



Mining Accident News No.1114

1 to 10 May 2011

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Sunday 1 May 2011

At least 9 dead in covered-up mine accident in NE China

Extract from Xinhua

At least nine people were killed in a coal mine accident that had been covered up for five days in northeast China's Heilongjiang Province, a provincial work safety official said Sunday.

The mine owner has confessed that nine miners have been killed in the accident in Didao District of coal-rich Jixi City on April 26, the official said on condition of anonymity, as he was not authorized to speak to media before the investigation is finished.

The finding came after a joint provincial investigation team arrived in Jixi on Saturday, in response to rumors of a coal mine gas explosion that killed about 10 people.

A family member of one of the victims, however, told Xinhua that the accident was a gas leak.

The team were still investigating the accident at the privately-owned mine that has a designed annual production capacity of 40,000 tonnes.

The mine was suspected of illegal production as it was ordered to close for renovation at the time of accident

Monday 2 May 2011

Gold mine collapse kills five in central Vietnam

Extract from ThanhNienNews.com

Five people, including a 15-year-old student, were killed when a gold mine collapsed in the central province of Nghe An Sunday, news website *VnExpress* reported.

According to witnesses, the accident happened at the mine in a forest of Dinh Hung Village, Tuong Duong District when the victims were removing rocks and earth.

NOTE: Views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual sender, and are not necessarily the views of Industry & Investment NSW.
Issue 14 of 2011



The site of a gold mine collapse that killed five in the central province of Nghe An Sunday

Others managed to get away in time, witnesses said in *VnExpress*.

Vi Tan Hoi, vice chairman of Tuong Duong District's People's Committee, said rescuers and locals later recovered and identified the bodies.

Meanwhile, the site has been restricted for further investigation into the cause, according to Hoi.

However, it was still unknown whether the people entered the mine legally or not.

VnExpress reported in recent years Nghe An's mountainous districts like Tuong Duong and Anh Son have been plagued by cases of illegal gold mining which lead to mine collapses and the pollution of local springs and rivers.

In other news, a gold mine collapse on Saturday in the central province of Binh Dinh killed three when eight people were drinking there. Six of them were owners of the mine, while others came to play.

Witnesses said four managed to run away when the accident took place.

Later witnesses and locals recovered the victims. Three of them were pronounced dead at the scene and the other was rushed to a local hospital.

Tuesday 3 May 2011

SA: No action on BHP Olympic Dam mine accident

Extract from The wall Street Journal

BHP Billiton has escaped prosecution for the \$200 million-plus Olympic Dam mine shaft

failure in October 2009 that stopped 75 per cent of production at the nation's biggest copper mine for nine months.

Safework SA yesterday said it would not charge the mining giant. "A legal review of all available information concluded that insufficient grounds exist to sustain a successful prosecution.

"Nevertheless, the financial consequences to BHP-Billiton have been substantial, ranging from repair costs totalling tens of millions of dollars to production losses worth several hundreds of millions of dollars."

The failure of the automatic braking system on the main Clark shaft at the South Australian copper and uranium mine sent a skip containing 38.5 tonnes of ore plummeting more than 700m down the mine.

The failure also sent an empty skip hurtling into the housing and structural equipment at the top of the main shaft, before it too fell to the bottom of the shaft, Safework said.

No one was hurt.

SafeWork said it was satisfied that its interventions and steps taken by BHP had identified the causes of the failure and contributory factors.

The cause of the failure was a software fault, Safework said.

Last year, BHP said the reduced output was expected to cost more than \$US200m.

Coal Mine Flooding Kills 4 in NE China

Extract from Xinhua

Four people were confirmed dead in a flooded coal mine pit in northeast China's Heilongjiang Province, authorities said Tuesday.

The accident occurred at around 7 a.m. Monday, when eight miners were working at the pit of Oulin Coal Mine in Heihe City. Four of them managed to escape, said a spokesman of the city's emergency office.

The cause of the accident is under investigation.

Mexico coalmine explosion traps at least 13

Extract from Reuters

MEXICO CITY, - At least 13 miners were trapped underground after an explosion on Tuesday at a coalmine in northern Mexico, Mexican media reported.

The owner of the mine, located in Sabinas municipality in Coahuila state, was not identified.

Sixty-five miners were killed in an accident at the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila state in 2006. The bodies of most of the victims were never recovered.

NZ: Solid Energy says mine shut down five months ago

Extract from NZ Herald

State-owned Solid Energy is to restart mining at its underground Spring Creek Mine on the West Coast, after it suspended operations five months ago after two coal face heatings were followed by the Pike River disaster.

Twenty-nine men died at the privately-owned Pike River mine on the West Coast after a November 19 explosion.

In a report on its March quarter activities published yesterday, Solid Energy said there had been minimal production at Spring Creek since last November, when operations were suspended following two heatings and the Pike River disaster.

Radio New Zealand today reported production was about to restart after changes prompted by the Pike River explosions.

