

# Nine dead, 44 still missing in mine collapse in China

Jack Wang  
2 April 2023

On February 22, a coal mine collapsed in Alxa Left Banner of Inner Mongolia, a province on the northern border of China, resulting in nine deaths and six injuries, with 44 people still missing up to this day. The disaster tragically exposes the brutal working conditions faced by miners in China in the reckless drive for profits ahead of lives and safety.

The open-pit coal mine collapsed over a large area during worktime in the late afternoon. Dozens of workers were immediately buried under the debris, along with multiple large mining vehicles. According to disclosed investigative findings, the lack of support for the upper portion of the pit led to the large scale landslide across an area of up to 400 metres.

Two workers were immediately killed on the spot, four others did not survive despite emergency medical treatment, and the bodies of three more victims were later uncovered from the debris on March 2.

The coal mine was operated by a small local company called Inner Mongolia Xinjing Coal Mining Co. This company had received more than 20 warnings and penalties over safety issues, all of which involved breaking regulations as it cut corners in pursuit of profits.

According to a report in *Alxa Daily*, the company also received complaints from residents in the area over dust pollution on March 28, 2022 and was ordered by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment to rectify it.

Two months later, Xinjing Coal Mining received another fine of 20,000 RMB (about \$US3,000) from local Urban Management and Law Enforcement because of the company's illegal conduct in water use.

These slaps on the wrist involving more than 20 penalties not only explain why the company did nothing to rectify the conditions that led to the horrendous disaster, but also expose the indifference of

the Chinese government to work safety and the enforcement of safety standards.

After the disaster, the company's main shareholder, Chen Fenggan, immediately hid from the media and claimed that that he had no liability for what happened. He was later compelled under pressure from the media and outraged public to issue another statement. However, he still insisted that his company would not be responsible for any compensation as the miners were subcontractors dispatched by other companies.

Data from China's Tianyancha, a commercial platform with extensive corporate information, shows that Chen Fenggan is the company's top executive and the one actually in charge. His attitude represents that of the company towards workers: callous indifference to lives and safety and an unwillingness to part with a penny in compensation as it relentlessly pursues profits above all else.

The company is not the only one with blood on its hands. The government authorities for drawing up and enforcing labour regulations at the regional and national level are also responsible for this tragedy.

In January last year, a news agency affiliated with the Alxa regional government published an article hailing the Xinjing Coal Mining. It lavished praise on the company for caring about and helping the impoverished in the area. A member of management hypocritically declared that corporations needed to shoulder greater social responsibilities as they are making profits and that he hoped to help more people through the company's charity works.

According to the country's Labor Law, the proportion employed by subcontractors in a workplace should not exceed 10 percent. However, at this mine, every worker was employed by a subcontractor. The widespread practice of hiring so-called subcontractors

is used by companies to legally enslave workers. Having exploited workers till the last drop of their blood and sweat, the company simply brushed aside all responsibility and declared they were “lawfully” hired by subcontractors.

The subcontracting company involved in this disaster denied it had employed miners. It claimed it was involved only to the extent of providing some positions and that Xinjing Coal Mining should have been responsible for their safety. The subcontracting company also refused to pay any compensation. Both companies are completely indifferent to the safety and lives of workers as well as the devastation caused to their families.

The workers at the mine received no insurance at work: no medical insurance, no work injury insurance, no pensions, nothing. For some workers, their monthly wage was only 2,000 RMB (\$291), barely above the local minimum wage of 1,980 RMB.

More than a month after the mine collapse, the 44 missing workers are still buried in dirt and rocks and are likely dead. Their families and children are under great pain, while the mining and subcontracting companies cold-bloodedly ignore their plight.

Just one day before the disaster, the government of Inner Mongolia issued a new emergency response plan for workplace accidents. And while the Chinese government proclaims the importance of production safety, it has only imposed trivial penalties for breaches of regulations by mining companies. Up to now, no significant action has been taken against Chen Fenggan and the two companies involved in the tragedy.

There were a total of 168 mining accidents in China last year, according to official statistics. In other words, every other day, there was a mine-related injury. These included:

- \* January 17, 2022: a mechanical accident due to negligence in maintenance led to the death of one worker in Ordos, Inner Mongolia.

- \* March 12, 2022: a mining company in Hunan Province illegally entered a closed well to carry out production. Due to the failure of a mining vehicle, a worker was crushed to death.

- \* April 10, 2022: three workers were suffocated to death in a mine in Shanxi Province.

Most of the 168 accidents last year, like those above, were caused by companies breaking safety regulations.

Virtually all could have been avoided if it not had been for the reckless pursuit of corporate profit regardless of the health, safety and lives of workers. The Chinese Communist Party bureaucracies are the conscious accomplices in these crimes.



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