

13 Russian miners declared dead after rescue effort ends

Andrea Peters
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Efforts to rescue 13 Russian miners trapped 410 feet underground came to a halt on Monday. The men, who were buried by a rockfall at a gold operation in Amur oblast on March 18, are now presumed dead, killed either by the initial mine collapse, flooding of the shafts, or lack of food, water and air. There will be no attempt to recover their bodies, which, located at a depth of approximately 30 stories, are unreachable.

In a statement released on April 1, Pokrovsky AGK, a branch company of mine owner Petropavlosk PLC, declared that the effort to free the men was called off because the “lives of rescuers and mine workers involved in the operation are at risk of death.” Emergency crews feared a second collapse would bury those attempting to save the trapped miners.

Bore holes drilled over the course of the last two weeks reveal water throughout the underground tunnels. There is, as seen in a video shot by an individual on the scene, extensive flooding around the mine opening. As the film’s narrator explains, an entire “lake” gave way at the site.

Rescuers were unable to pump out these massive volumes of liquid, which are mixed with rock and ice. After initially declaring that they needed to remove 9,000 cubic meters of material to reach the miners, authorities later revised that number upwards by a magnitude of 21.5 times—to 194,000.

Speaking to the press on Monday, presidential spokesman Dmitri Peskov described the end of rescue efforts as “not good news” and blithely went on to declare, “But the situation is what it is.”

The dead miners, primarily contract workers from outside of the Amur region, ranged in age from 31 to 58. The mother of Rolan Sharipov of Bashkortostan told the press outlet Prufi that authorities had promised her “they would pull out every single one [of the

miners].” Her daughter-in-law, wrecked by the loss of a husband his mother describes as “always smiling, never depressed,” has yet to tell their young children that their father is not returning. At the age of 31, Sharipov, the son of a miner, had already been laboring underground for nearly a decade.

Acting on cue, various guilty parties, from government officials to the mine operators, have issued their “heartfelt condolences” to the families. Parents, spouses and children have been promised the equivalent of a year’s worth of the dead men’s salaries. Offspring under the age of 18 will reportedly receive a monthly payment equivalent to their father’s wage until they reach maturity. Pokrovsky AGK also made mention of providing for the orphaned children’s medical and educational needs, although it is unlikely that any of the miners’ families will holding their breath for that one.

According to the website Mojazarplata.ru, Russian miners earn on average somewhere between 33,498 and 59,587 rubles a month, about \$363 to \$645. In addition to receiving these pittances, families will also get, so authorities say, insurance payouts and pension and welfare benefits. Should any of these be forthcoming, they will amount in total to another few hundred dollars a month at most.

Furthermore, the parent company of mine owner Pokrovsky AGK has been making its way through bankruptcy and restructuring for the last several years. Undoubtedly, financiers will see payments to the relatives of dead miners as an expense with which one can dispense should the opportunity present itself.

The treatment of the miners’ families has been appalling from the outset. Despite the fact that five of the trapped men were from Bashkortostan, no government official from the region contacted their

relatives to alert them about what had happened. The wife of 33-year-old Emil Valikhanov told the newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* last week that she learned of the disaster from the media. The uncle of another miner reported the same thing, adding, “our souls have been torn apart during these nine days.” In another instance, a mother was simply given a phone number to call to get updates.

Last week, families who had been brought to the disaster area and deposited at a location some distance from the mine demanded to go to the rescue site. From there, they reported the official “all hands-on-deck” narrative to be a lie. “The equipment is just standing there. No one is doing anything. On the television, they show the absolute opposite. Why are they wasting time?” one declared, according to an article on March 29 in *Novye Izvestia*.

The family of miner Vadim Nikolaev, age 32, issued a desperate appeal last week to President Vladimir Putin, asking him to take direct control over the rescue effort. “They lie on TV. They do not tell the story as it really is. Time is being wasted, people may die, please help!!! Please help!!! We beg you!!!” Putin did nothing.

Now that the miners are dead, authorities in Bashkortostan, the oblast from which five of the victims came, moved themselves to declare that a memorial will be erected in a local park. Criminal charges are also being brought against the mine director, who has been detained, and two officials from a government regulatory agency. They gave the gold operation a clean bill of health in 2022 and 2023.

Alexei Biryukov, the managing director at Pioneer, faces up to seven years in prison for knowing, according to the local branch of the Russian Investigative Committee (IKRF), “that work in the mine was being carried out in the presence of a water body (a pit filled with water) within the field.” He “did not organize measures to drain the quarry,” despite the fact that this is a violation of safety regulations, said the IKRF in a statement issued last week.

In addition, authorities from Rostekhnadzor, Russia’s Federal Service for Environmental, Technological, and Nuclear Supervision, are facing accusations of a “careless and negligent attitude to their official duties,” failing “to exercise their authority to halt violations,” refusing to authorize the “administrative suspension of

the mine’s operations,” and allowing the company “to conduct work at the hazardous production facility with gross violations.”

That these individuals are responsible for the miners’ deaths is undoubted. The Russian mining industry is notorious for disregarding health and safety measures and regulatory officials are almost uniformly “on the take.”

But the sudden discovery by government authorities of a handful of criminals at the Pioneer mine and among officials in the Amur region is a coverup. Behind Pokrovsky AGK stands one of Russia’s largest gold mining corporations—Petropavlovsk PLC—which itself is currently under the oversight of a British financial restructuring firm. They too are guilty, as are the government’s regulatory bodies as whole, as is the whole state apparatus.

The entire extractive industry in Russia is a death and injury mill, with accidents of varying scale happening every month, if not more frequently. An explosion at an iron mine last week in Sverdlovsk, which is thousands of miles to the west of the Pioneer gold operation, killed one miner and injured another five, three seriously.

These conditions exist broadly throughout the Russian economy. According to the country’s Federal Service for Labor and Employment, in 2022 alone there were 4,639 industrial accidents, of which 991 were fatal and 298 involved multiple workers at once. The Federation of Independent Trade Unions, an outfit with close ties to the state and the corporations and hardly inclined towards truthful reporting, puts those numbers even higher. According to it, there were 5,563 industrial accidents in Russia in 2022. Nearly 1,300 workers were killed in these events.

Russia’s notoriously unsafe mines do not actually rank highest in regards to workplace injuries and deaths. This place is taken by the construction industry, followed by manufacturing, transportation, and agriculture, forestry and fishing, notes the website Attek in its analysis of official data.



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