Mine Boss Who Smeared Coal on Face Detained

the Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese police detained a mine boss who smeared coal on his face to pretend he had been in the shaft where 34 miners died and nine are still trapped, state media said Monday.

Mine bosses who don't go underground with their workers face severe punishments under a rule imposed last year to improve safety. Chinese mines are still the world's most dangerous, though death rates have been lowered significantly.

A powerful gas leak at the Sizhuang Coal Mine in Yunnan province Thursday trapped 43 miners. Thirty-four bodies have been recovered, while rescuers were still trying to reach nine miners still trapped Monday. Gas inside the mine and the risk of explosions were hampering efforts, Xinhua News Agency said.

The People's Daily reported that Qi Guming, deputy head of the coal mine, has been taken into custody on suspicion of faking evidence, citing a briefing by the rescue command office.

After the accident, Qi "rushed down the shaft and smeared coal on his face to pretend he had escaped from underground," the newspaper said. "On Sunday ... the public security authority confirmed that Qi did not go down the shaft on that day, and made false claims to the rescue command office."

The regulation that took effect last year calls for mines that violate the rules to pay between 150,000 and 5 million yuan ($22,400 to $750,000) in fines, depending on

whether the mine also suffers serious accidents. Bosses can be fined between 10,000 yuan ($1,500) and up to 80 percent of their income from the previous year and face a lifetime ban on mine supervision work.

Xinhua has said that the Sizhuang Coal Mine's license was revoked in April and that it was operating illegally.

The incident was China's second deadly mining accident in less than a week. In the previous accident, eight miners died and 52 were rescued from a mine in Henan province after a cave-in.

And on Monday, rescuers were pumping water out of a coal mine that flooded early Sunday in northwestern Gansu province, trapping seven workers. The miners still have not been located and it is not known whether they are alive, Xinhua quoted Fan Shijie, chief of the local work safety supervisory management bureau, as saying.

Fan said coal mine managers there failed to work underground as required, and further investigation was under way.

China closed many smaller, illegal mines in recent years as part of its safety efforts. Annual fatalities are now about one-third of the high of nearly 7,000 in 2002.

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