



Chilean mine rescue leads to soul searching in China

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The inspirational rescue of 33 Chilean miners, broadcast live around the world this week, has been met with mixed feelings in China. While sharing in the joy of the miners' liberation from ten weeks underground, many in China are asking what would have happened if the workers had been trapped in a Chinese mine.

Both the official China Daily and the blogger Xi Mengzhou pinpointed the almost complete lack of emergency shelters as the key difference between Chinese and Chilean mines. While the Chilean miners could find sanctuary, get fresh air, food and water, and even watch television, Chinese miners trapped underground would have no such luxuries.

Zhou Weixing, one of the last three miners to be rescued from a pit in Guizhou last year, told Xi Mengzhou that he had to subsist on bark and artesian water for 25 days before finally being hauled to safety. Zhou said, "generally speaking larger mines might have emergency shelters, smaller mines hardly ever. I've been working in the mines for five, six years. I've only heard of such shelters, never actually seen one."

Xi Mengzhou described the failure of China's mining industry to build sufficient shelters as tantamount to ignoring the most fundamental human right, namely the right to life. People in China should be ashamed, he said, that while a small developing country like Chile can protect all its miners' lives, China's mines continue to claim thousands of lives each year.

The China Daily, in a strongly worded editorial Friday, called on China's mine owners, especially those in the private sector, not to ignore the lessons of the Chilean mine saga, and urged the government to take a tougher stand against those who disregard workplace safety.

Given the private sector's past record of negligence, there must be forceful government intervention to make sure it takes the matter seriously... Profit-minded mine operators will not act appropriately until they know they can no longer expect the government to treat them with kid gloves.

The same day, the People's Daily announced that the authorities had already closed down 1,600 small scale and unlicensed coalmines this year in a bid to improve safety. The announcement was clearly timed to demonstrate the Chinese government's professed commitment to mine safety but until the Chinese government and mine bosses start acting like their counterparts in Chile and really put safety first, valuing human life above excessive profits, very few people will believe them.

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