In the three weeks before Pike River exploded, Spring Creek was twice evacuated because of signs coal faces could catch fire.

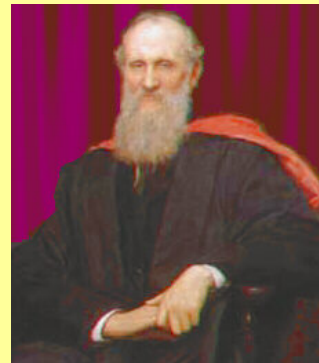
Solid Energy had said in a statement that in early December, following the Pike River explosion, management at Spring Creek decided to undertake a full safety review.

Supported by outside experts, the review identified some improvements which had now been implemented.

It had lost at least \$30 million in production and had spent millions more on the upgrade.

Last week there was a fire on a loader near the Spring Creek mine opening, and all emergency procedures worked well, Solid Energy had said.

Quote of the week



"When you can measure what you are speaking about and express it in numbers, you know something about it."

Lord Kelvin
(Irish mathematical physicist and engineer,
1824-1907)

Wednesday 4 May 2011

USA: Coal industry seeks 'voluntary' safety plans

Extract from the Charleston Gazette, USA

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A year after the worst U.S. coal-mining disaster since 1970, the mining industry on Wednesday launched a campaign for a program that could allow companies with good safety records to avoid regular mandatory inspections.

The National Mining Association urged Congress to model the initiative after an existing Voluntary Protection Program at the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Anthony Bumbico, vice president for safety at Arch Coal, pitched the idea on the association's behalf during a Wednesday hearing before a House Committee on Education and the Workforce subcommittee.

"In many respects, overly proscriptive regulatory requirements can inhibit the ability of companies to respond proactively to health and safety issues," Bumbico said in prepared testimony. "Often, the time spent dealing with bureaucratic requirements steals precious time that could be spent eliminating a barrier to safe performance."

Bumbico said the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration should create its own Voluntary Protection Program, or VPP, as part of a safety model not based "strictly on enforcement."

"Enforcement is necessary, particularly with regard to 'bad actors,' but to truly modernize mine safety we have to develop performance structures that engage all stakeholders in a problem-solving manner," Bumbico told lawmakers.

Under the OSHA VPP program, companies that take part are exempted from certain planned inspections. If OSHA does inspect, based on a complaint or accident, the employer is not cited for violations if those violations are prompted corrected.

Federal law, though, does not require OSHA to inspect every workplace periodically. MSHA is required by law to inspect all underground mines in their entirety once every quarter. Surface mines must be inspected in their entirety twice per year.

Passage in 1969 of required inspections of coal mines is generally credited with greatly reducing that industry's mining deaths, from hundreds every year to an average of 30 per year from 2001-2005. When inspections of metal and non-metal mines became mandatory, deaths dropped from 134 in 1977 to 23 last year.

Industry lobbyists tried in the mid-1990s, when Republicans controlled Congress, to combine MSHA with OSHA and eliminate mandatory mine safety inspections. During the administration of George W. Bush, then-MSHA chief Dave Lauriski proposed a similar plan for "focused inspections" of bad-actor mining operators and fewer reviews of companies with

strong safety records. The National Mining Association also floated the idea in 2006, just two months after 12 miners died in the Sago Mine Disaster.

Bumbico's proposal may not go quite as far as previous industry efforts. But it received a similarly cool reception from safety advocates and House Democrats.

"Mine owners policing themselves is not the answer," said Aaron Albright, spokesman for ranking committee Democrat George Miller of California.

Albright noted that U.S. Government Accountability Office reviews of the OSHA VPP program diverted scarce resources without any real evidence of improved worker safety.

"Clearly, many are pushing to police themselves again because they want fewer inspections now that MSHA is finally doing their required quarterly or semiannual inspections," Albright said. "The sheer number of continuing high-profile negligent behavior by some shows that the industry can't be relied upon to police themselves."

Phil Smith, spokesman for the United Mine Workers union, said the industry proposal defeats the purpose of having strong laws on the books to protect miners.

"This industry has demonstrated over and over again that it is incapable of policing itself in the long run," Smith said.

"They can say all the nice things they want about compliance and a new focus on safety and how they are all being punished because of a few bad apples, but its important to remember that even today's so-called good apples have history of being bad apples. Without strong and continuous enforcement -- and the threat of penalties that have teeth -- history tells us that there won't be many good apples left."

MSHA chief Joe Main did not respond to a request for comment on the industry's proposal. But when he was UMW safety director, Main

testified against similar proposals at a July 1998 congressional hearing.

USA: Families of W. Virginia miners offered a settlement

Extract from NewsFirst5.com

An offer is on the table for the families of the 29 miners killed last year in West Virginia. Massey Energy Company is offering \$3 Million to each family to settle any pending lawsuits against the company following the worst U.S. coal mining accident in nearly 40 years.

Twenty-nine miners were killed on April 5, 2010, in an explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia. According to reports, the company has set a deadline of June 1st for families to accept the offers. The deadline comes weeks before the Mine Safety and Health Administration is planning to issue its preliminary report into what caused the explosion.

