



Mining Accident News No.1028

27 September to 5 October 2010

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Monday 27 September 2010

Mine explosion suppressant lags in USA

Extract from Charleston Gazette, USA

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- At first, "passive barriers" to prevent the spread of underground

coal-mine explosions sound a bit like the old practical joke where you balance a bucket of water on a partly opened door, and the first person who walks through gets drenched.

But by simply hanging containers of water or limestone dust in key places throughout underground coal mines, other coal-producing countries have been able to keep smaller methane ignitions from turning into major mining disasters.

The technique got a few sentences in a May report on coal-dust explosion prevention from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

"Passive barriers have been deployed in most leading coal-producing nations to provide supplemental protection against coal dust explosions," the NIOSH report said. "Barriers are designed to quench an explosion immediately on arrival at the location."

And Labor Secretary Hilda Solis told President Obama in an April preliminary report on the Upper Big Branch Mine Disaster that such devices "can suppress propagating explosions to mitigate their effects."

But the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration doesn't require coal mine operators to use explosion barriers. The devices aren't mentioned these days in congressional hearings, pending legislation, or the national media coverage of mine disasters.

Even long-time mine safety advocates have to think back in history to remember them being considered in the United States.

Davitt McAteer, who ran the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration during the Clinton years, said last week he recalls making a push on the subject in the early 1970s. The idea apparently went nowhere, but McAteer says it should be resurrected, especially in light of the deaths of 29 miners in what experts believe was

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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a methane and coal-dust explosion at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch Mine on April 5.

"It's proven technology," McAteer said. "We should be doing this."

A variety of old Bureau of Mines and NIOSH research reports discuss the use of explosion "barriers" in other countries, and outline ways that the devices could be deployed in the United States.

For example, one 1974 Bureau of Mines study outlines the use of plastic tubs or troughs hung through underground mine tunnels.

"During a dust explosion, the dynamic pressures induced ahead of the propagating flame tilts or ruptures the water containers, releasing and dispersing the water, which acts to suppress the approaching flame," the report said.

Water containers could also be made of wood or metal, the report said, and could be of varying size and capacity, depending on their locations in the mine.

Michael Sapko, a now-retired NIOSH researcher, provided a broad overview of explosion barriers as part of a presentation on coal-dust controls in September 1989 at an international mine safety conference in Washington, D.C.

In his written presentation, Sapko produced a chart that showed barrier requirements in many other mining countries, including Australia, Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union.

His report also listed examples where barriers had proven successful:

— At the Fenton Colliery in the U.K. in 1963, barriers controlled the spread of a methane explosion at the working face of the mine.

"There was clear evidence that the flames had actually reached the barrier," the report said. "A [coal] transfer point was located just [beyond] the barrier where there were ample deposits of coal dust, and there was little doubt that without the operation of the barrier the explosion would

have increased in intensity and traveled much further."

— Also in 1963, at the Mainsforth Colliery in Durham, U.K., a rock-dust barrier on the mine intake airway "was completely discharged and without doubt arrested the spread of flame."

— In March 1984 at a mine in Belgium, water barriers helped contain the damage from an explosion that killed seven men.

"The investigation indicated that the first five sets of distributed barriers operated ... and arrested the explosion," the report said. "This was suggested as the reason why men who were located 290 meters from the face were not injured."

— On July 16, 1986 at the Moura Mine in Australia, water barriers helped stop an explosion that had already killed 13 miners, preventing even more deaths.

Sapko notes that barriers are more difficult to use in smaller mines with "low coal" seams, and in some mines using "room-and-pillar" mining configurations. But, he said, they can be more effective in more mechanized mines, especially those using longwall machines. Research on the devices continues to help them improve, he said.

"The overall direction in research on mine explosion prevent seems to be headed in the right direction," he wrote. "But it is disappointing that quantum improvements in the practice of rock dusting do not appear imminent."

Tuesday 28 September 2010

USA: West Virginia hopes to start detailed coal dust tests by November

Extract from The Examiner

Ron Wooten, the WV Mine Safety Chief, announced that he expects to hire eight people and create a laboratory to run tests to determine if underground coal mine operators are

complying with coal dust regulations designed to prevent explosions.

They will attempt to have hired and start training by October 31, if all goes as planned the new operation will be up and running by mid-November.

Seven of the workers will be designated to collect dust samples from the underground mines. The eighth member will test the samples to ensure they meet state law.

The project is estimated to cost \$411,000. The project is being created to fulfill an executive order issued by Gov. Joe Manchin.

USA: W.Va. aims to finish explosion probe by mid-2011

Extract from Associated Press

West Virginia is targeting summer 2011 to finish investigating the nation's deadliest coal mine explosion since 1970, the state's mine safety chief said.

However, he said the date is merely a goal and investigators will take as long as they need to determine what caused the Upper Big Branch explosion. The April 5 explosion killed 29 miners and injured two others at the Raleigh County mine about 51 miles south of Charleston.

