

Methane Blast at Siberian Mine Kills One

July 25, 2010

The  Moscow Times

A methane explosion at a coal mine in West Siberia early Saturday killed one miner and left two hospitalized with burns, officials said.

A sudden buildup of the gas at the Krasnogorskaya mine ignited as 66 miners were at work, and 65 were evacuated, said Valery Korchagin, a spokesman for the Emergency Situations Ministry. The extent of the injuries was unclear.

State television reported that the Krasnogorskaya mine is one of the region's oldest, built in the 1940s, but that new safety equipment had recently been installed.

In Saturday's blast, the methane accumulated so quickly that it was not picked up by detectors in time, the Rossia-24 news channel reported.

The mine is one of dozens in and around Kemerovo, an industrial city atop one of the world's largest coal basins. Fatal accidents are common there, with workers often ignoring — or forced to ignore — dangerous levels of volatile gases to raise production figures.

In May, two blasts at the Rospadskaya coal mine in a Kemerovo region town killed at least 67

miners. Two dozen more are still listed as missing, presumed dead. A breach of safety rules was blamed.

Reports said more than 1,000 safety violations had been flagged at Raspadskaya, Russia's largest coal mine, since the beginning of 2009. The head of the mine, Igor Volkov, stepped down and faces up to seven years in prison if convicted on charges of violating safety rules with fatal consequences.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said in the wake of the disaster that Russia's mining industry suffers an average of 100 deaths a year, but last year the figure jumped to 217. To reverse the trend, he called for higher wages to discourage excessive overtime, more stringent safety checks, and drugs and alcohol to be banned from the mines.

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