



Mining Accident News No.1015

15 to 22 May 2010

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Sunday 16 May 2010

Hilda L. Solis: Disaster probe must be protected

Letter to Editor, the Charleston Gazette, USA

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- In the past six weeks, I have made a number of trips to West Virginia to

meet with the families of the 29 men who died at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch Mine. Although there is nothing I can do to eliminate their pain and suffering, I can, as the nation's top cop on the workplace beat, make sure that we learn the truth about what happened on April 5 and bring those responsible to justice.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration is taking an aggressive and unique approach to the Upper Big Branch Mine investigation - one that utilizes every possible tool we have to get the truth, ensure transparency and accountability, and preserve the ability of federal prosecutors to bring criminal charges if it is determined that crimes were committed.

Our dedication to transparency begins with the unprecedented number of public hearings we will conduct, including one where miners, contractors, mine officials and others with knowledge of the Upper Big Branch Mine will participate. We will use subpoena power if necessary to ensure that happens.

Other public hearings will explore the technical aspects of the explosion, as well as allow family members of the deceased to voice their thoughts and suggest potential reforms in mine safety law. We also will host a town hall meeting to promote the exchange of ideas on how best to create a culture of safety - and practical ways to improve safety - at mining operations. These events will be open to the community, as well as to anyone else interested in justice and mine safety, via live webcasts.

This is a new approach to openness and public participation, and unlike any other accident investigation of this magnitude. But there are other elements of the investigation - particularly the first round of witness interviews - that, in order to maintain the integrity of the investigation process and the safety and trust of the witnesses, must remain private. And here is

NOTE: Views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual sender, and are not necessarily the views of Industry & Investment NSW.

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why: no smart cop would let a possible defendant sit in on witness interviews, and no one expects cops to "cooperate" or "coordinate" with potential criminals.

While we value transparency, I will not allow the evidence gained during our investigation to taint a potential grand jury process, telegraph to possible criminal defendants what other witnesses are saying, or provide potential criminal defendants with a road map to avoid prosecution, evade conviction and escape justice.

In this investigation we must ensure that witnesses can tell their stories candidly, without fear of intimidation or retaliation by anyone adversely affected by their testimony. But something else, too: this information will be shared with other federal law enforcement authorities who may use it to identify bad actors in potential criminal actions.

I have made it clear that company officials and company lawyers will not be allowed in the room during interviews, so it was not surprising when Massey's corporate office criticized our process.

I refuse to compromise this investigation in any way or jeopardize our pursuit of justice.

If those who put miners' safety at risk see that we are serious about putting them in jail, I am willing to bet that they will change their ways.

Solis is secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor.

Monday 17 May 2010

Russia: Fires in Rospadskaya mine put out, it is flooded to oust methane

Extract from ITAR-TASS News Agency

MEZHDURECHENS - Fires in the Rospadskaya coalmine in the Kemerovo region that were detected by mine rescuers now have been totally extinguished, commander of the Novokuznetsk squad of the militarised mine

rescue unit Alexander Apalkov told journalists on Sunday.

He specified that he had in mind the underground fires found before the methane accumulation place beyond which the rescuers were ordered not to go and come to the surface due to the possibility of another explosion. It is due to the high concentration of methane gas that the rescue operations had to be suspended. "We, naturally, cannot tell if there are fires beyond the methane accumulation place. At first we will remove methane and then will again check the mine tunnels," Apalkov explained.

Water pumping was started into the mine from 10:00, local time (07:00 MSK) and simultaneously the special reagent khladon (freon) is supplied. According to the commander of the mine rescuers' squad, this is done "for neutralisation of the methane cloud when it will be coming to the surface past possible seats of fire, in order to avoid another explosion." These operations will continue for about a week, after which rescuers will again descend to the mine.

There was an accident in the Rospadskaya coalmine on the night to May 9 – two methane explosions that killed 66 people, 24 mine workers are still missing.

Meanwhile, governor of the Kemerovo region Aman Tuleyev said that the owners of the Rospadskaya coalmine must bear responsibility for the accident. "I put the blame for the tragedy fully on the owner," he told reporters on Saturday. "It is outrageous that there is no reaction from the owners, the administration of the Rospadskaya coal mining company. They are silent, though they must not be afraid to meet with people," he stressed.

