

Kremlin-backed separatists arrest director of Donetsk coal mine where 34 killed; mine resumes operations

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Relatives of a miner who died in the Zasyadko mining disaster on March 4 stand around his coffin prior to his funeral at a cemetery in Donetsk on March 6. Authorities say 34 miners were killed in a blast in the notoriously dangerous mine of Zasyadko, just a few kilometers from fighting in Russia's war against Ukraine.

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DONETSK, Ukraine – Kremlin-backed separatists have arrested the general director of the coal mine where a methane explosion killed 34 miners on March 4. While the Russian-backed authorities said little, they confirmed that the suspect will be jailed for two months pending further investigation into whether criminal charges should be filed.

Prosecutors in front of the Donetsk City Court didn't disclose the name of the suspect. But the website of the coal enterprise says that Paul E. Filimonov is the general director.

The management of the Zasyadko mine, where the explosion took place, could not be reached, although a secretary told the Kyiv Post that a statement regarding the accusations will be coming soon.

Meanwhile the self-proclaimed justice department of the separatist authorities said that more suspects might be arrested. "We are performing a criminal investigation. The current apprehended suspect will be questioned, and there might be reason to arrest more individuals who may have violated the Criminal Code," the Donetsk regional prosecutor's office said in a statement.

Despite the criminal investigation, the mine has resumed operations, saying conditions are safe again.

The Zasyadko mine is notorious for its fatal disasters and bad safety conditions. The biggest mine disaster in Ukraine's history happened at the Zasyadko mine in 2007, when 101 mineworkers were killed. Miners say safety conditions have not improved significantly since then.

Ukrainian authorities have also offered their help in investigating the disaster. However, officials in the breakaway republic have refused any help from Ukraine. Earlier, Ukrainian rescue workers were blocked from entering the Donetsk People's Republic as the separatist Ministry of Emergencies stated there were enough rescue workers.

One of the separatist leaders, Denis Pushilin, said that if help would be needed that the authorities in Donetsk would ask Russia or the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic. "We don't need help from Ukraine," Pushilin said during a press conference on March 4.

It remains unclear if the mine company will financially compensate the relatives of the killed miners.

"If the court finds the suspect guilty, then yes, there will be compensation. Only then there is legal ground to hold mine Zasyadko liable. We don't know how much compensation would be reserved for relatives. That's up to the Donetsk court. Our first priority now is to continue the criminal investigation," an official in the prosecutor's in Donetsk told the Kyiv Post by telephone.

The deputy general director of Zasyadko mine says safety has been improved since the March 4 disaster.

"A committee of experts has drafted new safety measures. The same experts have assessed the tragedy. According to the committee it is safe to continue operations," said Boris Boki. "The level of methane – that caused a fatal blast on March 4 – is currently in a normal state, so the mine can function properly."

Miners are still reluctant to speak with journalists as separatist fighters stand guard. "We are here by orders of our commander. That's all I have to say," said one of the armed men present at Zasyadko mine entrance said, refusing to identify himself.

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