Regulators suspect the blast started with methane gas, then grew as it fed on explosive coal dust.

"We know that there was gas and likely coal dust involved. Our whole objective here is to do everything we can to find out what happened,"

state mine safety director Ron Wooten told The Associated Press in an interview Monday.

Mine owner Massey Energy Co., has suggested instead that methane poured into the mine through a crack in the floor and overwhelmed safeguards including ventilation equipment weakened by government-mandated adjustments.

Wooten's agency, the Office of Miners' Health Safety and Training, is conducting a joint investigation with the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration. The explosion also is the subject of an independent civil probe ordered by Gov. Joe Manchin and a federal criminal investigation.

Massey said Tuesday it has received state approval for its plans to start its own investigation and urged MSHA to give its OK.

Spokeswoman Amy Louviere said MSHA is reviewing Massey's plan.

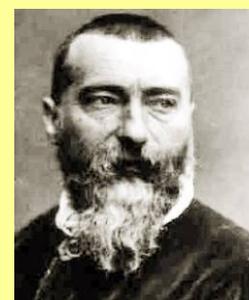
"Every day, evidence is deteriorating," Massey Chief Operating Officer Chris Adkins said in a statement. "We need MSHA to approve our plan quickly."

State and federal regulators followed standard procedure and took control of the mine the day of the explosion. They have allowed Massey representatives to accompany investigators underground, but have barred the company from taking its own photographs and collecting dust samples, among other things.

Massey has complained, but last week a federal administrative law judge upheld the restrictions.

The plan Massey filed with the state calls for mapping, collecting dust and other physical evidence, and taking photos and video, among other things. Massey estimates it needs six weeks to work underground.

Quote of the week



"The more things change, the more they are the same."

Alphonse Karr
(French critic, journalist and novelist,
1808-1890)

Chile rescue speeds up, cheering miner families

Extract from Associated Press

SAN JOSE MINE, Chile — Rapid progress Tuesday in the drilling of escape tunnels for 33 trapped miners brought smiles, hugs and cheers of "Viva Chile!" from family members and government officials, as hopes rose the men might be rescued sooner than planned.

Officials promised the relatives that preparations for the rescue effort on the surface would be ready by Oct. 12, planning for the possibility that the miners could be pulled up nearly a month ahead of the official schedule. But they urged caution, warning that unforeseen problems could slow the work.

A siren sounded at 5 p.m. in the camp where families have held vigil since a rock collapse blocked the mine's exit shaft Aug. 5. At first, no one knew what it meant, just that it was good news.

Then, rescue workers came down to report that the "Plan B" drill had reached 984 feet (300 meters) deep, nearly halfway to its goal after advancing 243 feet (74 meters) Tuesday, more than twice as fast as expected.

At that pace, barring complications, the drill could break through to the miners in about five more days, and be reinforced with a metal sleeve even before Oct. 12.

We're "happy for this depth they reached. We needed just this kind of attitude," Alberto Segovia told The Associated Press. His brother Dario has been trapped in the gold and copper mine for 54 days.

Three drills are pounding through hard rock below the Atacama desert to reach the miners. "Plan B" is a U.S.-made T-130, operated in consultation with a team from Somerset, Pennsylvania, that had experience in the 2002 Quecreek mine disaster, where a similar tunnel was carved to pull out nine trapped coal miners.

Many observers had put their bets on "Plan C," a towering oil-industry drill with the power to rapidly carve a separate tunnel to a spot slightly less deep. Now it looks like either drill might be the one to reach the miners first.

Above ground, the government is rushing to set up a field hospital and a huge stage where the media can observe the rescue from a distance.

The first rescue capsule has already arrived, but workers still need to attach it to a huge spool of steel cable. These and other tools will be ready in 15 days, Interior Ministry official Cristian Barra promised Tuesday.

Barra and the rescue operations chief, Andre Sougarret, stressed, however, that just because the tools will be ready doesn't mean the rescue will happen so quickly.

There could be setbacks in the drilling, they warned, especially as the drills pass through collapsed sections of the mine or rock layers that aren't well mapped. Staying cautious, Barra said they are sticking with the official date of early November for now.

"We in 15 days will be prepared to be able to do the rescue at any moment. This doesn't mean it will happen in 15 days, but all the installations will be in place," Barra said.

If the "Plan B" drill maintains its current speed, President Sebastian Pinera may be able to keep his promise of hugging each surfacing miner and still leave for Europe on a previously scheduled trip Oct. 15-22.

But Sougarret also advised caution, saying he expects the unexpected when it comes to hard-rock drilling.

"I must insist — we have had problems in which we have had to pause the machines for more than four days at a time because of some problem with the drilling," he said. "We don't completely know the geology, we're passing close to open spaces in the mine, and so I can't confirm until we are very sure that the rescue can happen more quickly."

"We still have doubts," he added. "... It's prudent to keep talking about the first days of November."

