

# At least 23 dead, dozens trapped in Iranian coal mine disaster

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An explosion yesterday at an Iranian coal mine in Golestan Province, in the country's north, has killed at least 23 workers and injured many others. While initial reports are scanty, it appears that dozens remain trapped in the mine, prompting fears that the death toll will rise dramatically in coming days.

The disaster reportedly occurred during a shift change at around 12:45pm, at the Zemestan-Yurt mine, close to the town of Azadshahr. As many as 500 workers are employed at the site, located in a region heavily dependent on coal mining, which is needed for the country's industrial production, including steel manufacturing.

Accounts by Iran's Fars news agency and other media reports indicate the blast may have been triggered by the jump-starting of a locomotive that ignited a gas leak. The explosion rapidly tore through the mine.

Most of the 23 workers whose bodies have been recovered died while attempting to rescue their trapped colleagues from the mine. They were hit by a series of tunnel collapses.

Images published online showed badly burned, semiconscious miners covered in coal dust being carried from the site by health workers and colleagues. Some were treated for the effects of gas inhalation. As many as 69 workers are thought to have been injured, with limited information on the severity of their conditions.

It is unclear how many workers are still in the mine. State authorities released contradictory estimates throughout Wednesday afternoon. Initial reports indicated as many as 80 workers, aside from those who perished, were unaccounted for. That figure was later scaled down to 50, and then 26.

However, no reason was provided for the changed

toll, and there were no reports of additional rescues later in the day. Those who remain in the mine are reportedly up to 1.3 kilometres underground. They are imperilled by noxious and volatile gases and the prospect of further tunnel collapses at the unstable site.

Local officials and mine authorities claim to have cleared a section of the mine, and are reportedly digging a tunnel to gain access to the trapped miners. Rescue workers, along with ambulances, helicopters and members of the Red Crescent organisation, have been dispatched to the scene.

There are already reports of anger over the official response to the tragedy, with some describing it as slow and inadequate. Many questions remain over the conditions that led to the disaster.

The government fears the accident could become a focal point for wider anger over dangerous industrial conditions and a deepening social crisis afflicting the working class. President Hassan Rouhani yesterday sent the labour minister, Ali Rabiei, to the site to personally oversee the official response.

The accident occurred two weeks before presidential elections, slated for May 19. All the major candidates have adopted a posture of concern over industrial accidents and deaths.

On January 19, the 17-storey Plasco Building in the capital Tehran was engulfed in flames before collapsing. The disaster killed more than 20 fire fighters and injured up to 194 people.

The historic building was owned by a foundation with close ties to state authorities. Its offices had been transformed into sweatshops for clothing manufacture.

According to Tehran municipal authorities, the building's owners had ignored up to 30 warnings over safety breaches. Jalal Malekias, a fire brigade official, told the press: "Even in the stairwells, a lot of clothing

is stored and this is against safety standards. The managers didn't pay attention to the warnings."

The accident prompted a social media campaign calling for the resignation of Tehran mayor, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and widespread denunciations of the authorities for not enforcing safety standards.

Mine accidents are no less politically sensitive, due to the importance of resource extraction for the Iranian economy, and widespread knowledge of the dire conditions confronting coal miners. Like their counterparts internationally, they are forced to work in dangerous environments, with exposure to coal dust and gases and the constant risk of accidents.

Iranian mines produced 1.68 million tonnes of coal in 2016, a substantial increase over the previous year. Much of that went to domestic consumption, including for steel manufacture and other industry.

While mining has expanded in recent years, little has been done by authorities to boost safety standards. Mining accidents in 2009 killed around 20 workers, while in 2013, 11 workers died in two separate incidents.

A 2012 survey of the safety of Iranian mines, published in the International Journal of Injury Control and Safety Promotion, found an increase in mining accidents over the previous year.

According to figures cited in the report, the number of active mines in Iran increased from 4,974 to 5,246 between 2011 and 2012. Over the same period, the annual injury rate rose from 106 per 10,000 workers in 2011, to 164 of 10,000 miners in 2012. Coal mines were among the most prone to fatal and injury-causing accidents.

In 2011, just 12 percent of mines had health and safety departments. In 2012, the percentage decreased to 10 percent of sites. According to the report, only 7 percent of accidents took place at sites with a health and safety department.

The plight of Iranian coal miners is paralleled by that of workers internationally. Dozens of coal workers have died in accidents in recent months. Among the disasters are:

? In December 2016, 23 workers were killed at the state-run Lalmatia mine in Jarkhand, in east India. Workers said that they warned managers of the imminent danger that the mine would collapse, but

were ordered back to work.

? In March 2017, 17 Chinese miners were killed when the lift in which they were travelling fell at a state-owned mine in Heilongjiang province in the country's northeast. Two welders were scapegoated for safety violations that caused the accident. A disaster in the same province in December 2016 claimed 32 lives.

? In March 2017, a blast at a coal mine in eastern Ukraine killed eight and injured others. The accident was ascribed to outdated equipment and lax safety measures.

? This year, three coal miners have died in accidents in the US, two of them in the impoverished state of West Virginia.

In other words, the subordination of workers' safety to the dictates of major coal producers is leading to an expanding tally of dead and injured miners.



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