This week in mining accident history

4 May 1858

Garscube Colliery

Dumbarton, Scotland, UK

Underground coal mine

2 killed, fall of shaft conveyance

Source: www.scottishmining.co.uk

At the time of the accident the colliery was owned by James Barclay & Co.

Killed were: Daniel Kelly, 45, Sinker, and Robert Donaldson, 39, Sinker, by the winding machinery getting out of gear with the driving shaft.

Inspector's report

The engineman on the day of the accident had been pumping water till a shift of sinkers were ready to commence work. The engine was then ungeared with the pumping, and geared with the winding shaft. The "kettle" with the two unfortunate sufferers was only lowered ten fathoms, when the wheel upon the winding shaft got out of gear, and they were dashed to the bottom, a distance of fifty fathoms.

Since the accident, the suggestions made in my last Report, for such a description of machinery, have been adopted.

The cost of providing the appliances for safely disengaging the gearing is so trifling, that I hope no new pumping and winding engine will in future be considered complete, which is not fitted up with them.

The Procurator Fiscal charged the engineman with culpable homicide. He was tried by Lord Deas and a jury, but it would appear the evidence was not sufficiently strong to obtain a conviction.

Thursday 5 May 2011

Mexico: No Hope of Survivors in Mine Accident, Government Says

Extract from Latin American Herald Tribune

MEXICO CITY – Conditions inside the coal mine in the northern state of Coahuila where 14 miners were trapped after an explosion have all but eliminated hopes that any of the men will be found alive, Mexico's labor secretary said on Wednesday.

Five bodies have been recovered so far, Javier Lozano said from the mine in Sabinas, where he arrived Tuesday to oversee the rescue operation.

He told Mexican television he did not want "to generate any false expectations of life because the conditions do not allow us to harbor that hope."

In the absence of any signal from the nine miners who remain trapped, "we assume the worst," Lozano said.

Chile, which last year mounted a dramatic rescue of 33 miners who spent 70 days underground, is dispatching a team of experts to Sabinas to advise the Mexican authorities.

The gas explosion early Tuesday that trapped the 14 miners also injured 15-year-old Jesus Fernando Lara Ruiz, who was operating the basket used to get men in and out of the mine.

Lara is listed in critical condition at a hospital in the western city of Guadalajara.

The mine consists of a derrick over a single vertical shaft with small tunnels radiating outward, Sabinas Mayor Jesus Maria Montemayor Garza said.

Such artisanal mines, which are common in Coahuila, lack the safety measures required at larger, mechanized facilities, the mayor said, adding that he was told there were only "around two or three inspectors" assigned to the area.

Known as "pocitos," the artisanal mines tend to operate for only a few months before shutting down. In this case, the Sabinas mine started up within the last three weeks.

The mine sits on a spread of 270 hectares held jointly by businessman Luis Gonzalez Garza and Minero El Sabino, a unit of Asociacion de Carboneros BINSAs, which is owned by Melchor Gonzalez.

While no one from BINSAs has turned up at the mine since the accident, one of Melchior Gonzalez's personal attorneys made an appearance, authorities said, adding that it is not clear who was actually operating the facility.

Some coal from the pocitos is bought by a Coahuila state government agency that sells in turn to Mexico's state electricity monopoly, the CFE, an arrangement that "promotes" unsafe mining, Lozano says.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon issued a statement Wednesday expressing "condolences and solidarity" with the families of the trapped miners and announcing that the Attorney General's Office will investigate the accident.

Coahuila was the scene of the worst mining disaster in Mexico's recent history on Feb. 19, 2006, when an explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine killed 65 men.

The bodies were never recovered and the miners' kin, supported by Catholic Bishop Raul Vera, continue to blame the mine owners for negligence.

NZ: Solid Energy confirms Pike River interest

Extract from NZ Herald

Solid Energy has today confirmed its interest in the Pike River Mine, submitting to the receivers an expression of interest to acquire the mine's assets.

The company's chief operating officer, Barry Bragg, said Solid Energy has the "knowledge, experience and track record to mine the resource safely and economically".

Mr Bragg also reaffirmed the company's commitment to recover the remains of the 29 men who died in the November 14 blast and to address the situation of the unsecured West Coast creditors.

The mine has not been accessed since the blast as authorities have deemed gas levels unsafe.

"We believe Solid Energy is uniquely positioned to develop and implement a sound mine management plan that would allow the mine to be successfully operated, but we know that there is no short term fix to get the mine up and running again," Mr Bragg said.

"It will take a long-term commitment of considerable resources and capital over several years, as well as working with key parties including the families of those who died in the mine and the West Coast community.

"While Solid Energy is keen to acquire the Pike River assets, we are cautious about the prospect as we don't believe the resource and its quality are characterised, or the geology understood, to anywhere near the level required in these types of challenging conditions, even in the areas that have been mined. There was also considerable damage to the mine from the explosions so we also have doubts about how much of the existing infrastructure will be useable.

