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April 6, 2010

Rescue Suspended at Mine as Death Toll Reaches 25

By IAN URBINA

MONTCOAL, W.Va. — The death toll from a blast at a [coal](#) mine here rose to 25 on Tuesday, federal safety officials said, making it the worst mining accident in the United States in 25 years.

Four miners were missing, and officials said it was likely they had also been killed in the explosion on Monday.

A recovery operation was called off early Tuesday morning because high levels of methane gas made the mine unsafe for rescuers. Workers were working to bore holes into the mine to try to get more oxygen inside, an effort that was not expected to be completed until Wednesday evening.

“The bodies will not be recovered until the mine is ventilated,” Ronald L. Wooten, the state’s mine health safety director, said at a news conference Tuesday.

The accident was the worst in an American mine since Dec. 19, 1984, when 27 workers died in a fire at the Wilberg Mine in Orangeville, Utah, and it came just four years after federal regulators overhauled mine safety laws. That overhaul, the first in over three decades, came after 19 miners died in a series of accidents in West Virginia and Kentucky — including one that brought criminal charges against a subsidiary of the Massey Energy Company, based in Virginia, the owner of the mine where Monday’s explosion took place.

“I can only say that when the rescuers in the mine saw what they saw, that it had to be a horrific explosion that

caused that type of damage,” Gov. Joe Manchin III said at a news conference Tuesday. “Rails, cars, buggies that carry heavy equipment — train rails looked like they had been twisted like a pretzel. That’s horrific. That’s an explosion beyond proportion. The heat that would come off of that explosion that caused it would be something.”

President Obama spoke about the accident at a White House prayer breakfast Tuesday morning.

“I spoke with Governor Manchin of West Virginia last night and told him that the federal government stands ready to offer whatever assistance is needed in this rescue effort,” Mr. Obama said. “So I would ask for the faithful who are gathered here to pray for the safe return of the missing, the men and women who put their lives on the line to save them and the souls that have been lost in this tragic accident. May they rest in peace, and may their families find comfort in the hard days ahead.”

The explosion occurred about 3 p.m. Monday at the Upper Big Branch mine, 30 miles south of Charleston, in Raleigh County.

The mine, which employs about 200, is owned by Massey and operated by the Performance Coal Company.

Mine safety officials said three groups of miners were caught in the blast. One group of nine were leaving the site at the end of their shift in a vehicle known as a “mantrip.” Seven miners in the mantrip were killed in the explosion; the other two were injured and taken to the hospital by rescue workers.

Eighteen miners in the second group were said to be working a bit deeper in the mine, closest to the area where coal was actually being extracted. All 18 died.

The last group — the four miners still unaccounted for — was even deeper in the mine.

The miners were all thought to be working more than 1,000 feet underground.

The explosion Monday destroyed all communication lines inside Upper Big Branch, but Kevin Stricklin, an administrator with the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, said there were two rescue chambers near the blast site. If the miners could reach them, the chambers were stocked with food, water and enough air to allow them to survive for four days.

Mr. Stricklin said that officials did not think there had been a roof collapse, but that they did not know what had caused the explosion in the sprawling mine.

Dennis O'Dell, an official with the union who was in contact with state and federal safety officials, said the explosion might have been caused by a buildup of methane gas in a sealed-off section of the mine. A similar type of explosion occurred in 2006 at the Sago Mine in West Virginia, which killed 12 miners after trapping them underground for nearly two days.

Mr. O'Dell said some officials believed the ignition source for the explosion on Monday might have been a device that carries mine personnel to and from the work area.

Upper Big Branch, which cannot be seen from the road, has 19 openings and roughly seven-foot ceilings, federal safety officials said.

The interior is crisscrossed with railroad tracks used for hauling people and equipment. Outside are several plants where coal is prepared for shipment by train.

Emergency vehicles lined the two-lane road leading to the mine Monday night as families of the miners gathered at a building on the mine property. A church in nearby Whitesville opened its doors Monday night for a vigil.

“All we know now is, this is an awful disaster,” Representative Nick J. Rahall II said as he arrived at the mine site, which is in his district. “This is the second major disaster at a Massey site in recent years, and something needs to be done.”

In a statement, Massey's chief executive officer, Don Blankenship, said, “We want to assure the families of all the miners we are taking every action possible to locate and rescue those still missing.”

Phil Smith, a spokesman for the United Mine Workers of America, said that the mine was nonunion but that the union had dispatched a team to advise on the rescue and to help the families of the trapped or dead miners.

Michael Mayhorn, an emergency dispatcher for Boone County, said that at least 20 ambulances and 3 helicopters had been dispatched from nearby counties, and that the state medical examiner was heading to the scene. At least one miner was evacuated by helicopter, he said.

For at least six of the last 10 years, federal records indicate, the Upper Big Branch mine has recorded an injury rate worse than the national average for similar operations. The records also show that the mine had 458 violations in 2009, with \$897,325 in safety penalties assessed against it, of which it has paid \$168,393.

“Massey’s commitment to safety has long been questioned in the coalfields,” said Tony Oppegard, a lawyer and mine safety advocate from Kentucky.

Those concerns were heightened in 2006 when an internal memo written by Mr. Blankenship became public. In the memo, Mr. Blankenship instructed the company’s underground mine superintendents to place coal production first.

“This memo is necessary only because we seem not to understand that the coal pays the bills,” he wrote.

Ellen Smith, the editor of [Mine Safety and Health News](#), an independent newsletter that covers the industry, said the Upper Big Branch mine was the site of two fatalities in the last 10 years.

More than 100,000 coal miners have been killed in accidents in the United States since 1900, but the number of fatalities has fallen sharply in recent decades, according to the Mine Safety and Health Administration. As late as the 1940s, it was not unusual to have more than 1,000 mining deaths a year; in 2009, there were 35, agency records show.

Mining remains dangerous work, as the disasters that seem to befall small Appalachian towns every few years attest. And there are persistent alarms raised about mines using antiquated safety equipment, lax enforcement and a culture that discourages safety complaints.

After the 2006 Sago mine accident, state officials said they believed those miners could have survived if seals cordoning off the abandoned section of the mine where the blast occurred had been properly installed.

Federal regulations passed after the Sago disaster increased the monitoring of air quality in active and sealed sections of mines to avoid methane buildup, and required mine operators to install stronger barriers between active and nonactive sections of mines.

State officials said the Montcoal mine was a long-wall operation, one of three major methods for mining coal.

The method often uses a steel plow, or rotation drum, which is mechanically pulled back and forth across a face of coal that is usually several hundred feet long. The loosened coal falls onto a conveyor for removal from the mine.

Daniel Heyman contributed reporting from Montcoal, W.Va., and Derrick Henry and Michael Cooper contributed from New York.

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