19 Miners Rescued after Week, Three More Missing

BEIJING (AP) — Their faces black with coal dust, 19 miners trapped for a week underground were pulled to safety Tuesday in northeastern China as rescuers searched for three missing colleagues.

Helmeted teams brought each man up on a stretcher, their faces blackened and their eyes covered to avoid damaging sun exposure after so long in the dark. The provincial governor greeted each of the 19 and assured them the rescue work was continuing.

"We are doing everything we can to save your colleagues," Wang Xiankui said in footage shown on state broadcaster CCTV.

Twenty-six miners had been trapped in galleries relatively near the surface when water poured into a shaft on Aug. 23 from an adjacent, flooded mine. Three had been pulled out alive Saturday and one body was recovered.

The survivors, who were hospitalized in stable condition, were able to keep their helmet lamps operating for the 165 hours they were trapped. They sustained themselves with water that dripped from the ceiling and later nutrition packs sent through a 920-foot (280-meter) pipe drilled through the rock, which also provided fresh air.

The Hengtai mine in Heilongjiang province was ordered shut in 2007 but reopened without permission on Aug. 16. Seven officials have been detained over the mine's operation and the head of surrounding Boli county and his deputy have been dismissed.

China's mines are notoriously deadly, although safety improvements have cut annual fatalities by about one-third from a high of 6,995 in 2002. That improvement has come despite a tripling in the output of coal that generates most of China's electrical power.

Technological advances, better training and the closing of the most dangerous, small-scale mining operations have also made rescues more successful, even after several days.

In April 2010, 115 miners were pulled from a flooded mine in the northern province of Shanxi after more than a week underground.

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