The government said the Strata 950 "Plan A" drill reached 1,667 feet (508 meters) Tuesday morning. Once it breaks through to 2,306 feet (703 meters), this drill will need to start over again, widening the hole to its final diameter of 28 inches (70 centimeters) so that the metal sleeve and escape capsule can pass through.

The other two drills are already carving out holes this wide, and making quick progress: the T-130 "Plan B" drill reached nearly halfway to its 2,047-foot (620-meter) goal Tuesday evening, Sougarret said. The "Plan C" Rig 421 oil well drill has carved out 361 feet (110 meters) of its 1,959-foot (597 meter) goal.

Harmony says miner dead after S.Africa mine accident

Extract from Reuters Africa

JOHANNESBURG (Reuters) - Harmony Gold Mining said on Tuesday it had recovered the body of one of two miners who had gone missing after a tremor on Monday at the Bambanani mine, which forced the suspension of operations.

Harmony, Africa's third-largest gold producer, could not immediately say how much gold production would be lost after the accident, in which four other workers were injured.

South Africa, the world's top platinum producer and a major chrome exporter, has a safety record that compares unfavourably with mines in more developed economies, partly because it has some of the world's deepest mines.

Fatalities have led to the temporary closure of mines and reduced output, which is already declining due to falling grades.

Last year, 165 miners died in its mines.

Bambanani mine, in Free State province, produced 1,170 kg of gold during the April-June quarter.

Wednesday 29 September 2010

India: Alert miners help avert mining disaster

Extract from The Times of India

NAGPUR: A mining disaster was narrowly averted on Tuesday at Western Coalfields Limited's (WCL) Umrer open cast mine, as lakhs of tonnes of overburden debris came crashing down into the mining area followed by gushing of water from the Aam river. The incident that occurred around 6.45am left one dead and another injured.

With the debris caving in, Dragline — a mining machine weighing almost 2,000 tonnes — went tumbling down almost 140 metres before it broke into pieces.

The machine's operator Gurmail Singh, 50, died on way to hospital while his colleague Chandrashekhar Kinekar, an electrician, suffered serious injuries.

They were trapped in the debris for almost four hours. Workers said Kinekar called from his cellphone to inform his colleagues of his situation leading to his rescue.

This is the second fatal accident at a WCL mine in two days.

Two persons were killed in a roof collapse in Sillewara underground mine near Nagpur on Monday. Operations in the Umrer mine, which produces almost 3,000 tonnes of coal daily, have been stopped.

Fortunately, workers had already seen early signs of overburden (it is the earth dug out to reach the coal seam), collapsing and alerted the management.



Industry & Investment

The 20th Electrical Engineering Safety Seminar will be held at Sydney Olympic Park, on Wednesday 10 November and Thursday 11 November 2010.

http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/354538/EESS-2010-rego-brochure.pdf

Thursday 30 September 2010

USA: Workers injured in two separate mine accidents

Extract from the Register-Herald, USA

Two contract service workers were injured after separate accidents around noon Wednesday at Kingston Mining in Fayette County, officials said.

The first accident involved a tree cutter at the surface of the mine. The worker had a safety rope and harness and had tied his rope to an adjacent tree, MSHA spokesperson Amy Louviere said.

He then sawed the tree that he had tied his safety rope to.

Louviere said the man was transported via HealthNet to the hospital but that he was not seriously injured. She added an MSHA staff member will investigate this incident.

The second accident involved a roof bolter at an underground operation at Kingston No. 3. When he was bolting a brow, it fell and caught his heel, Louviere said. She said the worker was also not seriously injured.

MSHA will issue a 103(k) order to close that section of the mine and staff will go underground and investigate.

"Neither accident appeared life-threatening, so the mine operator did not call the hotline," Louviere said. "There was no blasting or anything similar occurring that we are aware of."

USA: Report Criticizes Coal Mine Regulators

Extract from The Wall Street Journal

The Labor Department's inspector general found that federal regulators failed over the past three decades to enact tougher oversight at coal mines with a history of serious safety violations.

In a blistering report, the inspector general said the Mine Safety and Health Administration didn't use its full authority to police mines granted in the 1977 Mine Act.

The report found that between 1990 and 2007, the agency didn't place a single mine on a list as having a pattern of violations that would trigger stiffer enforcement, even though many mines had hundreds of serious violations.

The mine-safety agency was "hampered by a lack of leadership...across various administrations" that allowed the rule-making process to stall as it fell victim to "the competing interests of the industry, the operators, and the unions representing the miners," wrote Elliot P. Lewis, the Labor Department's assistant inspector general, in his report to the head of the mine-safety agency, Joseph A. Main.

The report noted that it took the agency 13 years to finalize pattern-of-violation regulations. The agency then failed to set reliable standards for determining when violations at a particular mine should trigger tougher enforcement, the report said.

The report makes 10 recommendations, including setting new criteria for determining when a mine meets the violations threshold.

The mine-safety agency's enforcement record has been under scrutiny since an April explosion at Massey Energy Co.'s Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, W.Va., killed 29 miners in the worst coal-mining accident in 40 years.

