Mine collapse in northern China leaves 21 dead

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A roof collapse in a small, privately-owned coal mine in northern China on Saturday killed 21 workers. A total of 87 miners were underground in the Lijiagou mine in Shenmuwhen the cave-in occurred around 4 p.m.

Initial state media reports indicated that 19 workers had been killed and 66 had escaped. Rescue efforts continued through the night in the hope that the missing two would be found alive. Their bodies were found on Sunday morning.

The mine is located in Shenmu in northern Shanxi province which borders Inner Mongolia. Aerial photographs of the mine on Sunday revealed a large number of ambulances and personnel.

The cause of the accident at the mine, operated by the Baiji Mining Company, is still under investigation, according to the state broadcaster CCTV.

According to a government notice, the Lijiagou mine was granted approval in 2016 to produce 900,000 tonnes of coal a year. However, in 2017, as part of a government campaign, its owner was ordered to suspend operations while it "improved safety standards to prevent serious accidents."

Whether or not the required safety improvements were carried out has not been made public at this stage.

China is the largest producer of coal in the world and notorious for its poor safety record. Information about mining-related tragedies, as well as the outcome of investigations, are heavily censored.

In December last year, seven miners were killed, and three others injured in a coal mine in Chongqing municipality in China's southwest when the connecting segment of a mining skip broke, plunging down into the mine shaft.

In October, 21 miners died in eastern Shandong province after a rock blast occurred due to pent up pressure causing rocks to fracture and collapse, blocking the tunnel. There were 334 miners working underground at the Longyun coal mine at the time and only one of the 22 trapped workers was rescued.

The mine in Yuncheng County, Shandong, was operated by the Shandong Energy Group, China's second largest producer. In response, the provincial authorities ordered a halt to production in 41 coal mines for security checks. The exercise was little more than a face-saving device to stem public anger over the deaths.

Similarly, in response to the weekend disaster, Xinhua reported yesterday that the coal mine safety bureau in Shaanxi, a province bordering Shanxi, had announced a six-month safety campaign of all its "high risk" mines. The focus will be on mines more than a kilometre underground, with increased risk of gas leaks or a high number of workers per shift.

In the early 2000s, at the height of China's economic boom, around 5,000 coal miners were being killed each year.

These figures have dropped considerably. In 2017 there were 375 coal mining-related deaths, down by 28.7 percent year-on-year, according to China's National Coal Mine Safety Administration. By comparison, the US had 15 coal mine deaths in 2017.

However, this reduction has less to do with improved safety standards than with declining production, mine closures and mass layoffs, and the consolidation of the industry by state-owned companies.

According to the *China Labour Bulletin*, a rapid rise in coal prices in 2016 led to an alarming spike in coal mine accidents. At the end of the year, there were nine major coal mine accidents in just three weeks, killing at least 86 workers. Some of these occurred at closed mines that were reopened to take advantage of higher coal prices.

In a statement January 2018, the safety watchdog announced it would be closing all coal mines capable of producing less than 90,000 tonnes a year to reduce excess capacity and safety risks at coal mines. In some regions, the limit was set at 150,000 tonnes.

The State Administration of Coal Mine Safety announced last August that it had inspected 59,000 mines nationwide in the first half of 2018. It had suspended production at 746 and issued fines totalling 677 million yuan ($US100 million) for safety violations.

In October 2018, China met its target of cutting annual overcapacity of coal production by at least 150 million tonnes, along with the slashing of its steel capacity by 50 million tonnes. The slowdown in coal production has been particularly felt in Shaanxi, which produces roughly 40 percent of China's coal.

Last Friday, the National Coal Mine Safety Administration sent notices to major coal hubs in Shandong and Henan provinces and parts of north-eastern China asking them to halt operations for inspections lasting until June, the state-run Shanghai Securities News reported.

There is no guarantee, however, that any discovered deficiencies will be acted upon in order to prevent further tragedies such as Saturday's roof collapse.

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