises.

The winding back of production has had the effect of boosting prices by 40 percent this year, fuelled in part by a higher demand for electricity during a hotter than normal summer. Government concern about coal shortages during the winter months led to the easing of caps on coal production in September.

Higher prices have encouraged Chinese producers to boost production in collusion with local authorities, fearful that mine closures will lead to social unrest. If mines have been slated for closure, repairs and maintenance suffer as management seeks to maximise profits for as long as possible.

Referring to the production cutbacks, Deutsche Welle commentator Frank Sieren pointed out last month: "Mine owners are up in arms; some continue to operate their mines illegally. And safety standards are being ignored. This has led to accidents such as the one earlier this week. In some cases, local authorities even support the illegal operation of mines."

Sieren was referring to an explosion on September 28 that killed 18 miners in a small mine owned by the Linli Mining Company. Xinhua reported that the disaster was caused by illegal mining methods and the company's senior executives were detained. Two other miners were still missing, presumed dead, after rescue operations ceased.

In other reported accidents, a gas leak killed 12 miners in the northeastern province of Jilin in March, while in January one worker died when four were trapped underground for 36 days.

The official death toll in China's coal mines is suspect. Mine accidents, especially in illegal operations, can go unreported. The agency in charge of work safety, SAWS, lacks sufficient inspectors and is also under pressure from the government to downplay mine deaths. Its publicly released figures are limited and sometimes contradictory.

Whatever the exact causes of yesterday's mine explosion, the drive for production and profit amid the fluctuations of the market will undoubtedly have been the principal underlying factor leading to the tragedy.



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