

# Russian miners trapped 30 stories below ground

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Over a dozen Russian miners remain buried under thousands of cubic meters of soil, after a rockfall at a gold operation in the Zeysky district of Amur Oblast on Monday at 8:40 p.m. local time. The 13 to 15 men—authorities have given conflicting numbers—are trapped at a depth of about 410 feet, roughly 30 stories. Rescuers have been unable to establish contact with them and it is unknown whether the workers, who range in age from 31 to 57, have any food or water. One news outlet reported on Tuesday that faint knocking has been heard along a ventilation shaft that is being used to try to reach the miners.

Emergency crews from mining regions around Russia, as well as specialists in mountaineering rescues, are onsite. Thus far, about 3,000 cubic meters of soil has been removed of the 9,000 sitting atop the men. Groundwater, liquefied soil and large rocks are making the work hard going. Rescuers are clearing about 100–200 meters of material every two hours in below-freezing temperatures as they labor to get to the trapped drivers, drainage fasteners, mechanics and welders.

So far, neither the mine owner, Petropavlovsk PLC, nor the government has issued an official list of the miners' names, although it was published by Telegram channel 112 on Tuesday. According to officials, none of the men were from the Amur Oblast, as they were all contract workers from other regions. Families are still in the process of being contacted and have yet to be brought to the area to wait for their loved ones.

The Pioneer mine, which is located in far eastern and southern Russia near the border with China, is one of the country's largest as measured by the volume of gold processed. Workers extract 6.7 million tons of ore per year, using a combination of open-pit and underground methods. It is owned by Petropavlovsk PLC, which, after entering bankruptcy proceedings a

couple of years ago, was placed under the administrative oversight of British financiers from the corporate restructuring firm, Opus. Petropavlovsk PLC has since delisted from the London Stock Exchange due to western sanctions. In 2021, it brought in over \$800 million in revenue.

Both the Russian and international investors making millions off the Pioneer mine are directly responsible for the fate of the men buried under the rubble. The mining industry in the country, as it is around the world, is notorious for violating safety standards, which are routinely ignored in pursuit of profits.

Major mine explosions killed 52 Russian miners in 2021 in Kemerovo, 36 in 2016 in Vorkuta, 91 in 2010 in Rapsadskaya and 38 in 2007 in Yubileynaya. Smaller scale disasters are routine, as they are across other sectors of the economy.

Just this week, Russia's workplace harvest of death saw a construction worker in Ryazan get flattened by a two-story fall, a 34-year-old concrete worker perish from plummeting 16 floors, two city employees in Belgorod get blown up by a gas leak, a worker at a container manufacturing plant in Khakasia die when a floor crane fell on him, a 41 year old in Sverdlovsk crushed to death by a falling boom and a driver at a rail transportation hub who was past retirement age lose his life in a crash. This is a very small sample.

Concerned about the eruption of social anger over the Pioneer mine disaster, the general prosecutor of the Amur region announced on Tuesday that it is opening a criminal investigation. It is "inspecting the scene of the incident, questioning witnesses and persons responsible for compliance with safety rules, and seizing the necessary documentation." Of this one can be assured of three things. First, the findings will be a cover-up. Second, the corporate executives and their government

allies will walk away unharmed. Third, nothing will change for miners.

The Kremlin has responded to the Pioneer disaster with rescue bravado, as it is highly aware of the fact that despite Vladimir Putin's reelection on Sunday, there is seething social discontent in the country over poor wages, low incomes, high prices and dangerous workplaces.

Presidential Press Secretary Dmitri Peskov declared Tuesday, "The president gave the order to take all necessary measures to save the miners who are now blocked." Amur Oblast Governor Vasily Orlov asserted the same day, rescue "forces and means are sufficient," "the situation is controlled at the highest level" and "IL-76 aircraft are on reserve ready to deliver specialized equipment if necessary." Newscasts on the disaster carry footage of emergency workers being rushed to the site.

The government knows that every working person in Russia, and anyone around the world who is aware of the situation, is desperately hoping to see a dozen and more men pulled from the underground alive. When people move heaven and, quite literally, earth to save others, it taps into the very best of human sentiments. And in making a show of its own allegedly firm actions, the Kremlin is attempting to use these feelings to divert attention from the fact that the state is fully responsible for allowing all the safety violations that contributed to the present disaster and every other one that has happened in Russia's mines. No one in the ruling class cares in the slightest about the brutalizing conditions under which Russian miners labor, which in 2022 the country's general prosecutor described as "bondage-like."



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