

Fifteen Indian coal miners trapped, likely killed, in mine disaster

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The bodies of 15 workers have remain trapped inside an illegal “rat-hole” coal mine at Ksan village in the northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya since water from the nearby Lytein River gushed into the 370-foot-deep mine on December 13.

While such mining is officially banned in Meghalaya state it continues because coal seams are close to the surface in this part of India. The mining involves clearing ground vegetation and digging down to find a coal seam. Horizontal shafts are then created that follow the seam. These shafts are so small that miners, including women and children, have to crawl on their knees and use pickaxes to extract the coal, which is carried out in baskets and winched to the surface.

According to media reports, only five of the 20 people working in the Ksan mine, located in the state’s East Jaintia Hills District, escaped.

Sahib Ali, one survivor, said he was inside the mine, pulling a cart full of coal, when the flooding occurred. “For some unknown reasons, I could feel a breeze inside the mine, which was unusual,” he told reporters. “What followed was the loud sound of water gushing in. I barely made it to the opening of the pit. There is no way the trapped men will be alive. How long can a person hold his breath underwater?”

Rescue efforts have been hampered by inadequate equipment and the total indifference of India’s central and state government authorities.

National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and Navy rescue teams have been unable to fully pump out the flooded mine. S.K. Shastri, who is heading the NDRF operations at the mine, told the media late last month that at least ten pumping machines with 100-horsepower capacity were needed. The operation only had two pumps with 25-horse power, he said, calling on the central government to supply the

required equipment.

The East Jaintia Hills District deputy commissioner also called on the state government to supply high-powered pumps and other equipment.

These urgent appeals have been ignored by the Meghalaya state administration and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central government.

More than three weeks after the disaster, India’s Supreme Court, in response to a public interest litigation submission, criticised the state government’s reaction to the mine disaster. “We pray that all people trapped in mines are alive. They should have been rescued by now,” the court said. Legal counsel for the state administration responded by insisting that authorities had “taken adequate steps in the rescue operation.”

Rescue operation divers have reported a foul smell coming from inside the mine and suspect it was from the decomposing bodies of victims.

One person, Krip Chullet, who was allegedly involved in hiring the labourers and sending them down the Meghalaya mine shaft, has been arrested. The mine owner, however, has reportedly fled.

In an attempt to pacify the victims’ families and deflect widespread anger, the state government announced a 100,000-rupee (\$US1,438) interim relief payment to each trapped miner’s family.

Rat-hole mines were banned in Meghalaya in 2014 by the Supreme Court in response to a petition filed by the National Green Tribunal. The ban, however, largely has been ignored, not just by mine owners in Meghalaya. Tens of thousands of mines throughout India operate without even rudimentary safety procedures.

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma admitted to the media that illegal mining was continuing. He

cynically declared that his government would “take action.” In fact, the state government opposed the 2014 ban, declaring that it would cut 7 billion rupees (about \$US100 million) per year from the mining industry in the state.

Like their counterparts in Meghalaya state, the more than one million workers employed in Indian mines are largely recruited from poverty-stricken remote villages with endemic unemployment.

A November 2016 report by Abhinav Publications noted that the socio-economic conditions of unorganised coal miners in India were “extremely deplorable.” They were “usually subject to indebtedness and bondage” because their income was so low.

Mine worker Abdul Hussain recently explained to NDTV: “We are uneducated, unskilled and poor. If we take up daily wage jobs in Guwahati (capital of neighbouring Assam state) we don’t earn more than 300 rupees a day. But in rat-hole mines, the pay starts at 1,000 rupees and goes up to 2,000 rupees per day. So in order to make sure that our kids have a better life, we do this work.”

Abdul Alim, who narrowly escaped from the Ksan mine accident, told the BBC about conditions in the mine: “Once we went down the mine, there was hardly any light streaming in from above. The mines I’d worked in previously were only about 30 feet (9 metres) deep but this one [370 feet deep] was far more dangerous.”

Alim explained that about 8 to 10 men would climb into a metal container suspended by a crane, which lowered them into the pit. “Once we touched the bottom of the mine, the shafts spread out in different directions. Each of us would crawl into one and go as far as 30 feet.”

Alim said the shafts were about two feet high. “We lie on our sides and chip the coal with a gaathi [pickaxe]. I put my pushcart just under my legs, so that the coal would fall into it. Once it filled up, I would drag it and bring it to the central assembly point.”

The BBC report said the workers were paid according to the amount of coal they mined.

According to India’s Mines Safety Directorate, there were 752 documented fatalities in state and privately-owned mines between 2009 and 2013. Data submitted to the national parliament last week revealed that the

death toll is continuing, with 377 workers killed between 2015 and 2017.

The opposition Indian Congress criticized Modi’s BJP-led government over its “slow response” to the Ksan mine disaster. Congress President Rahul Gandhi criticised Modi for “strutting about” on Assam’s newly-opened Bogibeel Bridge and “posing for cameras” while the bodies of 15 miners remained inside the rat-hole mine.

Gandhi’s criticisms are utterly hypocritical. Congress, whether in government or opposition, defends big business profits and is equally responsible for the mining deaths and dangerous working conditions confronting workers throughout India.



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