

10-20-2010

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Carlos Navarro

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Rescue of Miners in Chile Draws Comparisons with 2006 Coahuila Mine Tragedy." (2010).
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Rescue of Miners in Chile Draws Comparisons with 2006 Coahuila Mine Tragedy

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Energy and Mining

Published: Wednesday, October 20, 2010

Mexicans, like most people around the world, were glued to the television to watch the dramatic rescue of 33 miners at a collapsed San José copper and gold mine near the community of Copiapó in Chile. The successful rescue elicited cheers from China to South Africa to Mexico City. But, in Mexico, it also drew inevitable comparisons to the 2006 tragedy at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine in Coahuila, where 65 miners lost their lives following an explosion. In that case, the Mexican government chose not to attempt a full rescue of the miners—or to retrieve the bodies—citing the danger posed by trapped methane gas ([SourceMex, March 1, 2006](#)). Rescuers were able to retrieve two bodies before the operation was halted.

Human rights advocates, including a prominent Catholic bishop, say the Mexican government continues to ignore the victims' families by choosing not to find ways to retrieve the bodies. Conversely, some experts are urging caution in drawing too many comparisons between the two incidents because the Coahuila mine involved coal, whose extraction is much more dangerous than that of copper or gold. The one common factor for the two mines is that the companies that owned the facilities ignored safety procedures that could have prevented the disasters.

Coal mines pose greater dangers

Most observers readily acknowledge that coal mines pose a much greater danger than metals mines and that the greater danger would have made a rescue extremely difficult in Pasta de Conchos. The main argument was that ex-President Vicente Fox's administration did not make a strong-enough effort to find a way to rescue the miners or extract their bodies following the explosion. Even though two bodies were recovered, 63 remained buried in the collapsed mine.

The criticisms continued into President Felipe Calderón's government, which justified its decision not to retrieve the bodies by pointing out that conditions remained too perilous for such an operation ([SourceMex, Oct. 24, 2007](#)).

The Cámara Minera de México (CAMIMEX) and executives of the mining industry are among those who said most forcefully that there are no comparisons between an accident at a coal mine and one at a facility where gold, silver or copper are extracted. The mining-industry officials, who made the comments at an industry gathering in Mexico City in mid-October, also issued a statement congratulating the Chilean government for the rescue of the 33 miners. "They also expressed regret that a similar successful operation had not been possible at Pasta de Conchos, which holds the bodies of 65 miners from Coahuila. They were not retrieved so as not to risk the lives of would-be rescuers," said the daily newspaper *Vanguardia*, which is based in Saltillo, Coahuila state.

But despite the protestations of the Mexican mining industry, the comparisons between the San José mine near Copiapó and Pasta de Conchos are inevitable.

"Although the difference [between the two types of mines] is pertinent in any analysis, the two incidents were addressed in different ways," said syndicated columnist Miguel Ángel Granados

Chapa. "In the Pasta de Conchos case, authorities resolved not to try a rescue; the miners were given up for dead. In Copiapó, there was the opposite decision, which was to use all means necessary to save the miners."

Mexican government criticized for lack of effort to rescue victims

Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and frequent critic of the administrations of ex-Presidents Fox and Calderón, both members of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), agrees that continuing the rescue attempt after the first two bodies were recovered at Pasta de Conchos was out of the question, given the inherent dangers at the collapsed coal mine. But he criticized Fox for failing to provide sufficient support to the miners' families. "I talked with President Fox and asked him to travel to the site of the disaster. I asked that we sit down and discuss our options, [but he did not listen to me]," said Moreira. "The state government was there [for the families] the entire time, but we had no powers to take charge ourselves."

Bishop Raúl Vera of the Diocese of Saltillo in Coahuila state was stronger in his criticisms of the Fox and Calderón governments, saying authorities are not being truthful about the circumstances of the rescue attempt and have chosen to keep documents related to the case out of the public eye. He said the case presented "an inconvenience" to the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social (STPS), which convinced the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) to bury the case. He demanded that the rescue team that had been assembled initially be summoned to testify about why they were pulled back from the operation.

Raúl Plascencia Villanueva, president of Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), said both the Fox and Moreira administrations ignored recommendations that a rescue attempt be made. "Without doubt, this is a good moment to revisit the debt owed to [the miners and the families] of Pasta de Conchos," said Plascencia. "In the recent case in Chile, the government made the maximum effort and managed to rescue all the trapped miners."

Vera also said the response of Chilean President Sebastián Piñera's administration to the plight of the trapped Chilean miners was admirable when compared to the Fox government's reaction. "It is a pleasure to see someone take such a clear option for life and to learn that the private sector and the Chilean government joined forces to conduct this rescue," said the Saltillo bishop. "This is a contrast to the situation in Mexico, where the private sector and the federal government conspired [to do nothing]."