"However, we are keen to work with the receivers of Pike River Coal to see if an acceptable proposal can be put together for Solid Energy to acquire the mine and bring it

back into safe production as soon as possible so that it can once again provide jobs and contribute to the West Coast economy."

Friday 6 May 2011

NSW: Safety record fudged says union

Extract from Muswellbrook Chronicle, Aus

Mining giant Rio Tinto, which owns Muswellbrook's Bengalla coal mine, has been accused by the miners union of having an outdated approach to mine safety.

At yesterday's Rio Tinto annual general meeting in Perth, Robin Williams from the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union said a significant number of accidents and incidents did not appear in Rio Tinto's 2010 annual report.

Mr Williams said Rio Tinto reported injury frequency rates for things like lost time injuries and restricted work days, but did not give details of the incidents.

"It is a bit of sleight of hand on behalf of the mining companies," he said.

"Rio is telling shareholders one thing and coalminers another.

"In their annual report they are telling shareholders they want to achieve a goal of zero harm, yet what we see at mine sites is starkly different."

Mr Williams said there had been an increase in mine accidents at Bengalla in recent months.

He said accident rates had also increased at Rio Tinto's Mount Thorley Warkworth mine, near Singleton.

"A culture of fear is permeating through Rio Tinto mines, which puts at risk the safety of mine workers," Mr Williams said.

"An adversarial approach to mine safety, where bosses threaten workers with disciplinary action is outdated and should have no place in modern Australian mining.

"If Rio Tinto is genuinely interested in mine safety, they should listen to the workers and have a culture of open reporting."

At a press conference after yesterday's meeting Rio Tinto chief executive officer Tom Albanese answered questions about safety in the Hunter Valley.

"We take safety seriously and it is our first and absolute priority," Mr Albanese said.

"I actually want to thank the employees and management in the Hunter Valley for some of the biggest gains in safety we've had in Rio Tinto in the last 10 years.

"From one of the least safe parts of Rio Tinto it has become one of the safest parts of Rio Tinto.

"Our overall safety statistics in the Hunter Valley and Mount Thorley Warkworth are better than Rio Tinto as a whole, and that's up to each employee.

"The business is focused on safety and they have been delivering improvements in safety in the Hunter Valley, but we can never stop."

Mr Williams said the union did not want to see workers uneasy about speaking out for fear of facing disciplinary procedures.

"If there is an accident or incident at a mine site, we want a proper investigation to make sure that it doesn't happen again, not a scapegoat who is disciplined for their actions," he said.

"Mining is a tough industry and we all work together to make it safe."

One mine worker representative from each of the three Upper Hunter Rio Tinto-owned mines – Bengalla, Mount Thorley Warkworth and Hunter Valley Operations – attended the meeting in Perth.

Landslide at Mexico mine leaves 3 dead

Extract from Fox News Latino

Mexico City – A landslide at a opal mine in the small western Mexican town of Hostotipaquillo left three miners dead, officials said.

An emergency-management and firefighters' spokesperson in Jalisco state informed Efe Thursday that one of the bodies had been recovered at the Pata de Gallo mine, while the other two men were confirmed dead early Friday.

Economy Secretary Bruno Ferrari, whose portfolio awards mining concessions in Mexico, identified the victims in a Twitter posting as Anastacio Avila, 54, Miguel Polanco, 50, and Alejandro Garcia, 27.

A spokesman for the municipal Public Safety office told Efe that the accident occurred early Thursday evening.

Authorities had said the tunnel in which the miners were trapped was not very deep but that rescue efforts were delayed by darkness.

Elsewhere, authorities were continuing efforts to recover bodies at a small coal mine in Sabinas, a town in the northern state of Coahuila where an explosion on Tuesday trapped 14 miners.

Rescuers have recovered seven bodies thus far and authorities say there is no chance of finding anyone alive due to conditions inside the mine.

Chile, which last year mounted a dramatic rescue of 33 miners who spent 70 days underground, dispatched a team of experts to Sabinas to advise the Mexican authorities.

The Mexican federal government has said the mine accident in Coahuila was caused by "brutal negligence" by "voracious business leaders" who operate in the area without ensuring even minimum safety conditions.

It added that similar accidents could occur at other of the state's estimated 150 small coal mines, although Gov. Jorge Torres said Thursday he opposes closing all of the artisanal mines, known as "pocitos."

In a statement, Torres said only "those acting outside the law" should be shuttered while "owners who comply with established rules and regulations will be able to continue operating."

The pocitos tend to operate for only a few months before shutting down. In this case, the

Sabinas mine had started up within the last three weeks and its owners had not notified authorities of its existence.

Some coal from the pocitos is bought by a Coahuila government agency that sells in turn to other state entities, an arrangement that promotes unsafe mining, Labor Secretary Javier Lozano said earlier this week.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon issued a statement Wednesday expressing "condolences and solidarity" with the families of the trapped miners and announcing that the Attorney General's Office will investigate the accident.

