

Turkey

Anger, Grief Blend At Coal Miner Funerals

Death Toll Reaches 283; 140 Trapped

BY DESMOND BUTLER
AND SUZAN FRASER
Associated Press

SOMA, Turkey — With photos of their loved ones pinned to their chests and chanting the names of lost miners, grieving relatives laid their dead to rest in mass burials Thursday, as gravediggers labored to make room for scores more victims of Turkey's worst mining disaster.

"The love of my life is gone," women wailed loudly, swaying and singing improvised laments about the departed as bodies were lowered, one by one, into the freshly dug graves.

Rescue teams recovered another nine victims, raising the death toll to 283 from Tuesday's disaster, with at least 140 miners believed still trapped underground, according to government figures.

Rage blended with grief as revulsion over poor safety conditions and what some perceived as government indifference set off protests across Turkey. "It's not an accident, it's murder," read a banner waved by trade unionists who marched through the streets of Istanbul.

The disaster has stirred up new hostility toward Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government and thrown his presidential ambitions off stride. Blackening his reputation further, Turkish newspapers published a photograph Thursday of one of Erdogan's aides kicking a protester who was being held on the ground by armed police.

At a graveyard in the mining town of Soma, where coal has been the main industry for decades, mourners said they

spent their whole lives fearing a disaster like Tuesday's, in which an explosion set off a deadly fire just as workers were preparing for a shift change, trapping hundreds underground. No miner has been brought out alive since before dawn Wednesday.

"The wives of the miners kiss their husbands in the morning. When they come back, even if they are five minutes late, everyone starts calling, said 45-year-old Gulizar Donmez, whose husband and father are both miners and whose neighbor was among the victims. "You never know what is going to happen."

Energy Minister Taner Yildiz said the search for survivors was being hampered by a fire that had spread to a conveyor system — engulfing a 650-foot (200-meter) stretch of tunnel — but progress was made Thursday toward extinguishing it. Rescue operations have been suspended several times as fire created toxic fumes and too-risky conditions for rescuers.

Emergency crews detected a drop in carbon monoxide levels "which means that the fire has gotten smaller," Yildiz said.

Erdogan, who is expected to announce his candidacy soon for Turkey's presidential election in August, was greeted by angry protests during a visit to Soma on Wednesday after he referred to mining accidents as "ordinary things" that "happen all the time."

The Turkish leader was forced to take refuge inside a supermarket after angry crowds shouting "Murderer!" and "Thief!" — in a reference to alleged corruption — clashed with police.

An Erdogan aide, Yusuf Yerkel, was photographed kicking a protester being pinned to

Mine deaths

More than 280 miners have died and another 150 are still missing in a Turkish coal mine explosion.

10 worst worldwide mine disasters

| Year | Location | Deaths |
|------|------------------------|--------|
| 1942 | Benxi, China | 1,549 |
| 1906 | Courrières, France | 1,100 |
| 1914 | Mitsubishi Hojo, Japan | 687 |
| 1960 | Datong, China | 682 |
| 1899 | Niihama, Japan | 512 |
| 1984 | Sao Paulo | 500 |
| 1984 | Mexico City | 500 |
| 1966 | Abercarn, Bulgaria | 488 |
| 1963 | Omuta, Japan | 447 |
| 1913 | Wales, U.K. | 438 |

NOTE: List includes disasters related to mining or mining extraction

Source: Steven Dutch, Natural and Applied Sciences, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay
Graphic: Chicago Tribune © 2014 MCT

the ground by special forces police.

Yerkel issued a statement Thursday expressing regret, but also claimed he was provoked. "I am sorry that I was not able to keep calm despite all the provocations, insults and attacks that I was subjected to," he said.

In contrast, Turkish President Abdullah Gul, visiting

Soma on Thursday, referred to the mine explosion as "a huge disaster," adding: "The pain is felt by us all."

The mood was more restrained than during Erdogan's visit, though townspeople angry at what they said was the slow rescue operation shouted at him, demanding that more be done to reach possible survivors.

Erdogan has made no secret of his desire to become Turkey's first popularly elected president. His party swept local elections in March despite a corruption scandal that forced him to dismiss four government ministers and has also implicated him and family members. Erdogan denies the allegations, saying they are part of a plot to bring his government down.

Turkey's largest trade union confederation, representing some 800,000 workers, joined a one-day strike Thursday by other unions to demand better working conditions for miners.

In the Black Sea port of Zonguldak, site of Turkey's previous worst industrial accident, where a 1992 gas explosion killed 263, miners gathered but refused to enter a mine. At the protest in Istanbul, trade union groups tried to march to the local social security department but were blocked by police and staged a sit-in instead.

Authorities said the disaster followed an explosion and a fire at a power distribution unit, and most deaths were caused by carbon monoxide poisoning. The government said 787 people were inside the mine at the time and that 383 were rescued, many with injuries.

Erdogan has promised a thorough investigation and Hurriyet newspaper reported that a team of 15 prosecutors has been assigned to the inquiry.

Investigator: More VA Complaints

WASHINGTON (AP) — New complaints about long wait lists and falsified patient appointment reports have surfaced at Veterans Affairs hospitals and clinics across the country, the department's internal watchdog said Thursday, but he said there's no proof so far that delays in treatment have caused any patient's death.

VA Secretary Eric Shinseki said he was "mad as hell" about allegations of severe problems and said he was looking for quick results from a nationwide audit. He rejected calls for him to resign and a senator's suggestion that he call in the FBI to investigate.