A written undertaking not to leave has been taken from the mine management for the period of the investigation into the criminal case opened in connection with the deaths caused by the explosions in the mine on the night to May 9, an investigation source told Itar-Tass. The criminal case is opened on charges of "violation

of the safety regulations in mining work that caused deaths of more than two people through carelessness.”

The two explosions killed 66 miners and rescuers. The fate of 24 people is unknown so far. The search operation is suspended due to the complicated situation in the mine, in which methane concentration is high and there are fire outbreaks.

Governor Tuleyev met on Saturday with a group representing the Rospadskaya miners' interests. He agreed with the workers on their demands and ordered to settle their social problems. The workers told him about the wage situation and other issues related to social welfare. Tuleyev told reporters that he had known “much interesting about activities” of the company management. All the facts are being checked, he added. The governor said he had agreed on the miners' all demands and ordered his deputies to settle the issues in a short period to time.

Tuleyev said earlier that the regional commission for the work with the relatives of the miners that were killed in methane explosions in the Rospadskaya mine was established. Deputy governor Andrei Malakhov was appointed the commission's chairman. “The regional commission will specifically engage in the settlement of material, housing and other issues of each family of the killed,” Tuleyev explained.

According to the governor, the relatives of the killed miners will get 1 million roubles from the owner of the enterprise in accordance with an agreement with the regional administration, as well as 12 salaries plus 3 miner's salaries for the past 3 months. Besides, the children of the killed miners will be annually holidaying in the best sanatoriums of the country free of charge. The owners will bear expenses for the education of children and improvement of housing conditions of the miners' families. “Students will get a separate stipend until the age of 23,” he stressed. The people injured in the accident will be paid 30,000 to 200,000 roubles each

depending on the severity of the injury, Tuleyev said.

Tuesday 18 May 2010

Turkey: Crews rush to rescue trapped coal miners

Extract from CNN International

Istanbul, Turkey -- Hundreds of rescue workers are racing to reach 30 miners, who have spent the last 24 hours trapped underground after an explosion rocked a coal mine in northern Turkey on Monday.

The accident occurred at the enormous Karadon coal mine, located some 12 kilometers, or more than 7 miles, east of the Black Sea port of Zonguldak.



Relatives of the trapped miners wait for news near the mine in northern Turkey

Turkey's Labor Minister Omer Dincer said the cause of the blast wasn't immediately known but it could have been prompted by a buildup of methane underground, according to Turkey's semi-official Anatolian Agency.

An official from the Zonguldak governor's office told CNN that intensive rescue operations are continuing to save the 30 workers trapped 540 meters, or about 1,700 feet, underground.

"It is not possible to know what conditions the workers are in or to estimate how long it will take to reach them because the rescuers don't know what they are going to face as they go along," the official said.

CNN's sister network, CNN Turk, has been airing interviews with distraught relatives of the trapped miners, who are holding a vigil by the coal mine.

Turkey's coal mining industry does not have a good track record in terms of safety. This is the third major mine accident within the last six months in the country.

In 1992, 270 people were killed in a mine explosion near Zonguldak.

Two people die in crane accident at a mine in northern Sweden

Extract from Associated Press

STOCKHOLM — Officials say the lift basket of a crane crashed to the ground at an iron ore mine in northern Sweden, killing two people.

Anders Lindberg at Swedish mining group LKAB says the workers were inspecting a shaft at the Malmberg mine, when the basket they were carried in suddenly broke loose from the crane and tumbled to the ground.

It is not clear what caused the accident Tuesday, or how far the two contractors fell.

Lindberg says several rescue workers, three ambulances and one helicopter have been dispatched to the scene.

Chief of Russian mine faces charges over blasts

Extract from eTaiwan News

Russia's top investigator has ordered that criminal charges be filed against the director of a Siberian coal mine over twin blasts that killed at least 66 miners and rescuers.

Investigative Committee chief Alexander Bastrykin says in a statement released Tuesday that the head of the Rasspadszkaya coal mine is expected to be held accountable for the disaster.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Monday expressed disbelief that Igor Volkov had already survived four dismissal attempts through the courts over a series of safety violations. Russian news agencies reported Volkov resigned Tuesday.

Rescue operations at the mine were suspended Thursday because of methane and fires in the tunnels, dashing hopes of finding 24 people still missing alive.