Coahuila was the scene of the worst mining disaster in Mexico's recent history on Feb. 19, 2006, when an explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine killed 65 men.

The bodies were never recovered and the miners' kin, supported by Catholic Bishop Raul Vera, continue to blame the mine owners for negligence.

Gas explosion kills two in Polish coal mine

Extract from Reuters

WARSAW - A gas explosion in a coal mine in southern Poland has killed two miners, and six other people remain trapped underground, the head of the mine said on Friday.

The methane explosion late on Thursday caused a fire in the Krupinski mine, owned by Europe's largest coking coal miner JSW, near the town of Pszczyna in the industrial region of Silesia.

High temperatures, smoke and fire have been hampering rescue operations. Two rescuers became trapped along with four miners.

"We have just regained voice contact with the four miners trapped there since yesterday evening and the two rescuers, but we don't know what shape they are in," said Jaroslaw Zagorowski, head of the mine.

Twelve miners were injured in the accident and eight of them were in hospital with severe burns after being pulled out during the night.

Accidents, including gas explosions, are not uncommon in mines in Poland, which relies on coal for more than 90 percent of its energy needs.

Poland's centre-right government wants to float state-owned JSW on the Warsaw bourse in June but is locked in difficult negotiations with labour unions over the plan.

JSW employs nearly 23,000 people and is estimated to be worth as much as \$3.6 billion.

Illegal mining kills 3, injures dozens in Ghana

Extract from People's Daily Online

ACCRA, (Xinhua) -- Three illegal gold miners died in an explosion at a mine site at Kenyase in Ghana's central Bono Ahafo region, about 400 km north of the capital Accra, a local source told Xinhua on Friday.

An electric plant which was used by the illegal miners developed a fault at dawn and caught fire which ignited explosives at the site, killing the three instantly and leaving dozens of others with various degrees of injury.

Families of the injured rushed to the scene to take them to a nearby hospital for treatment.

Local reports said a number of young Ghanaians had previously died in illegal mining activities in abandoned mine shafts, which mostly caved in on them, burying them alive.

Illegal miners, who usually ply their trade at night to avoid arrests, say economic hardship drives them into such hazardous enterprise.

Kwabena Ansah, a 25-year-old illegal miner in the Kenyase area, told Xinhua on telephone, "We don't get work to do here and we are hungry so we have to go and mine the small gold that we can get in the old mines. On good times we get about 200 cedis (134 U. S. dollars) or even 500 cedis (335 dollars) a week from the gold."

Sunday 8 May 2011

Balochistan raises levies on mines to fund safety

Extract from The Express Tribune, Pakistan



Responding to mining disasters, government raises excise duties.

QUETTA: Responding to the woefully inadequate safety and rescue mechanisms in place for miners in the province, the Balochistan Assembly passed a bill that would raise the excise duty on mining for the first time since 1923 and allocate funds specifically towards developing safety and rescue mechanisms for miners.

The provincial legislature passed the Balochistan Mines (Amendment) Bill 2011 which raises the excise duty from three paise per ton to Rs5 per ton. The tax, which was first levied in 1923 and has not been changed since, has also been renamed the "duty for safety/rescue/training".

The move comes after the provincial government came under severe criticism for not having adequate resources or trained manpower to rescue miners who were trapped due to an accident at a coalmine in Sorange. At least 43 miners died as a result of that accident on March 20.

With the addition revenues, the government plans to purchase mine safety and rescue equipment, in addition to maintaining a rescue station. The provincial government will also conduct safety training workshops for miners on daily wage contracts to help create awareness of safety techniques and minimise mining accidents.

The provincial government, however, has not made it clear how much is expected to be raised as a result of the new tax.

USA: UBB transcripts raise mine rescue system questions

Extract from the Charleston Gazette, USA

Coal Tattoo Blog

It will take a while before we've all had time to fully read and understand the hundreds of pages of mine rescue team interview transcripts that the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration gave to the Upper Big Branch Mine Disaster families yesterday.

From what we've been able to see so far, the transcripts clearly outlined a major dispute between MSHA's own mine rescue team members and Massey Energy officials about how the effort to search for potential survivors at Upper Big Branch was handled. And the testimony from MSHA rescue teams indicates that the agency's then-district manager, Bob Hardman, sided with Massey, ignoring longstanding mine rescue protocols that called for having backup teams ready before rescuers risked their lives underground.

As I've read through more of the testimony last night and this morning, more details have jumped out at me, including some that indicates concerns about the safety of rescue teams wasn't limited to the hours immediately after the explosion on April 5, 2010.

MSHA rescue team member Fred Martin told investigators during his interview that he was concerned about efforts much later that week — including a last push by rescue teams to see if the last four unaccounted for miners might have made it to a rescue chamber deep inside the Upper Big Branch operation. Martin said rescue teams felt almost certain that those miners had not survived the explosion, based on the condition of the mine and the victims they had already seen. But, Martin testified, there were political pressures to try to make it to the rescue chambers within 96 hours of the explosion, because of media and public perceptions that

this was exactly how much time any survivors could have lasted in those rescue chambers.