The inspector general investigated the agency's use of the pattern-of-violation rule at the request of Rep. George Miller (D., Calif.) and several other members of Congress after the agency admitted a computer glitch kept the Massey mine off a preliminary list of mines with patterns of violations last fall.

Mr. Main has said he thought the pattern-of-violation rule was seriously flawed. In a statement Wednesday, he said the agency agreed with the recommendations by the inspector general, "which we believe will help us improve the process already underway."

On Monday, the mine-safety agency announced new criteria for determining when it should consider stronger enforcement, including how

many serious citations would be required to trigger greater scrutiny. Mr. Main, who has increased inspections over the past five months at Massey and other coal companies, called the new criteria a "stopgap measure" and said the agency is seeking both regulatory and legislative fixes.

The inspector general's report criticized the agency for providing little guidance to district offices on the issue for many years.

After a series of deadly mining accidents in 2006, the agency developed national guidelines, using a computer program that the inspector general found to be faulty.

Between 2007 and 2009, the agency identified 89 mines for potential pattern-of-violation status. The agency sent warning letters to 68 of the mines but didn't ultimately designate any as requiring tighter scrutiny.

Chilean miners liken themselves to kamikazes

Extract from CNN International

Tierra Amarilla, Chile (CNN) -- Gilberto Angulos does not need to say a word to tell the tale of working 30 years in Chile's mines. His broken body does all the talking for him.

A jagged scar runs down his forehead. A metal plate keeps his fractured left forearm together. A bone never properly set juts from his left shoulder.

The injuries are the remnants of a mine explosion that nearly killed him. In 2003, Angulos was driving excavation equipment in a large copper mine when he felt a rush of air.

"I got knocked back into the equipment, and rocks came crashing down. The equipment was completely destroyed, and the rocks came down on top of me," he said. "With all the rocks landing on top of me, I was covered in bruises. All over my body.

"I was lucky; I got hit by rocks, but none landed directly on top of me," Angulos said, holding his

hands a foot and a half apart to indicate the size of the projectiles raining down. "If they had, I'd be dead."

Instead of being killed, Angulos was taken 1,300 miles (2,092 km) south to Santiago, where he spent a year in the hospital. The damage to the miner was permanent.

Angulos said the accident could have been avoided.

Ten explosive charges had misfired. As well as blasting loose tons of rock to be harvested for copper, the charges ripped into the miner. Despite the severity of his injuries, Angulos received little compensation.

"They paid for the hospital in Santiago," he said, "and for my wife to come be with me for a month. That was it."

And, he said, little changed at the mine following the accident.

[Statue of miners in Toerra Amarilla, a Chilean mining town.](#) "No one asked any questions, asked me what happened or increased supervision," he said. "There was an explosion, end of story."

With the San Jose mine collapse that trapped 33 men in Chile this summer, new scrutiny is being placed on the country's lucrative mining industry.

Government officials said the owner and operator of that mine, the San Esteban Mining Co., did not complete promised improvements to the mine where the men have been trapped since August 5, 2,300 feet (701 meters) underground.

After the collapse, President Sebastian Piñera dismissed top officials at the country's mine regulating agency, saying, "We've found there were many deficiencies, many errors and many omissions."

Many of the 33 trapped miners and their peers have had numerous brushes with death in the depths of a mine.

Mario Gomez had two fingers sliced off by falling rocks. Victor Segovia spent a year recovering after a rock slammed into his back.

Franklin Lobos was trapped for three hours during a previous cave-in. Hector Avila worked 20 years in the mines and became close friends with several of the now-trapped miners when he worked with them at the San Jose mine.

When asked why he left the San Jose mine, Avila rolls up his right pant leg to show the spider web of scars across his crushed foot.

A rock was driven into his foot with the force of a bullet after explosive charges in the mine misfired, Avila said.

A geologist was killed in the same 2007 accident, prompting the closure of the San Jose mine. But the mine was reopened soon after.

A government investigation is trying to determine why it was reopened if improvements to the mine's safety were apparently never completed.

The San Esteban Mining Co. did not return calls requesting comment on its safety record.

The company is facing bankruptcy and may lack the funds to pay its workers.

Avila said he and other workers had a name for the most dangerous mines they worked: "kamikaze" mines.

"It's about need, about needing to take care of your family," Avila said. "You become going like a kamikaze down into a dangerous mine. As miners, we lived with the danger just the way kamikazes did in their attacks."

An accident at a different mine cost Avila his livelihood and his left leg after a steel beam fell on him. The leg was sheared off, he said, and he nearly died.

Avila punctuates his sentences by repeating, "Pero estamos con vida": "We are still alive."

Since 2000, 374 miners have died practicing their trade in Chile, according to government statistics. For some Chilean mining

communities, the risks that come with working in the depths of the Earth are part of the fabric of life.

The mining town of Tierra Amarilla supplies many of its men to the area's mines, including the San Esteban mine, where the trapped workers await rescue. In an area of town called Villa Mineros, the streets are named for miners who did not return alive from the hunt for copper and gold.

