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Mine Rescue Teams Pulled Out After Methane Warning

By IAN URBINA and BERNIE BECKER

MONTCOAL, W.Va. — Rescue teams at the Upper Big Branch mine, where at least 25 people were killed in a deadly blast this week, were abruptly pulled out Thursday morning because methane levels were dangerously high and further explosions were possible, state officials said.

“We think they are in danger,” said Kevin Stricklin, an administrator at the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration. “That is the whole intent of pulling them out.”

Officials also said Thursday that only three miners were unaccounted for, rather than four as had previously been reported.

On Wednesday, federal officials said two safety citations were made against the mine’s operator, the Massey Energy Company, on the day of the explosion.

According to records from the mine safety agency, one of the citations issued Monday was for failing to properly insulate and seal spliced electrical cables. The problem was outside the blast area and was fixed immediately, federal mine safety officials said.

The other citation was for failing to keep maps of above-ground escape routes current. It was not clear if federal inspectors were at the mine before the blast, or if the citations were issued for conditions they

discovered after responding to the explosion.

At the time of the explosion on Monday, Mr. Stricklin was at the airport in nearby Charleston, W.Va., on his way to a Massey mine in Kentucky to discuss violations there, an agency spokesman said. Mr. Stricklin quickly canceled his plans and headed to the Upper Big Branch.

On Jan. 7, federal regulators issued two citations against the mine because the intake system that was supposed to pull clean air inside was moving air in the wrong direction. Similar problems were also noted by the mine safety agency after a 2006 fire at a Massey mine in Logan County, W.Va., killed two miners.

After that fire, the Aracoma Coal Company, a subsidiary of Massey, agreed to pay \$4.2 million in criminal fines and civil penalties and to plead guilty to several safety violations. Over the years, Massey has accumulated a long record of violations and fines for its coal mining operations.

Massey representatives did not respond to requests for comment.

Also Thursday morning, protesters from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., were headed to the Upper Big Branch mine to convey the message that the explosion was a result of e-mail messages allegedly sent from West Virginia threatening the church, according to the church's Web site. The church said it had received the threats about a trip to West Virginia and Virginia scheduled to begin Thursday. Members of the church, which is led by Fred Phelps, have attracted attention recently by showing up at funerals for soldiers who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan and carrying signs that say the soldiers' deaths were God's way of punishing the United States for its tolerance of homosexuality.

"So God reached down and smacked one of those mines, killing 25," the church said on its Web site.

At the mine, local families clung to slim hope that survivors might be found and convened at an open warehouse on the Massey property, where residents delivered food and condolences.

Because of the hilly terrain, cellular telephone reception is weak to nonexistent near the mine. As they waited for news, relatives of miners lined up at one of the few landline phones available near the site to call home and update loved ones.

Gov. Joe Manchin III of West Virginia said Wednesday that he was concerned about reports of several work

stoppages in the mine before the explosion because of high methane levels. The mine is supposed to be outfitted with air-quality sensors that shut machines off when methane levels grow too high.

“Why didn’t it happen this time?” Mr. Manchin asked. “Why didn’t sensors go off?”

After their initial ventures into the mine, rescue workers said the explosion appeared to have occurred in its active section, not in the abandoned, sealed-off areas. Dennis O’Dell, a safety official with the United Mine Workers of America, said if that were true, it would indicate that the mine not only had methane problems, but also probably had dangerous levels of coal dust in the air.

Lawmakers in West Virginia and Washington said they planned to hold hearings to review what went wrong and what, if anything needed to be done to improve safety regulations.

In 2006, Congress conducted the biggest overhaul in federal mining regulations in three decades. Under the new federal regulations, mine operators are required to add emergency breathing devices and airtight rescue chambers to help miners escape explosions and fires. Companies were ordered to report serious accidents more quickly and to add more mine rescue teams.

Investigators will probably want to see whether the mine operator was in compliance with the requirement to have new communications and tracking gear to help miners reach people above ground and help rescuers locate missing workers.

Mr. Stricklin, of the mine agency, said it was not entirely clear whether the mine was in compliance. It had an approved tracking and communication plan in compliance with the federal law, but tracking equipment was not in place in the section of the mine where the missing miners are believed to be, he said.

Federal mining data indicates that only one in 10 underground mines nationwide have met the law’s requirements.

Michael Cooper contributed reporting from New York, Gardiner Harris from Washington, and Dan Heyman from Montcoal.

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