

Kyrgyzstan: Life at the Coalface

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Amateur coalminers risk life and limb digging out a livelihood.

The deaths of four men killed while working in an abandoned coal mine has highlighted the daily risks undertaken by thousands of young people in Kyrgyzstan who see illegal mining as their only way of making a living.

The four freelance miners –known locally as “Apaches” because of their weathered and tanned appearance – died in a rockfall on October 11 in an underground tunnel at the Karatyt mine, in the Aksy district of the southern Jalalabad region.

The south has the highest unemployment and poverty rates in the country, and those who become Apaches do so for lack of any other viable option.

When it was part of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan had 12 mines which supplied coal to neighbouring Uzbekistan as well as local consumers. But as the USSR collapsed and subsidies from Moscow stopped coming, the state-run ones fell into disuse. Although the country had five opencast mines, it is the pits, often 100 metres below ground, that are now being exploited by illicit mining teams.

Conditions underground are extremely hazardous, and the men have no safety equipment. The main dangers are collapsing roofs and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Within the last year there have been a number of reported fatalities at mines in Suluktu, Kyzylkiya and Tashkumyr. At the beginning of March, for example, two local men were found asphyxiated by coal fumes 65 metres underground near Kyzylkiya.

“Dozens of people die every year from unauthorised coal mining,” said Emil Akmatov, press service chief at the ministry for ecology and emergency situations. “For many residents of coal towns, where there is universal unemployment, mining is the only way to earn money.”

The director of the government agency in charge of industrial and mining safety, Turabek Sarkulov, told IWPR that between 15 and 20 people die in the mines every year.

“Many fatalities go unnoticed by the authorities,” he noted. “People prefer to drag the bodies out themselves and bury them without any fuss.”

Ulan, a self-confessed Apache, agreed that the figures are underreported, “We intentionally hide the real number of Apaches killed, because we’re scared the authorities will close all the mines and we’ll be out of work.”

The rewards for this high-risk job are meagre, with a tonne of coal laboriously extracted by hand selling for just 700 or 800 soms, about 20 US dollars.

The mining season begins in autumn and goes on through the winter, when demand for fuel is highest and sales can be made quickly.

Teams of Apaches are usually led by an experienced former professional miner, from what used to be one of the best paid industries in the Soviet Union. Since the Kyrgyz coal industry foundered, many others have moved away to Russia or Kazakhstan, where their skills are still in demand.

Bakyt, 39, is one of those who remained. He has run a mining team for seven years to support his family in Tashkumyr. Sometimes, his wife helps out by selling bags of the coal he extracts.

“It’s a very good time for us at the moment, as we have no shortage of customers – our coal is cheaper than what the state can offer,” said Bakyt.

Asked whether he feared accidents, Bakyt just shrugged his shoulders.

Local government officials in charge of areas that once thrived on the coal industry admit there is a huge problem. “Almost all the factories here are standing idle. If a person doesn’t work somewhere, he’ll have nothing to feed his family with,” said Maxim Toktosunov, head of Tashkumyr’s town council.

Toktosunov said a study conducted by council officials found that seven out of ten people in the town were living below the breadline. “People are forced to do this [mining] because they have no other choice,” he said.

A commission set up by the town authorities to investigate the latest deaths found that, in the words of one of its members, Ikram Yuldashev, “People die in collapses because of unemployment and poverty. We constantly inform the people about the dangers of mining coal in abandoned tunnels and coal fields. But people keep on mining anyway. We are unable to stop this.”

That response is not good enough for trade unionists and non-government organisations, NGOs, who blame the authorities for failing to curb illegal mining or create alternative forms of employment.

“Why were we not included in the commission? Because we would have stopped them hushing it up and closing the case quickly,” said Janysh Abdyrakmanov, chief health and safety inspector with the regional trade union council.

“Our town of Tashkumyr is collapsing, gradually and irrevocably,” said Galina Vasilyanova, head of the Social Foundation for Supporting Legal Reforms. “Life gets more difficult every year. Many people leave, and those who remain can barely survive. If there is no work and no social progress, how can you say things will be better tomorrow? People are not afraid of dying in a mine collapse, they are afraid of [what will happen] tomorrow.”

An official from the town’s office for civil defence, who requested anonymity, said, “The local authorities are entirely to blame, at the level of village councils, district akims [local government heads] and town mayors. They should prevent illegal coal mining. In 2001, the governor of Jalalabad region issued orders to all district akims and mayors to implement a series of urgent measures to prevent tragedies. But they did not carry it out - and people died as a result.”

A man selling sacks of coal by the side of the main highway from Osh north to the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek

dismissed the dangers he faced by mining illegally, “What do you suggest instead? What should I do if there is no work in the town, none of the factories here are functioning, and the children want to eat? I’d rather die in a mine collapse than see the tears of hungry children and hear their cries for food.

“It’s not dangerous for us to earn a living this way - the most dangerous thing is to go without food.”

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