USA: Witness interviews in W.Va. mine blast start

Extract from the Washington Examiner, USA

CHARLESTON, W.VA. — Investigators probing the Upper Big Branch mine explosion have started interviewing witnesses even though hazardous conditions have kept them from going underground to search for a cause.

Mine Safety and Health Administration spokeswoman Amy Louviere says interviews started May 10 at the agency's mine academy in Beaver.

MSHA has been chastised by mine owner Massey Energy and sued by the United Mine Workers for not questioning witnesses in public during a formal hearing.

The agency reiterated its plans Tuesday for a series of public meetings, though witness interviews are being done in private.

Louviere says the agency isn't releasing names either.

The April 5 explosion killed 29 miners, the nation's worst coal-industry disaster in 40 years.

SA: BHP apologises to court for worker's death

Extract from ABC Online, Aus

The Industrial Court has heard safety standards were not followed when a worker died at the Olympic Dam mine in outback South Australia.

Scott Rigg, 35, was doing maintenance work in the mine's acid plant in December 2007 when a 75-kilogram fibreglass nozzle fell on top of him.

The BHP Billiton Olympic Dam Corporation has pleaded guilty to one count of failing to maintain a safe workplace.

The court heard fibreglass nozzles were not supposed to be lifted out of a humidifier while

workers were doing repairs inside it, but the work schedule was changed contrary to safety policy because a crane crew was running late.

Mr Rigg died when a nozzle broke and fell during crane operations above him.

A lawyer for BHP Billiton read a public apology in court.

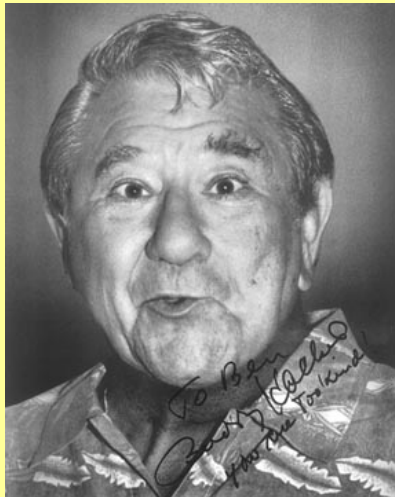
There will be a decision on a penalty next month.

The victim's brother Shaun Rigg said the accident had deeply affected his family.

"We will never get over this but we will walk on knowing that we will never walk alone," he said.

"Rest in peace Scotty, we love and miss you every minute of every day."

Quote of the week



"I've had a good day when I don't fall out of the cart."

Buddy Hackett
(American comedian and actor, 1924-2003)

Wednesday 19 May 2010

10 Dead In China Mine Explosion

Extract from RTT News,

An explosion in a coal mine in northern China killed 10 miners and left one missing, the latest in a series of deadly accidents to hit the hazardous mining industry of the world's largest

coal producer, state media reported on Wednesday citing work safety officials.

The blast occurred around 4.50 p.m. (0850 GMT) on Tuesday when 41 miners were working in the shaft of Chendong Coal Industry Co. Ltd. in Yuxian county of Shanxi province, the country's coal-producing heartland, the official Xinhua news agency reported quoting an official of the work safety committee of Yangquan city.

Twenty-seven miners escaped unhurt and three trapped workers were rescued, the report said.

Rescue work was on, and an investigation has been launched into the cause of the accident, said a spokesman with the city government of Yangquan which administers Yuxian county.

The latest coal mine accident came as Chinese authorities launched prosecution against nine technicians and engineers in connection with a mine flooding two months ago in northern China's Shanxi Province that killed 38 miners.

Xinhua said on Wednesday that they were arrested on charges of failing to take measures to prevent flooding and neglecting signs of the imminent flooding of the Wangjialing Coal Mine.

Of the 153 miners trapped on March 28, 115 were rescued after more than a week.

China's mining industry is the most dangerous in the world. According to official statistics, deaths from coal mine accidents dropped to 2,631 last year, an average of seven a day, from 3,215 in 2008 and 6,995 in 2002, the worst year on record.

Many of the unlicensed mines in China are trying to make the most of the prevailing high coal prices. Lax safety standards in the quest for profits and the drive to meet surging demand for coal--the source of about 70 per cent of China's energy--have made the country's mines the most dangerous in the world, despite the government's crackdown on illegal and unsafe mines.

Two missing after new Russian coal mine accident

Extract from Reuters

MOSCOW, - Two miners were missing and dozens were rescued after a pit in Russia's coal heartland of Kuzbass collapsed on Wednesday, two weeks after blasts killed at least 66 people in a neighboring mine.