Under a sign that reads Ivan Gonzalez Way, a woman sweeps her doorstep. She looks up at the sign as if noticing it for the time when asked who Gonzalez was.

She is not sure but said, "He was a miner. We are the family of miners, so we honor them."

Down the town's one main road, the family of killed miner Ricardo Rojas has just returned from seeing a lawyer.

They have been told that the attorney couldn't take on their case for what they could pay him. Rojas died in April, after being crushed under tons of rock in a copper mine.

He was 29 years old and left his wife, Pamela, with three small children to raise alone. Before her husband died, Pamela said, she wanted him to quit the mines.

"They always gave him the dangerous jobs," Pamela said. "He would say, 'Baby, I don't want to go to work tomorrow. I have to do this job, and I don't want to,' and I would say 'Baby, don't go,' but then he would say, 'I have to, or they will run me off.'"

The Rosario Mine, where Rojas worked, did not return calls about the case. There has not been an investigation into his death, his wife said, and after she complained to the company, her husband's paychecks stopped coming.

"We want this cleared up. We want answers. We want justice," she said.

For many miners, though, the risks of the job are weighed against the need to provide for their families.

After he was released from the hospital, half-deaf and his body twisted from the mine accident, Angulos was given a desk job.

But when job cuts hit the mining industry, Angulos had only one place to go: back to the mines. He is grateful for the work but also terrified.

"I am doing the same work as before, with the same machine, and its tough, because I have pain in this arm," Angulos said. "It's risky to have me back working in the mine. You should be 100 percent to do this kind of work."

This week in mining accident history

30 September 1899

Snailbeach Lead Mine

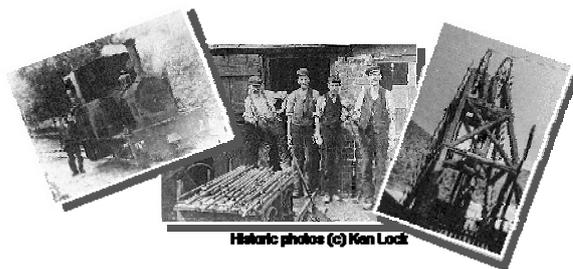
Shropshire, UK

Underground lead mine

1 killed, crushed by cage

Source: Wellington Journal & Shrewsbury News

On Wednesday, at noon, a miner named **Richard Crowther** left his comrades in the Snailbeach Lead Mines for the purpose of coming up to attend the funeral of a former workman at the mines.



In doing so the poor fellow met with a dreadful accident, for shortly afterwards his body was found dreadfully crushed not far from the cage. No one was with him when the accident happened, but it is supposed by some means the man must have been dragged under the cage while it was in motion, and thus got crushed to death.

Deceased was chief pitman of the miners, and had worked at Snailbeach many years. Great sympathy is

felt with Mrs. Crowther and the family, who are much respected in the neighbourhood.

Sunday 3 October 2010

6 dead in China coal mine accident

Extract from Inquirer.net

BEIJING – A gas leak at a coal mine in southwest China killed six people Sunday and injured 12 others, state media reported.

The accident occurred around 1:20 am on Sunday (1720 GMT Saturday) at the mine outside the city of Zunyi in Guizhou Province, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Thirty-five people were working in the mine at the time of the accident, the report said – 22 people escaped and 12 had to be rescued.

One worker died in the in mine while five others died in hospital, Xinhua said.

Police were investigating the cause of the accident, it added, providing no further details about the gas leak.

China's vast coal mining industry is notoriously accident-prone due to lax regulation, corruption and inefficiency as mines rush to meet soaring demand.

Last year 2,631 miners were killed, according to official figures, but independent labour groups say the actual figure could be much higher as many accidents are covered up to avoid costly shutdowns.

USA: Communities struggling to recover from Montcoal mine disaster

Extract from the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

COAL RIVER VALLEY, W.Va. — Stanley "Goose" Stewart spends most days sitting in a lawn chair, staring at the densely forested mountains surrounding his home.

In the cemetery next door lie three of his closest friends, fellow miners who were killed April 5

when a still-unexplained explosion tore through the Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal.

Stewart used to be an avid hunter, runner and fisher. He had lots of friends, most of whom don't stop by or call anymore. And that's just fine, Stewart said Thursday, standing in his gravel driveway. He finds no enjoyment in anything and wants people to leave him alone.

"There is something in me, eating me from the inside out, and I don't know what it is, and it won't come out," said Stewart, 54, who ran from the blast that killed 29 miners and injured two inside Upper Big Branch. He'll never mine coal again.

"I am hoping I can get back to normal, but it just seems like I'm getting worse. The last two or three weeks, I've been worse than I was even right after it happened. I don't know if it's possible I'll ever be normal again. I'm hoping it is."

Six months after the deadliest U.S. coal mine disaster in 40 years, residents in the string of coal-mining towns tucked into small valleys along the Coal River between Charleston and Beckley struggle to restore normalcy to their lives.

