

Hopes Are Dashed For Miners

ORANGEVILLE, Utah (UPI) — Rescuers searching for 14 missing miners found 12 bodies late Saturday in smoked-filled tunnels of a burning coal mine and officials gave up hope of finding two others alive, bringing the presumed death count to 27.

Exhausted crews, wearing fire-retardant clothing and oxygen masks, stumbled onto the bodies deep in a dead-end tunnel of the Wilberg Mine. They had found 25 bodies over three days in Utah's worst mining accident in nearly four decades.

Thirteen other bodies were found Friday by weary crews battling resurgent fires along coal seams nearly a mile underground.

"We feel there will be no survivors. We're simply looking for bodies now," said Emery Mining Corp. spokesman Bob Henrie following a private briefing with relatives of workers who had been missing since the fire erupted Wednesday night.

"We have searched all parts of the mine where we think survivors could be found," he said.

The 25 confirmed deaths at the Wilberg Mine 115 miles southeast of Salt Lake City were the most in a Utah mining accident since 1945, when 23 coal miners died in an explosion at nearby Sunnyside.

Henrie's grim prediction did not surprise Kathy Riddle, who earlier Saturday said she was losing hope

her missing husband, Kelly, would be found alive deep within the mountain mine tunnel.

"My children ask me if he is dead yet, has he burned up," she said. "I'm just ready to give up hope." Riddle was not among the four dead identified in the latest discovery.

The latest casualties included Nannette M. Wheeler, 33, of Castledale — the only woman among the trapped miners. About 100 workers were in the mine when the fire, possibly started by an overheated conveyor belt, broke out nearly a mile inside the mountain.

Thirteen bodies were found Friday, including six company executives or supervisors. The officials

said in the mine the night the fire started to watch an attempt at a world production record.

Emery officials denied the attempt at the record was linked to the fire, but some relatives of the missing were skeptical. Their doubts were fueled by federal reports that the mine had been cited for 264 safety violations since 1983, including 26 uncovered in a Dec. 5 inspection.

"They were trying to break the world record and I think that had something to do with it," Riddle said. "They just wanted to go after those bonuses."

Federal inspectors said all problems found in the recent inspection had been corrected within 72 hours.

They added the number of violations was not unusual for a large mining operation.

Only four identities were released late Saturday as a result of the latest discovery of bodies. They included Wheeler; Lester Walls Jr., 23, Huntington; John Wilsey, 31, Orangeville; and Curtis Carter, 29, Huntington.

Officials had hoped the missing workers might have retreated to a safety chamber deep underground where canvas sheets could be pulled down to block out smoke. They said the chamber contained enough air to keep a dozen people alive for six days.

When searchers reached the chamber, it was empty, but bodies were found nearby.

Volunteers from as far away as Pennsylvania and Kentucky braved choking smoke and searing heat to explore deeper into the tunnel Saturday, but were repelled by recurring outbreaks of fire.

The fire was sufficiently contained late Saturday to permit a more thorough search of side tunnels.

A heavy cloud of smoke continued to billow from the mine entrance, blackening the snow-covered mountain above. Roadblocks kept everyone but rescue workers at least eight miles from the mine.

Mining spokesman John Serfustini said the rescue camp near the mine entrance looked like a "combat zone."

1984 Wilberg Mine fire NEWS3

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