

Bring miners into safety process to avoid tragedy

Editor's Note:

The Wangjialing coal mine accident drew new attention to China's accident-prone mines. Despite a substantial reduction in accidents from 2008, over 2,000 miners died last year. How can China avoid such disasters? Global Times (GT) reporter Li Yanjie talked with Dave Feickert (Feickert), an advisor from New Zealand to China's Bureau of Coal Mining Safety, on this issue.

GT: It's been reported that there were traces of flooding, and the accident could have been avoided. How do you evaluate China's coal mine safety measures?

Feickert: The rescue of the miners has been an amazing feat of courage and engineering, but we need to remember those who have lost their lives. If you are constructing a coal mine, you need to have a very good system monitoring the conditions around it, especially when you know there are old mines, because if you leave a coal mine abandoned, it will fill with water.

So what happens in Western countries is to drill holes vertically in the ground and monitor water levels in the area around the new mine project. Underground, miners can monitor the water seeping in and check its chemical contents. This gives you information about the water flow, but from reports, it seems that this wasn't being done at the Wangjialing mine.

The second thing is that you need to find all the plans of the mines around your project. You need to do a risk assessment which includes the information about the whole area around the new project.

Every new project in China must have a risk assessment certificate from the State Administration of Work Safety (SAWS). But in developed countries, the responsible mining company conducts a risk assessment every day. This second part does not always happen in China.

At Wangjialing, workers reported there were traces of flooding, but the managers said keep working. The managers were pushing the project too fast, which is bad for safety and economics too.

When water comes into mines, managers should evaluate how serious it is, and the work should be stopped promptly, because it takes some time to get miners out of deep coal mines.

I think 280 people were working in Wangjialing coal mine at the time, and over 100 also got out before the trouble, leaving 153 behind.

GT: China has laws and regulations on workplace safety, but coal mine accidents keep happening. Why?

Feickert: Risk assessments in China are often too technical. In developed countries, the risk assessment process continues day by day. All employees take part. Workers will look for water and other dangerous factors.

There need to be changes in safety organization in China's companies, irrespective of ownership. Currently, managers are primarily responsible for production and safety.

Managers have the duty of supervising both production and safety, but if they are forced to choose, they usually choose production. I believe this is what happened in some accidents, probably including the one at the Wangjialing coal mine. They were reportedly trying to get the mine into production as soon as possible, as it is a large mine important for the energy needs of the country.

The authorities should form a safety triumvirate at mine or factory level, which stays in daily contact, with the manager at the top supported by a government SAWS inspector and a worker safety representative.

The manager is supported by the owner (government or private company), the inspector is supported by SAWS, and is independent, and the worker safety inspector is supported by the union.

This triumvirate then carries out risk assessment every day.

In the event of danger, such as in Wangjialing's case, the indications of possible neighboring water in an abandoned mine, the worker safety representatives and front line managers on site immediately inform both the responsible manager and the government inspector. The three parties meet to discuss how to solve the problem. If it is judged to be serious, the men should be taken out of the mine immediately and action is taken.

If the manager objects to withdrawal of the men, the government inspector must have the necessary power to act. In the developed countries, this is what happens, whoever the owner is.

In China, the government inspector does not have this general power, except where a company is not in compliance with all its safety licenses. If it is in compliance and in most large mines they are then the inspector's instruction can be contested by the manager. By the time the inspector has been to court to get his instruction upheld, it may well



Dave Feickert

be too late to save the workers.

Workers at the coal mine need more power to make decisions. Chinese law says workers have the right to stop work when it's unsafe. But how many miners in Wangjialing coal mine know they have this right? How many workers feel they are strong enough to tell the manager who is really the big boss, "We're coming out because it's unsafe?"

GT: How do you evaluate China's merging of coal mines last year?

Feickert: I think the government

did the right thing in closing many small coal mines. The mine owners were given the opportunity to improve mine safety, but they didn't. So the government is either closing them or merging them together with the large State-owned coal mines.

A lot of small mines are illegal, but this doesn't mean that large mines will never encounter accidents, as in the explosion at the US Massey mine last week that killed 25 people. Since small mines are often unregistered, this might be one reason why the company in charge of Wangjialing wasn't aware of the nearby mine caused the flooding.

GT: Does the relatively low level of education among Chinese miners make them hard to train?

Feickert: Yes, many Chinese miners come from countryside and are illiterate. But in Western countries, many miners are even less educated.

Take the US. A lot of new miners come from Central or South America, and they can't speak or read in English. Some of them are even illiterate in their

native languages.

In the US, every new miner needs to be trained. They are sent for training. Training, more training, then retraining. In New Zealand, all miners are trained in gas detection and first aid.

Miners are the most motivated, since it's their lives on the line. They can be trained even if they cannot read. You can show them videos for example, telling them how to do things.

Worker safety representatives should be workers with at least three and preferably five years' experience and have received training in risk assessment. This can be done quite easily, and the training of trainers for these people is envisaged in the 8 million euro (\$11.90 million) EU-China high risk industry safety and health co-operation program, which is nearly ready to start.

GT: Mining accidents used to be common in developed countries. Is this high-risk phrase just a necessary stage of development? When can the goal of zero accidents be achieved?

Feickert: It's true that many countries have experienced this, but China can learn from developed countries' experience and avoid coal mine accidents as much as possible.

Some mines in my country, New Zealand, didn't have any accidents last year – not just no fatal accidents, but injuries at all. China can definitely reach zero accidents, but when is uncertain. I believe the State Council needs to discuss how to introduce modern risk assessment into the high risk industries. We are happy to help.

GT: You once said Chinese coal mining safety experts are too often inclined to try to find an engineering solution to all problems. Why?

Feickert: When I first came to China and discussed why accidents happen, my Chinese colleagues sometimes said it is because there is not an engineering solution to the problem.

But take an automatic system, monitoring methane and gas, which uses computers. To keep computer monitoring going, you have to train people to do the maintenance work and read the information. The human factor is very important. You can't just think in engineering terms.

Everybody, from chief engineers to miners at the bottom, must be involved. There are always engineering solutions to problems but safety organization must include everyone. The managers and engineers are leaders but the miners are their eyes and ears.

Chinese Press

Polish air crash leaves nation floundering

The death of Polish President Lech Kaczynski, along with about 96 passengers including

top military and political leaders, in a plane crash in Russia has caused turmoil in Poland.

The prime minister has called for a presidential election to find a new head of state, which will be held in two weeks. But Poland is in a better situation than Kyrgyzstan, whose president was ousted a

few days ago.

Both will have to go through the process of political transformation, but Poland has a tradition of democracy and constitutional rights while Kyrgyzstan has not yet recovered from the shock of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The air crash might also

cause turmoil in the relationship between Poland and Russia.

Lech Kaczynski had long taken the side of the US when US-Russian conflicts occurred.

Conspiracy theorists will point to the crashed airplane Russian-design, its major overhaul in Russia last year, and

that it crashed in Russia.

Russia is doing well on this. Officials called for people to focus on the humanitarian help instead of politics in this matter, in hope of getting the relations of the two countries back on track.