

Two Colombia mine explosions kill 26

By Samuel Davidson
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Two mine explosions in less than two weeks have claimed the lives of 26 miners, beginning another deadly year for Colombian miners. Last year, 173 miners were killed in accidents and explosions throughout the country.

On January 26, 21 miners were killed at the La Preciosa mine in the province of Norte de Santander. On February 1, five miners were killed in an explosion at the La Escondida mine near the town of Sutatausa, north of Bogota. Officials are blaming both explosions on methane gas, although investigations of the two disasters have not taken place.

At the La Precolosa mine, 27 miners were inside when the explosion accrued. The six survivors were gravely injured. The La Precolosa mine was the site of another deadly explosion in 2007 when 32 miners were killed. Six workers were also killed at the mine this past October.

Workers were in the process of changing shifts at the time of the explosion. Luis Suarez, a miner at La Preciosa who wasn't working at the time of the explosion, told *El Tiempo* newspaper that the day before the blast readings of methane levels were five times too high, but they had supposedly taken measures to reduce them.

An unnamed miner told a local television station, "I hope (God) favors me with another type of job to support my family, not this kind of mining in a murderous mine."

Last year, 80 mining-related accidents killed 173 miners in Colombian mines, including a massive disaster in the northwestern town of Amaga, where 73 workers died last June after an explosion trapped them in a tunnel. That mine was not equipped with gas detectors or fans to extract methane gas.

In November, nine miners were killed at two small coal mines in the central province of Cundinamarca.

Colombia is the fifth largest exporter of coal in the

world following Indonesia, Australia, Russia and South Africa. Demand for coal in China and throughout Asia is strong and it is one of the country's major generators of foreign exchange. Government figures show Colombia exported over 75 million tons of coal last year and is expected to produce over 100 million tons this year.

Export is controlled by a few multinationals companies, including Alabama-based Drummond, Glencore International AG of Switzerland and Australian BHP Billiton. In addition to coal, Colombia is a major producer of other raw materials like gold, copper, oil and gas.

Safety conditions for Colombian miners are horrendous. There are only 16 government safety officials to cover all 6,000 mines. In addition, there are estimated to be several thousand unofficial mines, many not more than a tunnel dug into the side of a mountain.

Family members of the five miners who died in the La Escondida mine explosion say they will sue the government for not carrying out safety checks at the mine. The miners' families say that the day before the explosion the mine was without electricity, and thus ventilation, allowing the explosive gases to accumulate.

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