

Mine safety under scrutiny after Moura disaster

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By Bill Mason

BRISBANE — The 11 miners buried underground after an explosion at the Moura No 2 coal mine on August 7, along with their suffering families, are the victims of the profit drive of BHP and other corporate mining giants.

Serious questions have been raised about safety precautions at the mine, especially following two previous tragedies near the site — at Moura in 1986, in which 12 miners died, and at Kianga in 1975, in which 13 workers perished.

Some 5000 people gathered in Moura, a tiny central Queensland town, west of Rockhampton, on August 12, to honour the memory of the entombed miners.

Veteran Moura miner Alan Whyte told the gathering that the tragedy "could never undo the spirit of the underground miner".

Three scientists, experts in mine safety, — Drs Robert Barnes, Tony Green and Sally Leivesley — have called for a Senate inquiry into the Moura disaster.

Dr Leivesley said Queensland had experienced four underground mine explosions in 22 years and NSW one. WA also had underground pits.

"We now have a problem causing national safety concerns and it is time to ensure it is sorted out," she said on August 10. "The best way is through a Senate inquiry rather than a Mining Warden hearing.

"Queensland learnt the lesson years ago that police should not investigate police. The same applies to the mining industry. People end up investigating their own work."

United Mineworkers Union state president Andrew Vickers on August 10 criticised the Queensland government and the mining industry for not spending enough money to make the industry safer.

"There has been a lot of duck shoving and an ongoing debate for two years about reorganisation of the miners' rescue service in Queensland," Vickers said.

"The government and the Workers Compensation Board and the coal companies do not want to pay for it."

To compound the tragedy of Moura, it has been alleged that widows and families of the 11 dead miners could wait years for possible damages pay-outs from negligence claims against BHP.

This follows long court delays and legal stonewalling in a claim brought by six widows of miners killed in the 1986 Moura disaster.

Andrew Vickers said that a similar Supreme Court common law damages claim, lodged by the union for negligence in the 13 deaths at Kianga in 1975 took 15 years to settle.

Vickers said BHP had been "making things as hard as possible within the rules of the system. "They slow down the process, questioning every minor technical detail, making sure every point is argued through solicitors before it even gets to court."

Estimates of the total damages likely to be awarded if the widows in the 1994 disaster win range from \$2 million to \$3 million.

Compare this to the annual super-profit of \$1.28 billion announced on July 1 by BHP, Australia's biggest listed company.

Brisbane lawyer Bob Brittan, who represents six of the widows from the 1986 tragedy, said on August 11 that "heads should roll" over the latest mining disaster as "obviously something is wrong when you have another gas explosion in the mine."

Responding to the public outrage over revelations about the compensation delays over previous cases, the state government has announced that legislation would be introduced to speed up common-law claims for damages.

Meanwhile, the government has stated that it will set up a Mining Warden's inquiry into the latest Moura tragedy as soon as possible.

BHP has stated it will guarantee the jobs of the remaining 154 Moura underground miners until 1997, but it seems unlikely that the doomed Moura mine will ever reopen, raising speculation about eventual job losses in the area.

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