

Gas Find Comes at Human Cost

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In their haste to confirm the discovery of a massive gas deposit, Turkmen government officials may have contributed to an accident that left two workers and ten others in hospital with burns. Although the blast occurred in early November, news of the casu

Gas workers at the Mary regional branch of the state-run Turkmengaz corporation say the explosion happened when a well was brought on stream at the recently-discovered South Yolotan gas field. A huge flare melted the metal top of the drilling rig, killing two workers instantly and causing burns of varying degrees of seriousness to other personnel. The latter were taken for treatment at the main regional hospital, in the city of Mary.

Eyewitnesses said the accident happened because operations began too quickly, and the well shaft was not yet ready for drilling to start. The oil and gas minister, who had arrived for the launch, insisted that drilling begin even though the prospecting team warned this was premature.

In a televised speech on November 5, President Saparmurat Niyazov mentioned there had been a big gas flare, but made no reference to casualties.

The oil and gas industry and local media outlets have also remained silent. One industry employee said anyone who revealed this kind of confidential information faced the sack. He noted that in the past, a Turkmengaz spokesman had been dismissed for revealing too much information.

It is not surprising that the authorities wanted to press ahead with opening up a gas field that they say has almost twice the reserves of Russia's biggest field.

The Russian firm Gazprom remains the main customer for Turkmenistan's natural gas, and Ashgabat is keen to move away from depending solely on Russia and to export to other countries such as India, China and the United Arab Emirates.

It would also like to export to west European countries via pipelines that would circumvent Russia, although these have yet to be built. When German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmayer was in Turkmenistan in early November, Niyazov laid great emphasis on the potential of the South Yolotan field.

In the headlong to rush to get the gas field up and running, it is clearly the launch that counts, not the human casualties, which have simply been covered up.

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