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Methane suspected in blast

WHITWELL, Tenn. (AP) — An explosion that killed 13 Tennessee coal miners probably was caused by methane gas seeping from the coal seam, officials said Wednesday.

But in another mine disaster, United Mine Workers President Sam Church said slipshod handling of explosives may have contributed to a blast that killed eight in a Kentucky mine a day before the Tennessee blast, and suggested mine officials should be prosecuted.

And Kentucky's medical examiner said at least three victims of the accident near Topmost, Ky., were carrying cigarette lighters when they died Monday.

"There was loose powder all over that place ... and there were (blasting) caps all over the face" of the coal seam in the Adkins Coal Co. No. 18 mine, Church said.

He said he was told that the victims took 25 cases of explosives into the mine minutes before the accident, but only 15 cases were found by rescue workers.

However, Kentucky Mines and Minerals Commissioner Willard Stanley said 22 cases of explosives had been found. And state and federal officials characterized the mine's safety record as relatively good.

Church said his comments were unofficial, but based on information

he received from officials at the scene and company personnel. The company has said it will not comment on any matters under investigation.

In Whitwell, a tiny town in southeastern Tennessee, relatives identified the bodies of the 13 men who died Tuesday three miles inside a mountain.

"They've been mining coal in this area for 100 years and this is the first fatal explosion they've ever had," said Harry Joe Hooper, father of a miner and owner of a funeral parlor used as a makeshift morgue for the bodies. "What makes it tough is that I knew all of them.

"I've got one back there I used to play guitar with. There's one I went to school with ... I got home at 4:30 this morning and lay down but I couldn't go to sleep. It's tough."

Tuesday's blast was the third fatal mine accident in Appalachia in five days — and the worst in Tennessee since 84 men died 70 years ago Wednesday in a mine collapse at Brieville. In the state's worst mine accident, 184 miners died in a mine at Coal Creek, Tenn., in 1911.

In addition to the eight killed at Topmost, Ky., on Monday, three miners were killed last Thursday in a rock and slate fall in a mine in Bergoo, W.Va. Before that, the last

major coal mine accident was last April, when 15 men died near Redstone, Colo.

The latest explosion ripped through a section of the No. 21 mine owned by Tennessee Consolidated Coal Co., and operated by its subsidiary, Grundy Mining Co. Investigators suspect methane gas, a common problem in deep coal mines, but federal mine officials said it may be several months before the cause is determined.

"I think there's strong evidence that's (methane) what it was," said John Parish, Gov. Lamar Alexander's press secretary. "But I don't think anybody is saying that officially."

Before inspectors can enter the mine, its ventilation must be repaired to disperse any explosive gas, said John McGrath, spokesman for the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration.

Also, he said, inspectors would check carbon monoxide levels and look for coal dust, another potential source of explosion.

Officials said about 30 miners were in the Whitwell Mountain mine at the time of the explosion, with 13 in the blast area. The others got out safely.

Parish said the blast killed all 13 instantly.

1981 Grundy No 21 Mine explosion
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