

# Another Chinese coal mining tragedy

By John Chan  
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A major flood at the Wangjialing coal mine in Shanxi province on Sunday afternoon trapped 153 construction workers a kilometre underground. In its rush to complete the development of the mine, management ignored warnings about water leaking into the shafts. The chances of finding the workers alive are rapidly diminishing.

Sunday's accident occurred despite the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's empty public pledges to improve mine safety after an explosion in Heilongjiang province last November killed 108 workers. The large Wangjialing project, operated by the state-owned Huajin Coking Coal Company, supposedly followed stricter safety codes than small, illegal private mines.

When the flooding occurred, 261 construction workers were underground in the unfinished coal mine. Only 108 escaped. Fan Leisheng told China Central Television: "Underground water gushed out like a tide. The water was right on my ass. Luckily, there is a transportation tunnel. Some of my co-workers and I hid in the tunnel... It is hard to imagine that I could survive in the 1,000-metre deep shaft."

A team of 1,000 rescuers is still battling to save the trapped workers by pumping water out. However, Liu Dezheng, the Shanxi work safety bureau's chief engineer, told the media that reaching the workers could not be done "in one or two days". It would take "at least seven days and nights". China Central Television reported that there was no communication or signs of life from the flooded area.

A preliminary investigation found that the flooding had been caused by accidentally drilling into a network of old water-filled shafts. Shanxi is estimated to have 260 billion tonnes of coal reserves, or about one third of the national total. There is extensive mining throughout the province, which is expanding to meet the escalating demand for energy. Some 70 percent of

China's electricity is provided by coal-fired power stations.

The last major mine flooding occurred in Shandong province in August 2007, which was caused by torrential rain. Workers refused to go underground, but the management falsely claimed the flooding was under control and threatened to dismiss any worker who failed to obey orders. As a result, 172 workers lost their lives in the subsequent disaster.

At the Wangjialing mine, construction workers had been telling mine officials since last Thursday that water was leaking into the shafts. Yang Shengcai, a miner, told the Associated Press: "They would call and say, 'There's water here', but still nothing was done. I don't know why." *Beijing News* reported on Tuesday that the leaking was so severe that workers had asked for pumps to clear the pooled water.

Police have been sent to the mine site to control angry relatives. Wang Wen, a mother of two, told Reuters she did not know what she would do without her husband. "There will be big problems. We do not even know where to go to beg for food. I have two parents, and they are in their 80s," she said. Most workers are from poor rural areas and their families have no other means of support.

On its website, the State Work Safety Administration has accused the mine's management of violating regulations. "Water leaks were found numerous times in underground shafts but still they failed to take action to eliminate the potential risks," it declared. *China Daily* reported that the managers in charge of construction have gone missing. Once arrested, they are likely to be used as convenient scapegoats.

Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have stepped in to try to head off public anger over the continuing carnage in the coal industry. The two leaders have ordered "all-out" efforts to save the workers. Vice Premier Zhang Dejiang has been sent to

oversee rescue operations.

Earlier this month, Premier Wen told the National People's Congress that the government would give "dignity" to the working masses and improve conditions for the country's 230 million rural migrant workers in particular. In reality, they continue to be exploited as cheap, disposable labour.

The CCP regime is directly responsible for the drive to boost production and profits in the coal industry that inevitably leads to accidents. In the past two years, the government has been closing small mines or merging them into large companies, especially in Shanxi. The result is that disasters are also occurring on a larger scale.

The Wangjialing mine was officially approved by the Shanxi provincial government. The company's website presents the project as a first-class model of safety and efficiency. The huge mine covers 180 square kilometres, with estimated reserves of 2.3 billion tonnes and a projected annual output of six million tonnes a year.

The operator, Huajin Coking Coal Company, is jointly owned by Shanxi Coking Coal Group Co. and China National Coal Group, China's second largest coal producer, and the parent company of Hong Kong-listed China Coal Energy. These "state-owned" entities have long been restructured as profit-making corporations that operate no differently from private businesses.

Amid hothouse economic development, the price for coal is high. Just a day before the accident, the *Shanxi Daily* reported that management was pushing to complete the Wangjialing project by October, instead of February 2011. The rush to begin production ignored the complex geological conditions in the area and networks of old mine shafts, many of which are not properly mapped.

China's coal industry is the world's deadliest. Last year the official death toll in mine disasters was 2,631. The actual figure is certainly much higher as most fatalities still occur in small, private mines and are often unreported. By bribery and threats against the families of victims, mine bosses in both private and state-owned mines often cover up accidents to escape prosecution. As in other countries around the world, high prices and large profits are strong incentives to push for higher production at the expense of workers.

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