Many doubt they will fully recover.

"Not in our lifetime. Not even in our kids' lifetimes," said Jennie Bennet, 35, of Whitesville, the wife of a Massey Energy Co. miner. "Whenever there's an ambulance or a helicopter, the kids are always asking if there was another accident, if another miner died. They'll never forget."

Still, someone must mine the coal in the dozens of mines here. So every day, hundreds of men throughout the valley kiss their wives and kids goodbye, and head underground.

"The goodbyes have gotten a lot longer," Bennet said.

"And at the end of the day, the kids know when daddy's supposed to be home," said Heather Walker, 31, of Sylvester, whose husband works

in another of Massey's mines in the area. "If daddy's late, they start to panic."

Investigations of the blast continue.

State officials hope to report their findings by summer 2011, state mine safety director Ron Wooten said. Officials with the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration have not announced a timeline, though coal administrator Kevin Stricklin said in September that the underground phase of the investigation is 90 percent complete. Public hearings will follow.

Massey, which owns Upper Big Branch, received MSHA approval Thursday to begin an investigation.

In the months after the blast, Massey has waged a public relations battle with MSHA over the pace and methods of the investigations. In a letter to shareholders Thursday, the company accused federal investigators of damaging evidence.

Last month, MSHA officials said rock dust samples inside the mine show high levels of coal dust that could have contributed to the explosion. Massey said the results were misleading and the methods of collecting samples are "unproven." Instead, Massey emphasizes a large crack in the mine floor that could have flooded the mine with methane.

"The government has been focused on vilifying and generic criticism, rather than focusing on the cause and figuring out ways to prevent it from happening again," Massey CEO Don Blankenship said in an interview with the Tribune-Review in Pittsburgh last week. "There is a lot of room to make (safety) improvements. I'm hoping we make them, rather than simply vilify (Massey)."

In the Coal River valley, some residents don't believe they will ever know what happened April 5.

"The main thing in this area is the unknown," said Diane Hodge, who runs Whitesville's community center, where locals gather for

quilting, banjo playing and almond-butter-making lessons.

"Not knowing what happened or why those men lost their lives, I think that's been on everybody's mind," said Hodge, 58, of Clear Fork. "Oh, we may get a short story on what they think happened, but we're still going to have our doubts.

"Some will think it's a cover-up; others will say it was an accident, unavoidable. Everyone has their opinion. Mine is, I don't believe those men should have died. I think there should've been some steps taken, and they weren't. I think we lost 29 men for nothing."

The mine remains closed, but Massey plans to resume mining operations in sections of the mine unaffected by the blast. Workers are digging an entry into the mountain, although company officials declined to say when they would finish.

Blankenship said 50 to 55 miners are working at the mine in preparation of its reopening. Massey transferred 60 to 70 employees to other mines, and some — Blankenship put the number at "single digits" — decided they no longer can mine underground.

Stewart is one of them.

For 34 years, he went into the earth, never missing a day of work, he said. In 1997, he survived an explosion in Upper Big Branch.

On April 5, he was riding in a mantrip 300 feet underground, heading to the work area where the ignition happened. He felt a rush of wind. The miners ran for daylight. The wind became so strong, Stewart said, it felt like his legs were going to lift off the ground.

"Some of the guys thought it was a roof collapse," Stewart said. "I said, 'That wasn't no roof collapse. The dadgum place blew up.' I knew it."

It took more than a week to remove the miners' bodies.

Stewart testified before the House Committee on Education and Labor, in Beckley and Washington, that conditions inside the mine were unsafe. He said miners complained that managers forced them to tamper with methane monitors, and that anyone who complained about conditions was told dozens of men would gladly take the job.

"It was a cult-like atmosphere at Massey. You just kept your mouth shut," Stewart said. "I broke the code. But that's all right — I'm going to keep breaking it."

Blankenship's response: "Anyone who knows me knows I put safety first. We had a really good safety record up to this point."

Before the accident, MSHA records show Massey and Cecil-based Consol Energy Inc. each had 23 fatalities since 2000, leading the U.S. coal industry.

In Whitesville, signs urging passing motorists to "Pray for our Miners" mostly are gone. A wreath remains in front of the mine entrance, with 26 orange hearts. Three hearts fell off during bad weather, residents said.

People want to build a permanent memorial. The Miners Memorial Park will have a play area for kids, with a tippie — used for emptying coal from rail cars — and water feature, and monuments for all miners.

A nine-person committee is trying to raise money for the park through a Facebook page — Whitesville Miners Memorial — that gained more than 1,000 friends. They'll soon activate a website.

Recovery is long and difficult, said the Rev. Bart Elkins, pastor of Amazing Grace Fellowship in Seth. But faith guides people here, he said, noting the blast occurred the day after most of the miners attended Easter services. Four or five of the miners' families told him they "came to Jesus" during that service and decided to dedicate their lives to God.