Interfax news agency said 107 miners out of 109 who had been working in the Alexeyevskaya mine were rescued after it collapsed on Wednesday morning. RIA news agency said only 31 miners had been working in the mine and 29 had been rescued.

The local emergencies service declined to give details of the number of missing and rescued. The Alexeyevskaya mine belongs to a group of Ukrainian investors, according to Russian media.

Safety in the Russian coal industry is in the spotlight following an accident at the Rospadskaya mine (RASP.MM) in the same region on May 8, the worst in three years.

With 66 people confirmed dead, the search for 24 men still missing at Rospadskaya has been halted because of fears of further underground explosions.

On Tuesday, Russian prosecutors said they would investigate safety at all coal mines and open a criminal case against the general director of the Rospadskaya mine, who resigned after a rebuke from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Turkey: 4 days to reach trapped miners

Extract from the Straits Times

ISTANBUL - Rescue workers are expected to take four days to reach 30 miners trapped in a coal mine in northern Turkey, a Turkish mining official said on Wednesday, dimming hopes of finding the workers alive.

Teams working to rescue the miners since Monday afternoon were being obstructed by

coal subsidence at the mine, located in the northern Black Sea province of Zonguldak.

Turkish Coal Board General Manager Burhan Inan said rescue teams had cleared one obstacle and envisaged it would take four days to break through a further 20 metre-long subsidence. 'We are working to shorten that time,' Mr Inan was quoted as telling reporters by state-run Anatolian news agency.

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan arrived in Zonguldak on Wednesday afternoon to inspect the rescue efforts, amid growing concerns about the workers' survival chances.

'Naturally as the time period extends it increases further our concerns about our worker brothers down there,' said Energy Minister Taner Yildiz.

President Abdullah Gul has given the order for the State Audit Board to conduct a comprehensive investigation on the recent accidents that have occurred in the mining sector, a statement on his Web site said.

This week in mining accident history

17 May 1965

Cambrian Colliery

Glamorgan, Wales, UK

Underground coal mine

Firedamp explosion

31 killed

Source: www.wikipedia.org & <http://webapps.rhondda-cynon-taff.gov.uk>

On 17 May 1965, a second major mining accident occurred at the Cambrian Colliery (the first being an explosion on 10 March 1905, killing 33 and seriously injuring 14 others). An explosion caused by firedamp, after poor ventilation allowed a build-up of flammable gas, killed 31 miners. The ignition point was later identified as an electric arc on an open switch panel which was being worked on. This was the last major mining disaster in South Wales history.

'Another sad scar in the Rhondda's History', '31 Died in Pit Hell', 'Rhondda Hell'.

So read the newspaper headlines on the 18th May 1965 following an explosion at Cambrian Colliery, Clydach Vale, on Monday May 17th. The explosion occurred at just before 1.00p.m. in the Pentre Seam of the p.26 district which had only been in full production for four months, and was the last of the major colliery disasters to hit South Wales. A major rescue operation was immediately launched, at times involving over 150 men. Ten hours after the explosion the last of the bodies was removed from the two and a half feet seam 300 yards underground and more than one and a half miles from the pithead. The final toll of the explosion was 31 dead, many of whom had to be identified either from the numbers on their lamps or by their fingerprints, and 13 injured.

An inquiry was held into the disaster at the Law Courts, Cardiff, over four days in the July of the year, with 58 persons appearing to give evidence. The inquiry found that the explosion was of firedamp with flame spreading along approximately 325 yards of face and return roadway. The firedamp had assumed explosive proportions due to poor ventilation circulating the district caused principally, the inquiry found, through a poorly constructed airbridge allowing the build up of gas. This gas was ignited by an electric arc on an open switch panel on which electricians were working. Therefore the explosion was deemed to be the result of poor 'pit practice'.

Although used to mining disasters, this explosion shocked the nation with D. Francis stating in 'The Miner' journal, 'I never thought that in 1965 we should be faced with a tragedy such as this'. Disasters on this scale were thought to be a thing of the past. The funerals of the dead miners were held on the Friday and Saturday and were incredibly moving, more than 20,000 people silently lined the route of the funeral procession, which stretched for over two miles. The Queen herself sent a message of

sympathy to the families of the injured and bereaved and a disaster fund was set up which raised over £123,000.

