

Two weeks after Chinese gold mine explosion: 11 rescued, 10 dead and 1 missing

Lily Zhao
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Yesterday, two weeks after a still officially unexplained explosion in a gold mine at Qixia in China's coastal Shandong Province, 11 trapped workers were rescued, and the bodies of nine were found. The confirmed death toll is now 10, while the last of the trapped workers remains missing.

The disaster occurred in the early afternoon on January 10. An explosion occurred in a shaft, shattering all the shaft entrances. About an hour and a half later, a second explosion took place in the shaft, sending a strong shock wave. The second explosion severely damaged the equipment around the shaft entrance and added more rubble to the already blocked shaft passage.

Among the workers whose bodies were found, five of them were around 420 meters underground, and another four were located around 500 meters underground. At a press conference yesterday, the emergency task force in charge of the rescue work concluded that all nine attempted to climb out through the shaft after the first explosion, but were killed by the second blast.

The rescue operation took place amid widespread public concern in China and worldwide after it became known that the mining company, Shandong Wucailong Investment, did not report the disaster for more than 30 hours. The hashtag "Qixia gold mine incident" has been viewed many million of times on the social media site Weibo.

A week after the explosion, on January 17, the rescue team was able to establish contact with 11 workers trapped at 586.8 meters underground. Emergency supplies, including food and medicines, were delivered to them through a drilled passage. The workers had survived by drinking mud water every day. One worker among them was severely injured and was in a coma. He had lost all signs of life by January 20.

According to these 11 workers, another person was trapped at a place about 50 meters deeper. This is the

worker who remains missing.

The rescue operation confronted huge obstacles. According to the task force, between 350 and 446 meters down the shaft, the passage was clogged by more than 70 tons of debris from the explosions. It was originally estimated that 15 days were needed to drill through this area. Drilling also had to be done extremely carefully to avoid flooding the regions where workers were trapped.

Fortunately, rescue teams found out that a lot of empty space existed in the material clogging the shaft, which reduced the difficulty of clearing the passage and the time needed to reach the trapped workers. On January 24, it only took about an hour to push forward 40 meters, and then virtually nothing needed to be cleared out of the way.

When the rescue team reached about 546 meters underground, only 40 meters above the 11 workers, they surprisingly found another worker trapped alone at this level. He had spent 14 days in solitude and without supplies since the explosion. According to a doctor at Qixia People's Hospital, this worker was extremely weak when he was rescued, with multiple ulcers and wounds on his hip and feet.

Later that day, the 11 workers who previously established contact with the rescue team were all elevated out of the mine. The one who was in a coma was confirmed dead. According to the same doctor, all the 10 rescued workers were conscious and could speak normally. Five workers, including the one trapped in solitude, remain in the ICU at Qixia People's Hospital, while the others were hospitalized in regular wards.

On the same day, January 25, the bodies of the other nine workers were found. The task force declared at a press conference that all search work in regions above the 11 rescued workers were complete, and they continued to dig deeper to search for the very last missing worker. He is thought to be trapped about 50 meters deeper, in very dangerous conditions.

Huge amounts of water have accumulated in the mine, and the water levels have been rising. The task force said it was unclear if the next 50 meters in the shaft is heavily clogged. So it was not possible to estimate how long it could take to reach the last worker.

Xinhua News, an official news agency of the Chinese state, hailed the rescue of 11 workers as “a miracle of life.” While it is welcome news to know some workers were rescued, this tragedy led to the deaths of at least nine workers who could possibly have been saved if rescue efforts had begun sooner.

At the same press conference, provincial officials offered a few empty promises to increase awareness of safe production. But similar statements have been repeated after every major mining accident that attracted large public attention. The officials further proclaimed they were “doing what [they] can do save lives of workers.” This is a hypocritical claim, made after the disaster has happened, because the health and life of workers are treated as dispensable when it comes to corporate profits.

Shandong Wucailong Investment is a subsidiary of Zhaojin Mining, China’s fourth largest gold miner, which was listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange in December 2006. The country’s lucrative gold mining industry is the world’s biggest, and developments in technology have paved the way for deep mining, as was planned via the long shafts being constructed at the Qixia mine.

The resulting tragedy points to how the drive for increased output and profits inevitably leads to the compromising of safety, resulting in terrible accidents.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) apparatus has responded with its usual search for scapegoats. The Qixia party secretary and mayor have been sacked and several unit leaders blamed for the 30-hour reporting delay have been taken into custody, but the underlying driving forces of such mine deaths remain.



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