"We know this is not the end," Elkins said. "Living in the Bible Belt like we do ... I think that brought a lot of comfort."

Yet Stewart cannot find comfort.

He recalled performing CPR on the first seven miners brought out of the mine after the blast and said seeing his lifeless brothers, their faces blackened by the blast, causes him to look at people and picture how they might look dead.

"I can't stop it," he said. "I see people walking around, and I know exactly how they'd look dead."

He admits that he drinks too much beer, lacks motivation, and gets frustrated easily. He can't sleep without pills, and nightmares interrupt the sleep he gets.

"I had one last night," Stewart said. "I was in the mine, all by myself. I was walking towards a set of doors, and I knew that if I could just get through those doors, I'd be OK before it all blows up. But when I got through the doors, I realized that I'm not OK. I've got to keep going to the next set of doors. So I ran, and I just kept motorin' and motorin' ..."

"And then I woke up."

Monday 4 October 2010

S.Africa: Mine fatalities down - 'silly season' looms

Extract from timeslive.co.za

Mining fatalities in the first nine months of 2010 dropped by about 26 percent compared to the same period in 2009, trade union Solidarity says.

"The number of mining fatalities reached 97 this week after a fatal accident at Simmers & Jack's Tau Lekoa mine near Klerksdorp last night," the union said.



This brought the number of mining fatalities this past week to three after an earth tremor led to the death of two workers at Harmony's Bambanani mine in the Free State.

Meanwhile the so-called "silly season" lay ahead, Solidarity said.

"Mining accidents usually increase sharply over the last two months of the year."

Mines and mineworkers regarded November and December as a critical period for increasing mine security because this period was notorious for its relaxed safety measures, which could ultimately lead to an increase in the number of mining accidents.

Solidarity said that in 2007, 221 mineworkers - or more than four workers per week -- died at the country's mines.

The figure dropped to 165 by 2009 - or just over three workers per week.

"According to provisional data from the department of mineral resources, 96 workers -- or just over two workers per week - have died in the first nine months of 2010, compared to 129 fatalities in the same period last year," said Paul Mardon, Solidarity's head of occupational health and safety.

Just under half of this year's mining fatalities -- 46 fatalities -- occurred in gold mines, while 24 fatalities were caused by accidents at platinum mines.

"Mines in North West are the deadliest in South Africa," Mardon said.

"The number of mining fatalities has dropped in seven of the nine provinces compared to last year, but most of the mining fatalities still occurred in North West (34), followed by Gauteng (20) and then the Free State (17)."

The number of mining accidents dropped by 31 percent from 2613 accidents during January to September 2009 to 1801 accidents in the same period this year.

Mardon said 54 percent of this year's accidents occurred in North West.

Tas: Mining truck joyride

Extract from ABC Online, Aus

Police in Queenstown on Tasmania's west-coast are looking for joyriders who took a mining truck late on Friday night.

Police say it is most likely pranksters were behind the wheel when the 55 tonne Barmenco ore truck was driven from the Mount Lyell copper mine.



A mining truck like the one taken for a joy ride on Tasmania's west coast.

The driver crashed it through a boundary fence and on to a main road, where it took up both lanes.

It was later abandoned when it became bogged on Gormanston Hill several kilometres out of town.

Inspector Brian Edmonds says the driver was probably a current or former mine worker.

"Only people that have knowledge of those vehicles would have been able to use the vehicle in such a manner," he said.

A four-wheel drive was also taken at the same time, but was returned to the site.

Tuesday 5 October 2010

S.Africa: Miner 'crushed by locomotive'

Extract from iolnews.co.za

A mineworker has died following an accident at Harmony Gold's Tshepong Mine in the Free State, the National Union of Mineworkers said on Tuesday.

The accident occurred late on Monday when the worker was crushed by a locomotive, the NUM said in a statement.



A mineworker has died at Harmony Gold's Tshepong Mine.

"The NUM condemns Harmony on its ever-increasing fatalities which have seen the company become the number one killer in the mining industry to date."

The Harmony accident brings the number of mining fatalities to four in the space of a week, and pushes the total number of deaths for the year to 99.

Harmony spokeswoman Hendrika Basterfield confirmed the death but could not confirm that the worker had been hit by a locomotive.

"The investigation into the cause is still ongoing."

NUM general secretary Frans Baleni said mining deaths remained worryingly high.

"If the industry is serious about the target for zero fatalities, then over eighty deaths for nine months is a whole lot."



Picture by: Duane Daws
NUM general-secretary Frans Baleni

The NUM sent its condolences to the family of the miner.

Chilean officials hope to rescue miners 'by weekend'

Extract from BBC News, UK

Engineers drilling to reach 33 trapped miners in Chile say the men might be rescued as early as this weekend.



Above ground there are games to pass the time

The head of one of the drilling operations, Pedro Buttazoni, told the BBC his drill had only 160m (524ft) further to go to reach the men.

However, the man overseeing the entire operation has been more cautious about the timetable for their rescue.

