

Officials to gather forensics

CSI-style investigation taking shape at mine

By SONJA BARISIC
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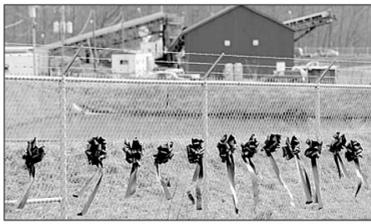
They will probably look for scorch marks and melted plastic, examine equipment for signs of a short-circuit, establish whether the methane detectors were working and take air samples to check for highly combustible coal dust.

They will also take notice of where the bodies lay, track the victims' footprints and perhaps look for farewell notes in the miners' lunch pails.

Sometime in the next few days, once the toxic gases in the Sago Mine have cleared, federal and state investigators will go in and begin gathering forensic clues in an effort to establish exactly what touched off the deadly explosion and how the victims spent their final hours.

At the same time, investigators on the outside will pore through safety records and interview just about everyone connected with the mine — inspectors, managers and coal miners alike.

The blast Jan. 2 killed one miner and spread



AP PHOTO
Black ribbons are tied on the perimeter fence of the Sago Mine in Tallmansville, W. Va., in memory of 12 coal miners who died after a mine explosion.

carbon monoxide that slowly asphyxiated 11 other men 260 feet below ground as they waited in the farthest reaches of the mine to be rescued. Establishing how the tragedy unfolded will be something akin to the way highway patrol officers try to reconstruct a car accident.

"It's the same approach, in that every bit of evidence is very crucial," said Richard Begley, a former mine boss, now an engineering professor at Marshall University.

Investigators already have some clues, including a sort of timeline written by one of the trapped miners, and a place to start: Rescue workers discovered that all of the

seals on a closed-off section of the mine had been blown toward the surface, indicating that was where the explosion took place.

"With an explosion you want to know where and how it was initiated," said Terry Farley, a member of the state investigative team.

To pinpoint the cause, the investigation team — which typically includes engineers, mine safety supervisors and mine ventilation experts — will most likely look for charring and other burn patterns, said Chris Hamilton, a former mine foreman and mine rescue instructor who is now the senior vice president of the West Virginia Coal Association. And they will want to ask miners who escaped to describe conditions in the mine just before the explosion, he said.

Tests conducted during the rescue detected high levels of carbon monoxide, and rescue workers found little evidence of fire. That suggests the explosion was probably caused by methane alone, and not, say, coal dust stirred up by the miners, Begley said.

The autopsies and toxicology reports could help investigators establish how long the miners were alive. Investigators will also probably try to reconstruct what the miners did as the tragedy unfolded, said Max Houck, a former FBI scientist who is director of West Virginia University's Forensic Science Initiative.



AP PHOTO
A Muslim pilgrim points to portraits of his daughters at the al-Moaysem Medical Center, in Mina, Saudi Arabia, on Friday. Hundreds of worried pilgrims crowded around the photo display, scanning anxiously for pictures of loved ones who may have been among the 363 people killed Thursday in a stampede.

Death toll rises to 363 in stampede

Authorities look for ways to prevent future incidents

The Associated Press

MECCA, Saudi Arabia

Pilgrims who ignored instructions to leave behind baggage and others who joined the rituals illegally, swelling the huge crowds, caused the stampede that killed 363 people during the Islamic hajj, or pilgrimage, officials said Friday.

The Interior Ministry defended the performance of security forces, saying they intervened within minutes and saved lives when the disaster occurred Thursday at al-Jamarat, a giant platform where three pillars representing the devil are located. Pilgrims pelt the pillars with stones in a symbolic purging of their sins.

About 600,000 pilgrims were squeezed in at the main eastern entrance ramp to the platform when about a dozen people stumbled over baggage, tripping others behind them, ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Mansour al-Turki told reporters.

Saudi Arabia appeared eager to avert criticism that it has not done enough to prevent stampedes that have plagued the stoning ritual during the past two decades.

Next week, Saudi authorities will begin tearing down the current platform and building a new four-level one with more access

ramps to accommodate the millions of pilgrims, al-Turki said. The new platform is to be finished within two years.

Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdel-Aziz called on Saudi clerics to issue fatwas, or religious edicts, allowing pilgrims to carry out the stoning before noon to spread out the crowds, a change in a centuries-old tradition.

"The number of pilgrims is only going to increase in the coming years, so there must be solutions so that this sort of incident is not repeated," Prince Nayef said, adding that a commission would study the accident and make recommendations.

"Those who know the facts know the security forces prevented many things that could have taken more lives," he said.

Al-Turki said security forces "were alerted to the incident immediately once it was seen through observation cameras, and moved in within two minutes."

The cause of the stampede "can be linked to the dynamics of the crowds," al-Turki said, giving journalists a detailed analysis of the stampede, complete with security camera footage of the pilgrims and computer images of the platform.

Many people ignored police requests that they leave their baggage at a separate site nearby.

A huge number of unregistered pilgrims also increased the size of the crowds, al-Turki said. The official count for this year's hajj was around 2.3 million pilgrims, but the unregistered participants likely brought it to more than 3 million.

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