

China: 82 workers dead in catastrophic mine explosion

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At least 82 mine workers have been killed in a gas explosion in a coal mine in the central Chinese province of Shanxi last Friday afternoon. The blast at the Liushenyu Coal Mine about 500 km southwest of Beijing is the deadliest coal mine disaster in China since an explosion in 2009 at a state-run mine in Heilongjiang province killed 108 people.

As of yesterday, 128 of the 247 workers who were underground at the time of the explosion were being treated in hospital, including two who were in a critical condition. Of the others, two were still missing and 35 of the survivors were able to return home. According to the state-owned Xinhua newsagency, initial reports of fatalities were incorrect because the company did not have an accurate figure for the number of workers on the shift.

Media reports of what happened are sketchy. One of the injured miners, Wang Yong, told CCTV that he had not heard any noise but had seen a cloud of smoke and smelled sulphur. “[It was] just like when explosives are detonated and I told everyone to run. As we were running, I saw people collapsing from the smoke and then I blacked out too.”

Doctors said that most of the injured were being treated for exposure to toxic gas and needed high-pressure oxygen therapy. Another hospital worker told China Newsweek magazine: “Right now, the entire hospital is incredibly busy, with everyone rushing off their feet.”

The Ministry of Emergency Management dispatched 345 personnel from six mine emergency rescue teams, along with equipment, to the scene of the rescue operation. Seven specialist medical teams were also sent. CCTV reported that rescue operations were hampered by the fact that blueprints of the mine provided by the company did not correspond to the

actual underground layout, forcing rescuers to improvise.

Rescue workers also told CCTV that the difficulties were compounded by the depth of the mine and the steep gradient of the area where the explosion occurred, making it hard to bring injured miners to the surface. They were also worried about rising water levels near the explosion site.

In what has become a pro-forma response to major disasters, Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed that every effort should be made “to treat the injured, organize search and rescue operations scientifically and properly handle the aftermath.” He called for an investigation into the explosion and to “hold those responsible to account, according to the law.”

Executives of the Shanxi Tongzhou Coal Group, which operates the mine, have reportedly been detained. While the immediate responsibility for the tragedy rests with the company, the Chinese government is seeking scapegoats to deflect public attention from the hundreds of workers who continue to die every year in China’s mines.

In 2023, 53 workers were killed in a collapse at an open cut coal mine in Inner Mongolia. The following year, Beijing implemented new regulations for the coal industry that increased potential fines for breaches and outlined additional safety checks and responsibilities for mine owners and local government and party officials.

The regulations and related legislation may appear comprehensive on paper, but companies are driven to maximise production and profits. Local officials are under constant pressure to boost output on which revenue and employment depend. Shanxi province is heavily dependent on coal mining, producing almost a third of China’s total production last year and

employing hundreds of thousands of miners.

In 2024, Liushenyu coal mine was listed by China's National Mine Safety Administration as one of the 1,128 mines that had been cited for "severe safety hazards." It was specifically cited for high gas levels, which make coal mines prone to explosions.

In a statement issued at the time, the safety body declared: "Provincial-level mine safety supervision departments must urge severely disaster-prone coal mines to implement measures for regional disaster management."

At this stage it is unclear what measures, if any, were taken to address safety at the mine. The lack of an accurate count of workers in the mine at the time of the explosion and inadequate blueprints of the mine layout indicate lax oversight by both the company and local officials.

The ChannelNewsAsia website cited Chinese state media as saying that more than half of the workers in the shaft on Friday had gone down without being properly registered. The miners are normally required to undergo facial recognition checks or take location-tracking cards before their descent.

The *South China Morning Post* reported that two administrative penalties had been imposed on the company last year for safety violations. The offences reportedly involved the failure of the emergency stop mechanism on a monorail inside the mine and the lack of proper support to areas where the mine roof was caving in.

While it is the case that the official toll from coal mine deaths has substantially reduced over the past two decades, coal miners continue to die each year—218 in 2020, 163 in 2021, 193 in 2022 and 162 in 2023. While significantly increasing the use of renewable energy, China is still heavily dependent on coal for energy. It is the largest global producer and consumer of coal, accounting for over half of the world's production.

President Xi has blandly declared: "All regions and departments must learn from the lessons of the accident, remain vigilant regarding workplace safety, thoroughly investigate, rectify all types of risks and hidden dangers, and resolutely prevent and curb the occurrence of major and serious accidents."

However, without safety legislation and regulations being enforced, miners will continue to be killed as mines—both state-owned and privately owned—put

production and profits ahead of the lives and health of workers.



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