Two years after the disaster the mine was finally closed, and in 1992 Neil Kinnock opened a Memorial garden on the site of the old pit.

Thursday 20 May 2010

Rescue workers find 28 bodies after Turkey mine blast

ANKARA — Rescue workers on Thursday recovered the bodies of 28 miners trapped underground in a Turkish coal mine following a gas explosion, in one of the worst mine accidents in recent years.

Energy Minister Taner Yildiz said rescuers were still looking to find the bodies of two other miners believed to be either buried under or beyond a pile of earth and rock in the Karadon mine in the northern province of Zonguldak.

"We have found the bodies of 28 people. Efforts are continuing to try to find the two other men," the minister told reporters.

Initial findings suggested that the miners had died from carbon dioxide poisoning, Yildiz added.

The workers were trapped at a depth of 540 metres (1,782 feet) on Monday when a powerful explosion, triggered by the build-up of methane gas, ripped through the pit, causing a massive cave-in.

Rescuers initially tried to reach the trapped miners through the main shaft of the mine, but found that the platform used to lower the workers was extensively damaged.

The operation was then shifted to another shaft 2,000 metres (1.2 miles) from the site of the explosion, forcing rescuers to travel that distance through an underground tunnel.

But their efforts were hampered by huge blocks of stone the size of cars that took them precious time to bypass.

Yildiz said rescuers launched a second effort to reach the miners through the main shaft late Wednesday after they repaired the elevator system and descended into the pit despite obvious safety risks.

News of the deaths triggered scenes of grief among families waiting at the mine since Monday for news of their loved ones. Many broke down in tears in front of television cameras after hearing the minister's announcement.

Explosions and cave-ins are common in Turkey, particularly in private mines where respect for safety regulations is often minimal.

Thirteen workers were killed in February when a methane explosion at a mine in northwest Turkey caused a cave-in. In December, 19 workers died in a collapse set off by an explosion.

President Abdullah Gul ordered an inquiry Wednesday into those incidents and Monday's blast.

Friday 21 May 2010

WA: Firm guilty in mine death

Extract from The Herald, NSW

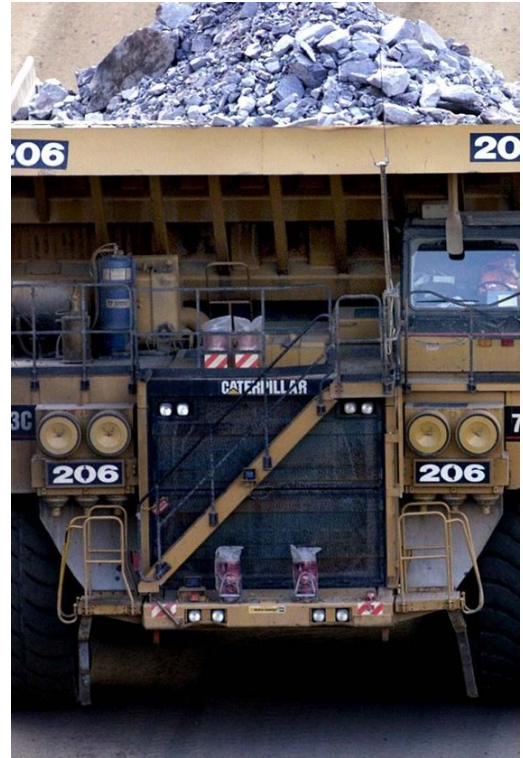
The operators of Australia's biggest goldmine, Kalgoorlie's Super Pit, have pleaded guilty to two charges relating to the death of a worker.



An aerial view of Kalgoorlie's superpit (Kalgoorlie Consolidated Gold Mines)

A 53-year-old woman died after falling from a dump truck at the pit in January 2009.

Kalgoorlie Consolidated Gold Mines (KCGM) pleaded guilty in Kalgoorlie Magistrates Court yesterday to failing to provide and maintain a safe working environment.



A dump truck carrying 190 tonnes of gold bearing ore makes its way out of the Super Pit at Kalgoorlie, 595 kms east of Perth

The operators also pleaded guilty to failing to replace a quarry manager who was away.

Sentencing will be on 3 August 2010 in the Perth Magistrate's court.

The woman's death was the fourth at a WA mine during the 2008-09 financial year.

