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Shining Coal Industry Is Dirty Business for Workers Environment

A horrific mine explosion, the latest in a long string of deadly accidents, has brought renewed attention to Colombia's booming coal industry. A key energy source, coal not only fuels several of the country's electricity plants, it also powers Colombia's export-oriented economy as a whole. But, as the recent disaster made all too clear, coal mining can be truly dirty business when it comes to human lives and the environment.

On the night of June 16, just days before Colombia's runoff presidential election (see NotiSur, 2010-07-02), a methane-gas explosion ripped through an underground coal mine near the town of Amagá, some 30 km southeast of Medellín in the northern department of Antioquia. The blast killed at least 72 miners (recovery teams are still searching for victims' bodies), making it the worst coal-mine disaster since 1977, when 143 people died in the same town.

Sadly, neither of the two tragedies was an isolated incident. Last year, nine people died in yet another Amagá coal-mine disaster. A 2008 accident in Cucumbá took the lives of eight coal miners, while 32 perished from an explosion in February 2007 in the department of Norte de Santander. The list goes on.

Despite the frequency of such accidents, observers say Colombia's many coal mines--particularly smaller, underground mines--operate without sufficient government oversight. The recent Amagá incident is a case in point. Mines and Energy Minister Hernán Martínez told reporters soon after the explosion that the San Fernando mine lacked proper gas-detection devices and adequate ventilation. The safety shortcomings are all the more galling given that, two years ago, a flood at the same privately owned mine killed eight people.

Worse yet is that the problem is grossly underreported, according to the Bogotá-based Centro Nacional Salud Ambiente y Trabajo (CENSAT), an environmental nongovernmental organization (NGO). "For workers in these types of small and medium-sized mines, the situation is really quite critical," said CENSAT's Marta Rincón, a mining researcher. "Because of changes in the law, it's now up to the municipalities to oversee the mines, but they just don't have and experience and the know-how to handle it."

Powering Colombia and the world

Coal mining is a huge business in Colombia, which the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) says is Latin America's top producer and boasts the region's second-largest reserves, just behind Brazil. The EIA reports that, in taxes and royalties alone, the coal-mining industry contributed more than US\$1 billion to government coffers last year.

Some of that coal stays in Colombia, where it is used primarily in the electricity sector. Coal-burning thermoelectric plants represent some 5% of the country's total installed capacity of 13,400 megawatts. Large-scale hydroelectric dams provide the lion's share of that power (64%) while natural-gas-burning generators contribute 27%.

More coal will be needed as Colombia looks to double its installed generating capacity in the next few years. Of the 13,545 MW worth of new facilities slated for construction before

2013, more electricity will actually come from coal (2,884 MW) than from natural gas (2,520 MW), Colombia's Ministerio de Minas y Energía (MINMINAS) predicts.