New Zealand Drops Charges Against Deadly Mine Boss

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand's government on Thursday dropped all charges against the former boss of a coal mine where 29 miners died in an explosion and instead accepted a financial settlement — a decision that left some of the victims' relatives angry.

The government last year charged former Pike River Coal chief executive Peter Whittall with 12 counts of violating labor laws following the 2010 methane-fueled blast. Each count came with a maximum fine of 250,000 New Zealand dollars ($206,000). But on Thursday, government lawyers said they considered the probability of convicting Whittall low given the available evidence.

The government said it instead accepted Whittall's offer that it drop the charges in exchange for a payment of 3.41 million New Zealand dollars ($2.8 million) made on behalf of company officials to victim's families. Whittall also pledged to meet with the relatives.

But many were unhappy with the outcome. Anna Osborne, whose husband Milton died in the explosion, told the New Zealand Herald newspaper that she's lost faith in the justice system.

"It is just another slap in the face for the families," Osborne said, adding that "as far as I'm concerned, it's blood money."

Another relative, Melissa Byrne, whose partner Sam Mackie was killed, told the newspaper she felt nobody was being held responsible for the disaster.

A government investigation found the now-bankrupt coal company ignored 21 warnings that methane gas had accumulated to explosive levels in the South Island mine. The company was convicted in April of nine health and safety violations after it did not contest the charges.

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