Martin told investigators:

We felt that political pressure from the state level had us go in and look at this thing, whether it was safe or not ... that was the consensus of several of the [Mine Emergency Unit] people, that we were kind of , you know, we were going to be — whatever happened to us happened to us, but they wanted to see what was in that box.

Pat McGinley, a member of the independent investigation team led by Davitt McAteer, asked Martin during his interview if the rescue teams felt that the search for survivors was not going to be successful, because all of the miners had perished:

To the MEU people, yeah, because I mean, those guys never knew what hit 'em. I mean the ones I saw, they just — they never knew what was coming.

Even with the release of these transcripts, there's still much we don't know about the mine rescue effort. MSHA did not release the testimony of Bob Hardman or Kevin Stricklin, top officials in charge of the agency's part of the operation. And top Massey officials involved in the rescue, such as vice president for operations Chris Adkins (above) asserted their Fifth Amendment rights and refused to talk to government investigators.

The testimony makes clear the bravery and dedication of the men who serve on our nation's mine rescue teams, and at points they show the raw emotion and frustration — and strong disagreements — that existed in an almost unbelievably tense situation like the Upper Big Branch rescue effort. For example, at one point during the confrontation in which MSHA rescue team members' concerns about the lack of backup teams were overruled by Massey and their own MSHA supervisor, Chris Adkins made it clear how he felt about the backup protocols the MSHA teams were trying to enforce. According to MSHA rescue team member Fred Wills:

He said we were not playing mine rescue today.

When thinking about all of this, it's important to remember two sets of conflicting memories that everybody involved could have had in the back of their minds.

First, there's the experience of the Sago Mine Disaster and the Aracoma fire, two instances where rescue teams didn't make it to missing miners in time to save them.

On the other hand, there's what happened just a few years ago at the Crandall Canyon Mine in Utah, where three rescue workers died in a follow-up mine collapse. And it wasn't so terribly long ago that 11 people, including mine inspectors, were killed in a follow-up explosion at the Scotia Mine in Letcher County, Ky.

Another MSHA rescue team member, Mike Hicks, explained in his interview that some rescue protocols might not have been followed to the letter at Sago, and — in a statement agreeing with Martin's assessment — explained why Sago and Upper Big Branch were different:

We broke them at Sago because we thought we still had victims, which we did.

Even before Upper Big Branch, MSHA chief Joe Main had promised a major review of the nation's mine rescue system (which supposedly was greatly reformed after Sago as part of the Miner Act) ... we'll have to wait and see if Main's review includes an honest and public accounting of what happened last April.

Canada: Former miner revisits lessons learned from Westray disaster

Extract from The Cape Breton Post

SYDNEY — The events that followed the methane gas explosion, and subsequent failed efforts to save 26 coal miners underground in the Westray mine, have left Vernon Theriault with sleepless nights to this day.

Originally from Sydney Mines, Theriault had worked at Westray for about six months leading

up to that day — May 9, 1992 — that shook the mining industry to its core.

He had just finished working an overtime shift the night before when he awoke out of bed at 5:30 a.m. by a relative on the telephone who said something had happened at the coal mine. It wasn't until he had left for work later in the morning that reality hit.

"It was like a brick had hit me in the chest," Theriault said. "I didn't know what to say or what to do. I was just in shock."



Vernon Theriault runs his hands over the names listed on the Westray monument of the miners who were lost when the mine exploded. Theriault, who worked in the mine, was part of the rescue efforts. Jennifer Vardy Little — The New Glasgow News

Although he seemed lost, like many other family, friends and co-workers, he headed to the local fire hall in Plymouth, Pictou County, which became ground-zero for organizing the rescue effort.

Even with his limited mining experience, Theriault didn't hesitate to help in the rescue. A group of miners was tasked with finding the 26 men, whether they be alive or dead.

After five days of searching underground, the bodies of 15 miners were discovered. After underground conditions worsened, the decision was made to abandon recovery efforts, entombing the bodies of 11 miners at the depths of the mine.

Several days later RCMP investigators re-entered the mine with a team of experienced miners to gather evidence for criminal prosecution but they did not enter the southwest main shaft where the remaining miners' bodies were located due to hazardous conditions.

The 117 miners who were not working on shift at the time were given 12 weeks severance pay.

The ordeal left Theriault, now 50, with post-traumatic stress disorder, and he's still dealing with nightmares and flashbacks from that week.

"I had a hard time sleeping. I had to go get nerve pills, sleeping pills. I'd be cranky as a bear and I wouldn't talk to nobody. You just feel like you're in a room by yourself.

"I guess I was one of the lucky ones who didn't turn to alcohol or something. I ended up seeing a psychiatrist for a long time. And I just find, even now, come May 9 it's hard."

