

Miner deaths linked to cutbacks

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New York Times News Service

WASHINGTON — The deaths of 24 coal miners in five days, including 13 killed Tuesday in south-central Tennessee in what the authorities called an "apparent" explosion, has raised new questions about the government's commitment to enforcing mine safety.

The United Mine Workers union, mine-safety partisans and congressional overseers of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Administration charge that the Reagan administration's budget cuts are related to the nearly 8 percent increase in mine deaths so far this year.

THE FATAL EXPLOSION Tuesday at the Grundy mine 21 of the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Co., 20 miles west of Chattanooga, was the second Appalachian mine accident in two days that apparently involved methane, an odorless explosive gas found in coal beds.

On Monday, eight miners died in an explosion at an Adkins Coal Co. mine at Topmost, Ky.

And last Thursday, three miners were crushed to death when a roof fell in a tunnel under Leatherwood Mountain at Bergoo, in north-central West Virginia.

ROOF FALLS, the sudden plunging of tons of

slate on workers, are the most common cause of fatalities in the mines. But the five-day toll of 21 since Monday was attributed, at least in early and sometimes conflicting official reports, to explosions of mine gas, a hazard regarded as more controllable by strict inspection.

Explosive mixtures of methane with air are normally prevented by rigidly regulated forced ventilation. Gas throughout a mine must be evacuated so that it does not reach the legal maximum level of 1 percent, the point where it would explode.

The two explosions were almost certain to bring a congressional investigation.

UNDER THE GOVERNMENT hiring freeze imposed by Reagan in January, a mine safety agency spokesman, Kathy Snyder, said Wednesday, there has already been a reduction of 73 mine inspectors by retirement or resignation. The inspection force in District 7, which covers most of the South, has fallen from 133 to 122 in the last year.

The safety office of the United Mine Workers said that the death toll since Dec. 3 was 27, of which 21 were in sites. The coal industry death toll for the year stood at 143 Wednesday, against 133 in 1980.

"They at least have got to be embarrassed over there, but maybe that's all," said Danny Davidson,

the union's assistant safety director, referring to the mine safety agency.

SPOKESMEN FOR THE agency said that "there were reports" that the Tennessee miners had been tunneling near abandoned works of Grundy mine 21 and had "broken through" a block of coal into a gas-filled passage, causing an explosion.

A "breakthrough" can bring a sudden burst of methane or an asphyxiating "blackdamp." This risk is so high that federal mine safety regulations require small holes to be drilled at least 10 feet ahead of advancing mining machinery. A spokesman here said that it had not been determined whether this safety procedure had been followed.

Grundy Mine 21 of the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Co., a subsidiary of the Fluor Corp., an international contractor, has been cited for 91 infractions of the federal mine safety code since January 1979, a spokesman for the federal agency said. In the same period, the mine, or portions of it, were ordered temporarily closed three times because of "imminent danger" violations. The federal agency said the Adkins mine had 139 safety citations in the last three years and four closure orders.

Neither total is unusually high.

1981 Grundy No 21 Mine explosion NEWS

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