USA: Mine Executive Favors Outside Inquiry Into Deaths

Extract from The New York Times, USA

WASHINGTON — The top executive of Massey Energy told a Senate subcommittee Thursday that an outside agency should investigate the April 5 explosion at his company's Upper Big Branch mine, which killed 29, because otherwise the Mine Safety and Health Administration, the agency now in charge, would have to evaluate its own performance.



Don L. Blankenship, top executive of Massey Energy, testified Thursday at a Senate hearing on the Upper Big Branch mine blast (Photo: Luke Sharrett/The New York Times)

In his first testimony since the accident, the worst coal mine disaster in 40 years, Don L. Blankenship, the chairman and chief executive, came out swinging. The 23 miner fatalities at Massey mines in the decade before the Upper Big Branch explosion made his company “about average,” he said, and Massey was a leader in safety innovation but had been forbidden by the Mine Safety and Health administration from making some safety improvements.

Mr. Blankenship spoke at a hearing of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on labor, health and human services. Senator Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa, the chairman, said the hearing would not focus on the details of the accident, because that is part of a separate investigation, but on the backlog of safety cases at the regulatory agency. Massey could have drawn extra scrutiny from the safety agency if it were found to have a “pattern of violations,” but it contested so many citations that it escaped that category.

In fact, the government program for closing unsafe coal mines has defeated itself because the safety agency has added inspectors faster than it has increased the number of judges to adjudicate cases, officials testified on Thursday.

In the 2008 fiscal year, 72 percent of cases were decided within one year. But as of April 30 of this year, only 25 percent of the cases resolved were under a year old, and 62 percent were one to two years old, according to Mary Lu Jordan, chairman of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission. The government recently

added four judges to the 10 it had, but the backlog will grow by the end of this year to 18,200 cases from about 16,000 now.

Senator Harkin said, “There seems to be every incentive to an operator challenge just about every citation.” He promised more money.

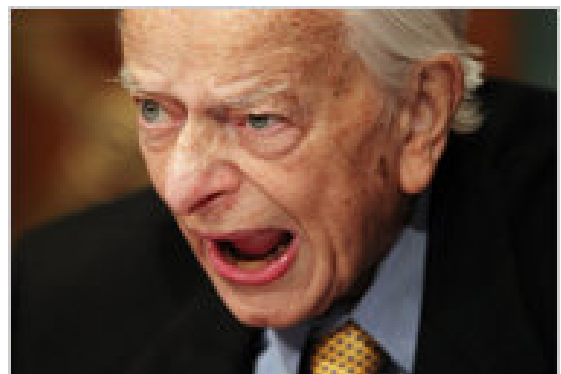
Witnesses suggested various changes, including requiring companies to pay interest on fines from the day the fine was proposed if they engage in lengthy appeals and eventually lose the cases.

At the hearing, another witness, Cecil E. Roberts, president of the United Mine Workers of America, challenged Mr. Blankenship’s assertion that Massey’s safety record was average.

“I can’t come up with another coal company that’s had 23 miners in 10 years die,” Mr. Roberts, seated next to Mr. Blankenship at the witness table, said. “This isn’t average. This is deplorable.

“This is the worst fatality rate in the industry either way you look at it, either before the explosion or after the explosion.”

Mr. Blankenship said that given the mining conditions in Massey’s region, central Appalachia, and the volume it produces, numbers “tend to get big,” but he added that any fatality was “unacceptable to us.”



Senator Robert C. Byrd of a Senate Appropriation subcommittee was one of several members who joined in the questioning (Photo: Luke Sharrett/The New York Times)

The agency’s prime witness, Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor, did not address how

the investigation would be conducted. He said his agency was trying to become more effective, with new tactics like "blitz" inspection raids.

Robert C. Byrd, the 92-year-old West Virginia Democrat, took a tough stance with Mr. Blankenship. "Twenty nine men are now dead, dead, dead, simply because they went to work that morning," he said.

USA: Massey miner dies after accident in W.Va.

Extract from Daily Mail - Charleston

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - Another Massey Energy coal miner has died on the job.

State of West Virginia spokesman Hoy Murphy says 55-year-old James Erwin of Delbarton died about 6 a.m. Friday.

Murphy says Erwin was pinned between a piece of heavy equipment and the wall at Massey's Ruby Energy mine in Mingo County on May 10.

