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At Least 17 Killed in Komi Mine Explosion

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The Vorkutinskaya Mine

A pocket of methane gas exploded in a coal mine in the far northern Komi republic Monday morning, killing at least 17 miners.

The blast at the Vorkutinskaya mine, owned by steel giant Severstal, occurred at 10:28 a.m. at a depth of about 800 meters, the Emergency Situations Ministry said.

Authorities cited differing numbers of fatalities from the explosion. Emergency officials said that 23 miners were in the area of the explosion and that 17 died and one was missing. Federal investigators said that in addition to the fatalities, two miners were injured in the blast.

A total of about 250 workers were in other areas of the mine at the time of the explosion and were evacuated, local prosecutors said.

According to prosecutors, the blast was caused by a high concentration of methane, a

combustible gas.

The explosion was at least the second fatal accident at a Russian mine in the past month. On Jan. 20, methane exploded in a mine in the Kuzbass coal basin in western Siberia, killing four workers.

Accidents at mines and industrial facilities in Russia are not uncommon, due to frequently lax compliance with safety rules and deteriorating Soviet-era infrastructure.

President Vladimir Putin expressed his condolences to the families of the workers killed Monday and ordered Emergency Situations Minister Vladimir Puchkov to fly to the scene of the accident.

Puchkov took off for the town of Vorkuta from Moscow at 3:30 p.m. with a team of physicians and psychologists to manage the fallout, the Emergency Situations Ministry said in a statement. It said 287 people and 79 machines were being employed in the cleanup and rescue efforts.

Puchkov said the families of those who died would each receive 2 million rubles ($66,000).

Komi republic head Vyacheslav Gaizer also flew to the scene Monday afternoon from the regional capital, Syktyvkar, Interfax reported.

The Investigative Committee said in a statement that it suspected the blast was caused by a violation of safety standards, and had opened a criminal investigation into the accident.

Local prosecutors said in a statement that they would monitor the investigation and had initiated a check into the mine's compliance with labor and industrial safety rules.

The Vorkutinskaya mine, which began operations in 1973, takes its name from its location in the town of Vorkuta, situated on a river about 150 kilometers from the Arctic Ocean.

The mine with an annual output of 1.8 million tons of coal belongs to the company Vorkutaugol, which is owned by Severstal.

In 2011, the Vorkutinskaya mine was given an award for having the best labor conditions of any facility in the Komi republic, RIA-Novosti reported.

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