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Dangerous Conditions Prevent Recovery Operations at Coahuila Mine

by LADB Staff

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The Secretaria del Trabajo y Prevision Social (STPS) has ruled out a recovery operation to extract the bodies of 63 victims of an explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine in Coahuila state in February 2006. In a report released in early October, the STPS said conditions remain too unstable and dangerous at the site of the explosion to allow recovery crews to enter.

The report was published just days after a special congressional commission issued its own report criticizing mining company Industrial Minera Mexico (IMM), along with the federal and Coahuila state governments, for failing to take the steps that could have prevented the accident. The explosion at the Pasta de Conchos mine, near the community of San Juan de Sabinas, sent temperatures above 600 degrees Celsius (1,100 Fahrenheit), enveloping the mine with lethal amounts of methane and carbon dioxide. The incident claimed 65 lives, with authorities able to recover only two bodies (see SourceMex, 2006-03-01).

The STPS report, based on studies by the government geological service (Servicio Geologico Mexicano, SGM) and other agencies, offered little hope that any bodies could be recovered in the near future. "Conditions, from the standpoint of safety and health, remain very unstable and unsafe," said Labor Secretary Javier Lozano. He noted that allowing anyone to enter the collapsed mine could result in further loss of life. Relatives of the 63 victims whose bodies remain trapped in the rubble have been pressing the government to take all necessary steps to recover the bodies of the dead miners.

To emphasize their demands, a group of widows, children, and other relatives of the victims set up camp outside the headquarters of the STPS in Mexico City a month before the STPS was due to release its report. After the STPS released its findings, the group decided to return to Coahuila but vowed to continue to push the government to require IMM to recover the bodies. Before departing for their homes in Coahuila, the relatives brought a formal complaint against IMM and the Mexican government to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) in Mexico City.

Report blames IMM and state, federal governments for explosion

The STPS findings were preceded by a report by a special committee in the Chamber of Deputies, which placed the responsibility for the accident primarily on IMM and its parent company Grupo Mexico SA, one of Mexico's largest mining companies. The committee also blamed the federal government and the administration of Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira for failing to ensure safe conditions at the mine. In its report, the congressional committee recommended that officials at Grupo Mexico and key personnel at the STPS and the Coahuila state government be prosecuted for the deaths of the miners.

The committee said IMM should have reduced the chance of an explosion by venting or sealing off areas with a build up of gases and coal dust. "The disaster was caused in part by negligence and serious omissions by the operators of the mine given that they did not comply in a timely way with measures demanded by labor authorities," the report said. "There was also negligence and omission on the part of the authorities at the STPS because they did not ensure the implementation" of safety measures or order the mine closed.

Among other things, the committee recommended that government officials and Grupo Mexico executives who share blame in the disaster be removed from their jobs and banned from working in the mining industry. Some legislators like Deputy Jose Antonio Almazan Gonzalez, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), have suggested that high-level officials, including ex-labor secretary Francisco Xavier Salazar and former President Vicente Fox, also be held accountable for the explosion. The report also recommended that the government strip Grupo Mexico of its rights to extract coal at the Pasta de Conchos site.

The Secretaria de Economia (SE), through its Direccion General de Minas, followed this recommendation in mid-October, taking the first step toward withdrawing IMM's permit to operate at the site. The SE agency ordered IMM to refrain from conducting any type of exploratory activities near the site and ordered the company to present a plan to rehabilitate the area within a 30-day period. The company retained the rights to extract coal near the site even though it announced earlier this year that it planned to shut down the damaged mine permanently (see SourceMex, 2007-01-10).

"If we determine that we have the appropriate evidence to withdraw the concession, we will do so," said Economy Secretary Eduardo Sojo. But some opposition legislators believe that the government should do more than just withdraw mining rights for IMM. Almazan Gonzalez said the SE should force Grupo Mexico to spend whatever is necessary at the collapsed mine to eventually allow recovery of the bodies of the deceased miners. "This matter is in the hands of the SE," said Almazan Gonzalez.

The silver lining in the Pasta de Conchos accident is that the government is moving to improve safety standards for all mining operations in Mexico. Sojo said a committee comprising officials from the SE, the STPS, and the Consejo de Recursos Geologicos was planning to meet soon to elaborate a much stricter set of safety norms for the mining industry. Raul Meza Zuniga, an SGM consultant, said the problem lies in part with the lack of enforcement by the federal and state governments. But he also noted that Norma Oficial 023, which governs safety considerations for the mining industry, was too weak, setting only minimal standards.

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