

# Disaster

## PREPAREDNESS



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### Gas explosion in Poland

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- By Magdalena Szarafin-Staff reporter

Once again man has lost against the nature: 23 people were killed in the explosion of methane gas in the Halemba mine in Ruda Slaska, Poland. The youngest of them was only 21 years old, the oldest one was 59. It was the most tragic disaster in the Polish mining industry for over 20 years



#### How much is the human life worth?

It happened on Tuesday, 21 November. At about 4:30 pm there was a methane gas explosion at a depth of 1030 meters in the Halemba mine in Ruda Slaska near Katowice in Poland. There were 23 people at this level that time. The rescue operation had taken until Friday, 24 November. Nobody of the miners in concern had survived. The last dead bodies were found in the night from Thursday to Friday.

Only 8 of the dead miners were Haleba workers. The rest of them were employees of the external company Mard, which was contracted to collect the equipment from this mine (at this level there is coal extraction done any more). The total value of the equipment is over PLN 70 millions (about USD 24 millions).

#### Man or nature?

Was it possible, to avoid the tragedy? In order to cut costs, the mines often outsource different operations to external

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companies. Their employees earn only a part of that what a regularly employed miner does (approximately 40% less). They are mostly worse equipped and do not possess enough experience to participate in such risky operations as that at Halemba. Normally the training cycle of a miner takes some months or even years. They should be gradually introduced in the extremely difficult conditions in the mining industry.



John Russell / AP

The question, if the responsibility is on the man's or nature side should be answered in coming days as an investigation of this matter is currently being carried out. However, the youngest victim of the tragedy was in the mine only four times. And that was not the first gas explosion in this mine: a few months ago, in February, another miner, Zbigniew Nowak, was trapped at the same depth for 5 days. He had luck as he survived but this experience should have been taken as a warning.

**The list of death**

The following persons lost their lives during the tragedy in Halemba (list in alphabetical order):

- Teodor Banduch (50)
- Jan Bilman (45)
- Ireneusz Brabanski (32)
- Krzysztof Bubala (37)
- Dariusz Dola (30)
- Arkadiusz Falkus (29)
- Krystian Gaszka (41)
- Janusz Gesikowski (47)
- Andrzej Giemza (47)
- Przemyslaw Jozwiak (23)
- Daniel Kindla (21)
- Jacek Mierzchala (39)
- Mariusz Milkowski (36)
- Bernard Poloczek (46)
- Krzysztof Prygiel (51)
- Tadeusz Rymarzewski (51)

- Henryk Samisz (52)
- Wit Siepka (48)
- Krystian Sitek (47)
- Edward Sobota (59)
- Mirosław Toczek (45)
- Zbigniew Turniak (38)
- Adrian Wasowski (23)

Well, of course there are many more victims of this tragedy: the families of the miners and their friends.

### **Some statistics**

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The Halemba mine is one of the deepest mines in Silesia. Its construction was started in 1943. It was put into operation in 1957.

It ranks among the mines of the 4th (highest) threat level. It also belongs to the deepest and the most dangerous mines.

In 1990 19 miners were killed there in the gas explosion, and 20 were injured. In 1991 further 5 miners lost their lives.

During 2003 38 people were killed in the mining industry in Poland. 14 people lost their lives next year. In 2005 there were 21 miners killed in disasters. In 2006 there are 26 persons.

### **National mourning and further measures**

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In connexion with the tragic disaster, Polish citizens and people from abroad try to offer support to the families of the miners killed. There have come many letters of condolence from all over the world for a few days: from Pope Benedict XVI, Jacques Chirac, Vaclav Klaus, Valdas Adamkus, Wiktor Juszczenko, Jose Manuel Barroso and many other officials. Private persons and organisations (e.g. Caritas) support the victims offering them financial help.

The Polish government announced a state mourning which had taken until Saturday, 25 November. The Polish national flag had been half-masted during that time and the most entertainments had been cancelled or postponed.

Currently an investigation has been initiated by the Polish Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro. It has been divided into three components. The first one is about the direct reason of the disaster; the second concerns the sense of going underground to retrieve the equipment and the third one if during the selection of contractors all necessary procedures were fulfilled.

Was the Halemba tragedy the last one? Will the decision makers learn from it? The questions are difficult to answer. Energy in

Poland is in 95% produced from coal. The ancestors have already extracted the coal from higher levels. That, what has been left, is coal at the lower levels, which is qualitatively better than that from the higher levels but it is also much more risky to extract it.

Where is the border of risk and people's safety in combination with the production of energy for the national economy?

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