The miners have now been trapped underground for two months, longer than any previous group.

Mr Buttazoni, the head of the Chilean mining company Geotec, said his drill had already cut through 464m (1,500ft) of rock.

He said his team expected to break through to the area where the miners are sheltering in 3-4 days.

And he said rescuers were debating whether they would in fact need to line the rescue tunnel with metal casing as planned, a process that would take several days.

If it was decided that the lining was not needed, it was "perfectly possible" that the miners could be brought to the surface by the weekend, he said.

'Dangerous' task

The timetable for rescue has shortened dramatically as the three drills racing to reach the miners have made rapid progress.

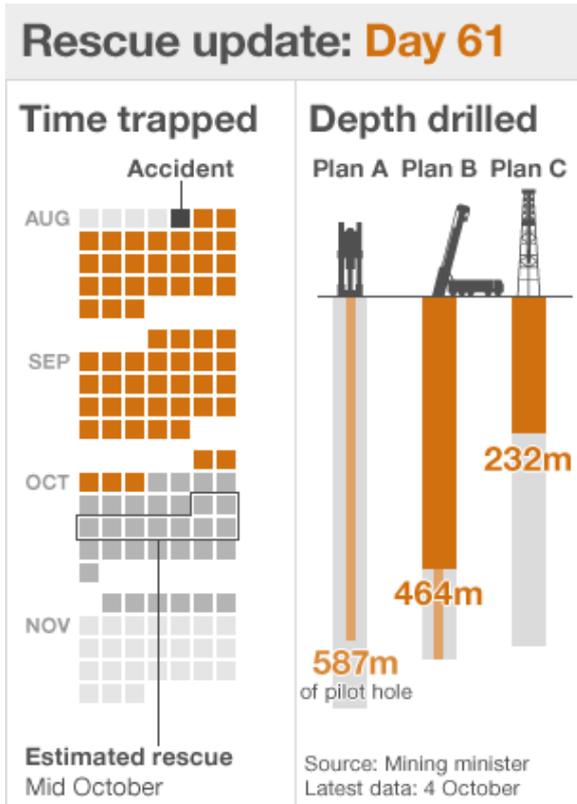
Last week the government said the rescue attempt would begin in the second half of October, having previously said it would start in early November.

President Sebastian Pinera now says he hopes the miners are rescued before he travels to Europe on 15 October, saying he wants to "share that moment with the miners".

But told of that comment, rescue chief Andre Sougarret said he had no new information to suggest a rescue would be possible before the second half of the month.

A sports physician who is in daily contact with the miners, Jean Romagnoli, told the BBC the men were "very cheerful" and eagerly awaiting their imminent rescue.

But he said it was vital that they continued their fitness training, because pulling them up to the surface would be very stressful.



"That's very dangerous. We want to prevent any type of overheating, because that can produce thermal shock, when your temperature rises above 42C [108F], which decomposes the proteins and you can have a hard time recovering.

"That could be fatal," he said.

Once the rescue shaft is complete, a specially made steel capsule, designed by the Chilean navy, will be lowered.

The plan is for navy commandos to go down to assess the situation and help the miners use the rescue capsule.

It is expected to take an hour to pull each of the trapped men to the surface.

The miners have even begun to send prized possessions and mementos which they don't want to leave behind up to the surface using small capsules, known as "doves," in which they have been receiving supplies through narrow boreholes.

Miners' relatives, who have been camping at the site for the past two months, are preparing a party to celebrate their rescue.

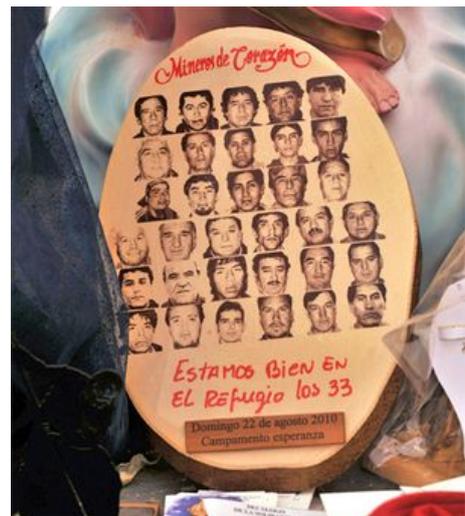
Protest

The men were trapped by a rockfall at the mine near Copiapo, about 725km (450 miles) north of the Chilean capital Santiago, on 5 August.

Rescuers had almost given up the search when they located the miners 17 days later.

As the rescue effort continued, other workers employed at the mine staged a protest on the surface, complaining that they had not been paid since the accident.

Chanting "there are more than 33 of us", about 200 workers marched through the town of Copiapo to demand money they say they are owed.



Portraits of the 33 miners remain at an altar at the camp near Copiapo (AP/Getty Images)

The company which ran the mine has large debts, and is also facing lawsuits from the relatives of the trapped men.

Mining dictionary

A guide to coal mining terminology

A

AA AA Always afloat, always accessible.