Granados Chapa said a better comparison than the Copiapó case is the rescue operation at a coal mine in Shanxi, China, in April of this year, in which 115 workers were pulled from the facility alive. "Almost all the trapped miners were rescued, after they survived in terrible conditions," said Granados Chapa.

"Even though the Chinese coal industry is infamous for its extreme lack of safety and high number of deaths, [the government] opted this time to not surrender to the possibility of death. More than 3,000 rescuers were able to retrieve 115 workers, which are many more than the 35 that could not be rescued [at Pasta de Conchos]," added Granados Chapa.

But even the Shanxi case differs from Pasta de Conchos because the miners at the Chinese facility were trapped by flooding, which resulted when miners who were digging a tunnel broke into an old shaft filled with water, rather than by an explosion that released lethal gasses.

Syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento said other political considerations were in play, including the ongoing feuding between Fox's conservative PAN and the miners union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana, SNTMMSRM), led by Napoleón Gómez Urrutia. The Fox government, which had accused the SNTMMSRM leader of corruption, including embezzlement of union funds, used federal labor statutes to oust Gómez Urrutia ([SourceMex, March 1, 2006](#)) and ([May 3, 2006](#)). Gómez Urrutia, who insists that the PAN governments made him a scapegoat, fled to Vancouver, Canada, where he has remained in self-imposed exile.

"In Mexico, the [Pasta de Conchos] accident was entangled from the very beginning in a huge political dispute between the mining syndicate led by Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, a number of dissidents from the union, Grupo México [owner of the mining company IMMSA], and the federal government. And the political parties tried to take advantage of this situation during an election year," said Sarmiento. "The struggle continues after more than four years."

Sarmiento noted that no such political battles occurred in the Chile mine case. "The opposition abstained from criticizing the conservative president," said the columnist.

Despite all the recent protestations, the Fox government's decision to not rescue the mine workers was not the central issue surrounding the incident at Pasta de Conchos. The safety conditions at the mine and the lack of enforcement of labor statutes garnered the most attention following the accident. One of the first actions by the Mexican Congress at that time was to summon then labor secretary Francisco Salazar as well as Fernando Flores Pérez, director of the social security institute (Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, IMSS), to testify about safety conditions at the mine.

At that time, there were widespread criticisms against the Fox administration for its failure to comply with its commitments to the International Labor Organization (ILO) to ensure that miners were not exploited. "The government has violated the ILO statutes by allowing corruption, failing to exercise sufficient controls of the industry, conducting inadequate inspections, and engaging in systematic violations of the federal labor law (Ley Federal del Trabajo)," a lawyers' group said at that time.

The Fox government failed to force Grupo México to correct many shortcomings at the Pasta de Conchos facility, including the use of outdated equipment. In addition, the company was accused of allowing gas buildups and sending miners into dangerously unstable shafts without training or proper equipment. In 2007, Grupo México said it was closing the Pasta de Conchos mine permanently, but this was a moot point because the explosion left the facility inoperable ([SourceMex, Jan 10, 2007](#)).

Lack of safety a common factor

The one similarity with the accident in Chile was that Grupo México and the operator of the San José mine, Compañía Minera San Esteban (CMSE), were both known for allowing miners to work in unsafe conditions. The workers at the San José mine near Copiapó were trapped by a collapse and a rock slide, which trapped the workers for 60 days. Some workers rescued from the Chilean mine accused CMSE of operating "without listening to the voice of the workers when they say that there is danger or risk," including loose roof meshing, inadequate roof bolts, and improper procedures, such as the failure to clear huge rocks following a blast.

Critics say that, despite the tragedy at Pasta de Conchos, conditions remain precarious at coal mines in Coahuila state. A joint report by the Centro de Reflexión y Acción Laboral (CEREAL) and the organization Familia Pasta de Conchos said an audit of safety inspections at 32 coal mines in Coahuila state indicates the danger of another accident similar to the one at Pasta de Conchos.

The report said the government is conducting inspections and finding problems at many mines, but there is no follow-through on the findings.

"[CEREAL] found that 17 mines in the Coahuila coal region continue operating despite an order from the Secretaría del Trabajo that access be restricted because of unsafe conditions," the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma said in mid-October.

"The disaster at Pasta de Conchos was not an isolated incident but the result of systematic negligence on the part of the Mexican government in applying laws and regulations to regulate exploration and exploitation activities at coal mines, particularly the small operations in Coahuila state," the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said in mid-September, citing findings from CEREAL.

The CEREAL-Familia Pasta de Conchos report said many workers are subjected to conditions that violate their fundamental rights, including consecutive 12-hour workdays, a lack of bathrooms and access to potable water, and the absence of an engineer to monitor safety conditions [a requirement for all mining operations in Mexico].

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