At a sometimes-combative congressional hearing, Richard Griffin, the department's acting inspector general, said that after an initial review of 17 people who died while awaiting appointments at the Phoenix VA hospital, none of the deaths appeared to have been caused by delays in treatment.

Putin: Ukraine Must Pay In Advance

KIEV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine must pay in advance for Russian gas supplies starting next month, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Thursday, raising pressure on the struggling neighbor as Moscow voiced dismay over what it says is Ukraine's reluctance to implement an international peace plan.

Putin said in a letter to European leaders that Ukraine's debt for Russian gas supplies has reached \$3.5 billion, and because of its refusal to pay Moscow, it will have to switch to pre-paid gas deliveries starting from June 1.

The Russian president first warned of the move in April in a letter to European leaders, whose nations are customers of Russian state-controlled Gazprom natural gas giant. Ukraine serves as a major conduit for Russian gas supplies to Europe, and pricing disputes have led to shut-downs in the past.

Putin said that gas talks involving Russia, Ukraine and the European Union have failed to reach a compromise, and pointed at Ukraine's refusal to pay even though it has received a \$3.2 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

Investors Pull Back From Stocks

NEW YORK (AP) — Investors retreated from stocks Thursday, leading the Dow Jones industrial average to its worst day in five weeks, after disappointing earnings from Wal-Mart and mixed news about the global economy.

Financial markets reflected broader investor jitters: government bonds rose, small-company stocks continued to plunge, and safe, slower-growth industries fared the best.

The latest economic data from the United States was mixed: Factory output fell. But fewer people sought unemployment benefits, evidence that hat solid hiring should continue. The news was more disappointing in Europe, where the economy of the 18 countries that share the euro saw output rise just 0.2 percent in the first quarter.



IRFAN KHAN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT
Fire comes down the hillside above La Moree Road in San Marcos, Calif., on Thursday.

Flare-Up In San Marcos Triggers More Evacuations In Calif. Fires

BY ELLIOT SPAGAT
AND JULIE WATSON
Associated Press

SAN MARCOS, Calif. — As calmer winds allowed firefighters to make progress on nine fires burning in San Diego County, one of the most serious blazes suddenly roared Thursday afternoon burning close to homes, triggering thousands of new evacuation orders and keeping the situation tenuous.

Growing flames raced along scrubby hillsides near the city of San Marcos as massive black plumes filled the afternoon skies after a half-day lull in winds that had allowed firefighters to gain ground against flames that have scorched thousands of acres this week.

Ash laden smoke limited visibility to a few feet at times in the inland suburban community. On one semi-rural street, five horses wandered nervously in a paddock as firefighters worked to protect nearby homes and barns.

Sheriff Bill Gore said the flare-up prompted more than 13,000 new evacuation notices in the San Marcos area and served as a "reminder to everybody just how volatile this can be." The new evacuations were in addition to more than 20,000 orders issued Wednesday. About 85,000 people live in San Marcos.

The flare-up in San Marcos ran up a slope in a heavily vegetated area but with no wind on it. The fire was being driven by fuel and topography, said Division Chief Dave Allen of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"It's created its own weather pattern there as it sucks oxygen in," he told a news conference.

State fire Capt. Kendal Bortisser said the fire was running east along hillsides behind California State University San Marcos.

The 1.56-square-mile blaze was only 5 percent contained. The fire, which broke out Wednesday, forced the evacuation of the university campus where nearly 10,000 students were in the middle of final exams. Graduation ceremonies were canceled.

Investigators were trying to determine the causes of the various fires.

Asked about the possibility of arson, the sheriff said he wouldn't prejudge the investigations. He noted that sparks from vehicles can easily ignite brush in such dry conditions.

Emergency officials said a significant number of fire-fighting aircraft had become available, including four air

tankers and 22 military helicopters, in addition to local agency helicopters.

Ten of the military helicopters were being used to battle a blaze that grew to 9.37 square miles on the Marine Corps' Camp Pendleton. Despite its growth, the fire was 20 percent contained and was no longer considered a threat to communities.

Twelve other military helicopters were available to the county.

Since the fires began, 125,000 evacuation notices have been sent, officials said. Schools also have been shut down and the Legoland amusement park had to close Wednesday. It reopened Thursday.

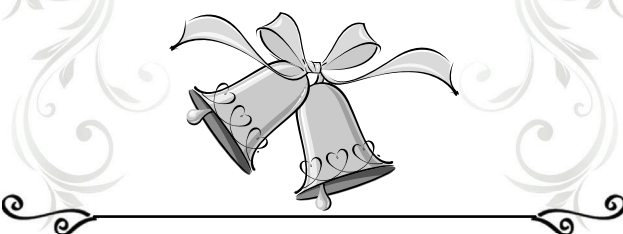
Greg Saska stood in front of his charred Carlsbad home Thursday in sandals that showed his soot-covered feet. He said he was not impressed with the fire response.

"I don't want to complain but I wish they had just made a little more effort to put the fire out," Saska said. "The end of the house right there that you see was still burning. And they (firefighters) just left. And I'm just kinda going, What would've been the big deal to stay here another 10 minutes and put that out totally. I just don't get it."

50th Anniversary Celebration

Mr. and Mrs. Haberman

The children and grandchildren of Earnie and Maxine Haberman would like to announce their 50th wedding anniversary. The couple was married on May 16, 1964. Their family requests a card shower. Greetings may be sent to PO Box 196, Tyndall, SD, 57066.



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