No criminal convictions resulted from the Westray mine disaster. Two of the mine's managers, Gerald Phillips and Roger Parry, were charged with 26 accounts of manslaughter and criminal negligence causing death.

The charges were stayed by the trial judge in February 1995 on the grounds that prosecutors had deliberately failed to disclose key evidence to the defence.

The Supreme Court of Canada upheld the Nova Scotia Court of Appeal's decision to order a new trial. However, after that decision came down prosecutors decided not to further pursue the charges because they determined there was not enough evidence to secure convictions.

Theriault was part of the group that advocated for changes to the Criminal Code to make it easier for companies to be charged with health and safety offences.

The amendments became law in 2004, and three years later it resulted in the first conviction of a company charged in the death of an employee in a workplace accident. The Quebec paving-stone manufacturer Transpave Inc. pleaded guilty to criminal negligence causing the death of labourer Steve L'Ecuyer in 2005.

The company was fined \$110,000 after an investigation by Quebec's health and safety board revealed a safety device intended to prevent the accident had been deliberately

disabled in 2004 and most of 2005 in order to avoid interruptions in production.

Theriault said there are too many workplace accidents causing injury and death, with the employer more likely to face a fine than a criminal conviction involving jail time.

"After that bill passed the Senate, I thought that would be it. A company would be dealt with, and should be dealt with (in an employee's death)," he said.

"But here we are, eight years later, and what's been done? Nothing's been done."

Mexican search teams recover 14 dead workers after mine blast

Extract from CNN

Search teams have recovered the last of 14 workers killed in an explosion at a mine in northern Mexico, the country's labor secretary said Sunday morning.

"Objective accomplished," Labor Secretary Javier Lozano said in a Twitter post.

But he later told reporters that the federal government would step up its inspections of mines in light of the blast.

"We want coal free of blood, clean coal," Lozano said, speaking minutes after forensic investigators drove away with the last body, the state-run Notimex news agency reported.

Rescuers began searching for survivors in the mine outside Sabinas, Mexico, on Tuesday, after an explosion injured one worker and trapped 14 others inside.

But after they entered the mine's shaft, officials painted an increasingly bleak picture of the incident. At one point, Lozano posted on his Twitter account that the prognosis was "not at all encouraging."

He went on to criticize the owner of the small, makeshift mine, referring to the facility and others like it as "irregular, deadly traps."

Sabinas is in the coal production center of Mexico and has a museum dedicated to the history of coal mining.

In 2006, in the nearby town of San Juan de Sabinas, 65 miners perished after an explosion in the mine where they were working.

An organization representing family members of the victims of that accident said Tuesday's blast was a tragic reminder that the federal government must do more to regulate mines. One activist from the organization said there had been more than 40 people killed in local coal mines since the 2006 accident.

Monday 9 May 2011

China: Watchdog snaps into action over cover-ups of coal mine accidents

Extract from People's Daily Online

The country's work safety authorities have vowed to crack down on coal mine accident cover-ups, which are now rampant in the industry.

The Work Safety Committee under the State Council, revealed in a statement on Friday the attempts to cover-up six major coal mine accidents that killed a total of 42 miners since April.

Five of the accidents were investigated after local work safety departments received tip-offs, while the other was reported to the safety watchdog after a day's delay.

The cover-ups included removing the dead miners' bodies from mines and forging the miners' shift logs.

Covering up mine accidents is a crime in China, which usually leads to jail terms of up to seven years and the committee said it will supervise the handling of all the six cases by local governments.

Cover-ups of coal mine accidents are said to be common in Southwest China's Yunnan province, Xinhua News Agency reported over the weekend.

Since September 2010, a total of 29 miners had been killed in nine mine mishaps that the mine owners had tried to hide from the local governments in the cities of Qujing and Zhaotong, according to the report.

On April 15, a gas blast left 12 dead and three injured at the Yangmeishan Coal Mine in Xuanwei under the administration of Qujing. The mine owner had conducted the cover-up with the help of the local township department in charge of regulating coal mining, said Zhang Chunsheng, deputy chief of the Yunnan administration of coal mine safety.

Lu Erchang, the mine's owner, confessed to local police that he had directed his daughter to make a payment of one million yuan (\$154,000) in hush money to the family of each dead miner in addition to 680,000 yuan in compensation. As a result, the families rejected autopsy requests from the police, saying that the miners had died from diseases.

The mine's owner was also found to have acquired the help of the local regulatory body to remove the bodies of four dead miners, forge their shift logs and destroy some related materials, said Zhang.

The mine owner and the township's regulatory department chief and deputy chief are being held by local police.

Tuesday 10 May 2011

USA: Rescuers Fault Response to Massey Mine Blast

Extract from The Wall Street Journal, USA

Rescuers looking for survivors following the Massey Energy Co. mine explosion last year felt their own safety was compromised by the company and federal safety officials, according to investigation transcripts.

Several rescuers said Massey and the Mine Safety and Health Administration both ignored protocols for having back-up teams available, among other things. The accident at the Upper Big Branch, W.Va., mine in April 2010 was the worst U.S. coal-mining disaster in 40 years.