Massey did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Erwin's death comes as Virginia-based Massey faces criminal and civil investigations into an explosion that killed 29 men at its Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia April 5. The blast is the nation's deadliest coal mining disaster in 40 years.

At least 31 people have died at West Virginia coal mines this year, and 36 nationwide

USA: W.Va. mine blast survivor's rehab slow, uncertain

Extract from the Associated Press, USA

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — A few days before the Upper Big Branch coal mine blew up, James Woods had a nightmare — he was pinned down, held by his arms, unable to move.

It was, his daughter believes, "God's way of telling him that something was going to happen."

Woods awoke from a coma in a Charleston hospital bed, and tried to yank out feeding and

ventilator tubes. Doctors were forced to tie down his arms for more than a week.

His dream was right on the mark.

Twenty-nine men died inside Massey Energy Co.'s mine in Montcoal, an hour south of Charleston. One other man was briefly hospitalized, and Woods was pulled out barely alive.

More than a month after the accident, the devout Christian, devoted family man and determined prankster is a fraction of his former self, unable to converse and seemingly lost in a brain that was starved of oxygen from carbon monoxide exposure.

"You know he's in there," daughter Sherry Lilly told The Associated Press recently in the family's first interview since the April 5 explosion. "And sometimes he'll have an expression that you're used to seeing. But then sometimes it's just blank."

Woods — a husband at 16, a father at 18 and 54 by the day of the blast — suffered bruised lungs and brain trauma, and his family has no idea what, if anything, he remembers. They don't talk about the accident in front of him. They don't ask, either.

They just thank God for miracles large and small — his survival, three consecutive words from his mouth, his ability to walk again.

Those first steps were "amazing to see, and very tearful," Lilly said. "It was like watching a baby walk for the first time. It really was. I have three children. It was like, 'Wow.'"

"Physically, he's doing good. But mentally, he's like a small child. He doesn't even know why he's here."

Woods had worked in the mines for 17 years and was an electrician at Upper Big Branch, where he was part of the "old man crew" — miners who took the long ride to the coal seam together and whose experience added up to decades.

Woods and eight others were aboard an underground vehicle that was on its way out of the mine at the time of the explosion, according to Danny Spratt, state mine rescue team coordinator. Seven were killed.

Rescuers found the other injured miner, whose name has not been publicly released, walking out along the underground tracks, Spratt said. The man was treated at a hospital and released within days. He has declined interview requests.

Also with Woods earlier that day was his 32-year-old son, Jeremy. Lilly said Jeremy Woods had left the area late in his shift to get some supplies he needed to complete his own work. Jeremy Woods was still inside the mine when the explosion occurred, but got out unhurt.

"He realized that when my dad was in there, that he tried to go back in and that men had to restrain him because he was going back in to get dad," Lilly said.

Jeremy Woods has talked little about the disaster, Lilly said, adding that he wouldn't be interviewed.

Massey Energy has come under fire since the explosion for its safety record, both at Upper Big Branch and in general. The company didn't respond to a request for comment on Woods' situation.

The elder Woods' relatives are just thankful for their blessings — "I have my dad when the others don't," Lilly said — and focusing on helping him get better.

It's his speech and memory that pose the biggest challenges. Progress is measured a few syllables at a time. Woods often speaks in a whisper and his sentences are short. Sometimes it's difficult for him to remember members of his own family, although he seems to light up when his grandchildren when they visit his room.

"That has been overwhelmingly like a sigh of relief, that he recognizes the kids," Lilly said.

Woods, who has lost more than 20 pounds, doesn't understand his surroundings. He

especially disliked the almost daily three-hour hospital rehabilitation sessions that worked on improving his mind. He was recently transferred to a facility in North Carolina that specializes in such work.

Mainly, he just wants to go home. His family wants to see him playing golf and horseshoes and hunting turkey, deer and squirrel, serving as church deacon and choir member, playing jokes on his loved ones.

It could take up to a year and a half to determine if a full recovery is possible.

"There are so many 'what ifs' right now," Lilly said. "That is what's so hard."

Mining dictionary

A guide to common mining terminology

V

vertical boiler

Commonly called 'donkey boilers', these are self-contained and more portable and flexible in use than larger boilers that need to be set into masonry beds. The vertical boiler was cylindrical in form, sitting on its circular base with a chimney at the top. It had a small fire grate at its base, and a smaller capacity for water and steam production than larger boilers.



Remnants of a donkey boiler

-Ed