

22 workers trapped by blast in Chinese gold mine

Peter Symonds
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Rescue operations are continuing at Qixia in China's Shandong Province after 22 miners were trapped underground on January 10 following an explosion in the Hushan gold mine. The blast cut all communications, which were partially restored with 12 miners this week. The fate of the other 10 workers remains unknown.

The mine is owned by Shandong Wucailong Investment, a subsidiary of Zhaojin Mining. Wucailong had obtained the mineral rights to the site in 2016, but full-scale mining operations were yet to start. Construction was taking place, including of the shaft where the blast occurred.

The state-owned Xinhua news agency reported last Sunday that some miners were still alive. Tapping had been heard on a pipe being drilled into the mine by rescuers. A wire was sent down, followed by food, pain killers, paper and pencils.

A handwritten note sent back up declared: "Don't stop trying to reach us. We hope the rescue continues. We remain hopeful." The note said four of the miners had been injured and three had high blood pressure. Telephone communication has since been established.

Chen Fei, deputy secretary of Shandong's Yantai city, told a press conference on Monday the miners were "very weak." Water levels were rising, the underground smoke-filled air was stifling, and medications were running out.

Speaking to *China Daily* on Monday, Du Bingjian, chief engineer of the National Mine Emergency Rescue Centre, said rescue teams faced a perilous task in drilling rescue shafts to reach the trapped men. "This mine has the hardest rock I have ever known, along with two strata that contain water, which hinders the drilling," he said.

Some 500 rescuers are involved in driving six shafts

to reach different parts of the mine. The 12 miners are trapped about 600 metres below the surface and the other 10 are believed to be another 100 metres further down.

The accident provoked public concern after it became known that the mining company did not report the disaster for more than 30 hours. Chinese laws mandate that all major mining accidents must be reported within an hour. The hashtag "Qixia gold mine incident" has been viewed 130 million times on social media site Weibo.

In a bid to deflect attention from the underlying causes of mine deaths, the state-owned media has focused attention on the late reporting of the explosion. Xinhua described those responsible for the delay as "enemies of the people." The broadcaster CCTV said late reporting of accidents was a "taboo for safe production" that could not be tolerated.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) apparatus has begun its usual search for scapegoats. The Qixia party secretary and mayor have been sacked and several unit leaders blamed for the reporting delay have been taken into custody.

Provincial authorities have opened an investigation into the cause of the blast. According to the local emergency management bureau, a dynamite explosion occurred in an area where no miners were working, and the trapped miners were in sections further down.

Just 26 days before the explosion happened, the bureau had conducted a safety check-up at the gold mine. No details of its report are publicly available.

China's lucrative gold mining industry is the world's largest. Most of the mines are small to medium in size, but developments in technology have paved the way for deep prospecting.

Zhaojin Mining, the country's fourth largest gold

miner, is headquartered in Zhaoyuan, Shandong, which is sometimes referred to as China's "gold capital." It was listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange in December 2006.

The drive for production and profits inevitably leads to the compromising of safety and consequent accidents.

In March 2017, 11 mine workers were killed in two separate incidents in neighbouring gold mines in Henan province. A fire in the Qinling gold mine owned by China National Gold Group—China's largest gold miner—killed nine workers, while a similar accident in a nearby mine resulted in another two deaths.

At the time, Xinhua reported that the Chinese government aimed to lift annual gold production from 450 to 500 tonnes by the end of the decade. A wholesale restructuring of the industry was projected to close unproductive mines, reducing the number from 600 to around 450.

The drive to open the large Hushan gold mine was part of this push for increased production.

China's coal industry—also the world's largest—has long been notorious for its high death toll. In December, 23 miners in the southwestern municipality of Chongqing died from breathing carbon monoxide gas. The accident in the Diaoshuidong coal mine occurred while workers were dismantling underground mining equipment.

Sixteen workers were killed at the Songzao coal mine on the outskirts of Chongqing in September after a conveyor belt caught fire and the resulting blaze produced dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. The mine had previously been cited for safety violations, according to the Chongqing Coal Mine Safety Administration. Just two weeks before the disaster, the company had been fined after inspectors found that monthly safety checks had not been conducted.

More than 400 mining accidents were reported last year, resulting in 573 deaths, the National Mine Safety Administration said on January 11.

In a cosmetic response to the latest disaster at the Hushan gold mine, authorities ordered a spate of inspections.

The Shandong government said officials throughout the province had been told to immediately conduct safety inspections of mines and other major industries, and to focus in particular on any rushing of deadlines in

the lead-up to the annual Spring Festival holiday in February.

According to the *People's Daily*, China's National Mine Safety Administration has ordered a comprehensive inspection of non-coal mines, which will run until the end of March. There are 32,000 non-coal mines in China, most of which are small. They use outdated technology and equipment, and have poor safety management, the newspaper said, citing an administration official.

None of this will address the root causes of deaths, which lie in the relentless drive to boost production at the expense of the health and lives of workers.



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