On Monday, the MSHA, which oversaw the rescue effort, released hundreds of pages of interviews with 25 federal, state and company personnel who searched the mine in the days after the accident, in which 29 miners died.

Jerry Cook, a member of the MSHA rescue team, said in the hours after the explosion there were 40 people searching the mine but their efforts were largely uncoordinated.

"You don't need to have people run in there—anybody could've done anything in that mine they wanted to," Mr. Cook told investigators. "They could've killed every one of us."

Rescue teams train to coordinate their actions so they don't endanger other members, by opening a door that can change airflow in the mine, for example.

Mr. Cook also said no back-up teams were standing by. Usually, a second team will be ready to help the first if a member is injured or their oxygen fails.

Mr. Cook said Massey Chief Operating Officer Chris Adkins and MSHA district supervisor Bob Hardman didn't follow certain rescue protocols.

Shane Harvey, Massey general counsel, declined to comment on that allegation. He said the company would examine the transcripts and was grateful for the "heroism, professionalism and teamwork" of the rescue teams.

An MSHA spokeswoman didn't address specific questions about following protocols. In a statement, Joe Main, head of the MSHA, said questions about the rescue were difficult to answer because "we are still in the midst of an ongoing accident investigation."

He said the agency was also conducting a review of its performance before and after the accident.

The agency had released the transcripts to the families of the deceased miners on Friday.

The interviews recall the confusion and tension in the days after the accident, when families gathered at the mine to learn the fate of 29 miners. With four miners still unaccounted for,

officials did not release the names of men who had already been found dead.

The rescue effort was repeatedly halted when levels of explosive gases rose underground. After four days, rescue teams found the bodies of the four men they had previously passed over in the darkness.

NZ: Union slates mine audit

Extract from Greymouth Star, NZ

Wellington - An audit report's finding of no imminent danger at New Zealand coal mines is "complete nonsense", according to the union that represents miners.

The audit by two Australian mining experts was ordered by Cabinet after 29 men were killed in explosions at the Pike River mine on the West Coast in November last year.

The report, issued today, found two mines were not fully compliant with health and safety regulations, but found no evidence of imminent danger at any of the four mines investigated.

Minister of Labour Kate Wilkinson said the audit did not find mines were being operated in an unsafe manner, and the lack of imminent danger was reassuring.

"However, underground coal mining is inherently dangerous and the hazards cannot be entirely eliminated, so systems and processes to minimise harm must be in place," she said.

Andrew Little, national secretary of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union that represents miners, said it was "complete nonsense" that there was no imminent danger at the mines.

He pointed to the audit's recommendation that the Roa mine install a gas monitoring system.

"For heaven's sake, what lay at the heart of Pike River was a gas explosion. The one thing you expect in an underground coal mine is a gas monitoring system," he told Radio New Zealand.

Mr Little said New Zealand had a "hands-off regulatory environment" due to the lack of a

mandatory code of practice, and he called for an industry-wide safety standard.

“There is a fundamental problem with our mines inspectorate and the total lack of oversight by a responsible government agency,” he said.

“In terms of the public interest in not having mine explosions and killing people and undermining the economic development of various regions, we need to have proper regulation and a proper mines inspectorate.”

NZ: Truck topples at mine

Extract from Greymouth Star, NZ

A truck driver suffered head and neck injuries when the massive truck he was driving fell down a bank at the Oceana Gold Mine near Reefton yesterday.



Truck topples at mine

The accident happened just before 10am when the truck was reversing up to a bank to empty its load and tipped down the bank, a Summit Rescue Helicopter spokesman said.

The bank was as high as a two-storey building and the truck ended up on its back.

The Caterpillar truck has a carrying capacity of 93 tonnes and was fully loaded at the time of the accident. However, it was not tipping at the time, mine management said.

The 51-year-old driver, from Reefton, was held in his seat by his seatbelt and suffered head and neck injuries. He was treated at the scene by St John paramedics and flown to Grey Base Hospital where he was in a stable condition. He was later transferred to Christchurch Hospital.

Mine operations manager Gareth Thomas told NZPA he could not comment on the details of the accident while it was being investigated.

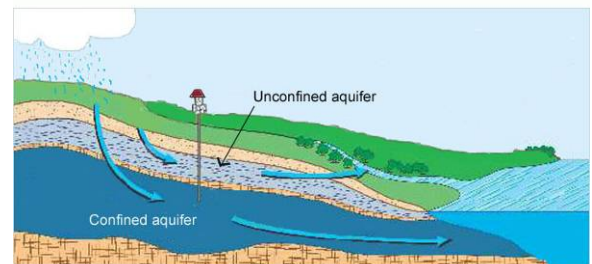
The mine had a good safety record but there were risks with such operations. “In this case unfortunately something went wrong and we have to investigate.”

Mining dictionary

A guide to coal mining terminology

A

AQUIFER A water-bearing bed of porous rock, often sandstone.



-Ed