

# 3 killed, 9 missing in coal mine blast

Cave-in caused sparks, explosion; rescue workers among missing

Associated Press

BROOKWOOD, Ala. — An explosion rocked a deep coal mine, killing at least three miners and leaving nine others missing and presumed dead, a company spokesman said Monday.

Some of the victims were described as rescue workers who had gone into the depths of the mine trying to save others.

Along with the dead and missing, four people were injured in the Blue Creek No. 5 mine, and one of them was in critical condition, said Kyle Parks of Walter Industries.

The explosion was caused by a cave-in Sunday during maintenance operations at the mine 36 miles southwest of Birmingham, said Parks, corporate communications director for the company based in Tampa, Fla.

The falling rock struck electrical equipment, creating sparks that ignited methane gas, said Dennis Hall, a spokesman for the company's subsidiary, Jim Walter Resources Inc. Methane is a natural component of most coal seams.



PORFIRIO SOLORZANO Associated Press

The Jim Walter Mine No. 5 in Brookwood, Ala., is seen Monday. At far right is the elevator shaft that takes the miners down to their work areas underground. An explosion at the mine Sunday killed at least three miners and left nine others missing and feared dead, a spokesman said.

Hall said 25 to 30 workers were in the mine performing maintenance work when the accident occurred about 5:45 p.m. Sunday.

The company said Blue Creek No. 5 is the deepest vertical shaft coal mine in North America, with operations at 2,140 feet underground. It employs 402 people.

Mine rescue teams worked

through the night to evacuate those underground. Four were brought out and taken to hospitals, but all other miners and rescue personnel were evacuated from the mine Monday, the company said in a statement Monday.

"Of the miners we have apparently lost, most were people who heroically volunteered to help their co-workers," said

George Richmond, president of Jim Walter Resources.

It wasn't immediately clear how many of the dead or missing were rescue workers trapped in the mine. Hall said the rescue workers were caught by erupting fires, but company officials were uncertain how quickly the fires started after the initial accident.

By late morning Monday, the

mine in hills just outside Brookwood was quiet, with a flag on a building flying at half-staff and two ambulances parked near the mine shaft.

The explosions were a shock to the community of Brookwood, where nearly all the 1,500 residents either work in a mine or have a relative or friend who does.

Relatives of one miner awaited word of his fate outside a Jim Walter Resources office. "We just hope he's among the missing," said a man, who did not give his name. A woman sat beside him in a pickup truck, crying.

The mine, which opened in 1978, produces low-sulfur coal that is burned in power plants and in metallurgical operations.

Two of the injured were identified as Raymond Ashworth, 53, who was listed in critical condition in the burn unit at University Hospital in Birmingham, and Tony Key, 49, in satisfactory condition. Skip Palmer and Michael McLe were hospitalized at DCH Regional Medical Center in Tuscaloosa.

The explosion was the latest in a series of accidents for Jim Walter Resources. Last month, a construction worker was killed in a fall at a company coal processing facility.

The No. 5 Mine was also the site of a blast in 1993 in which four workers were seriously burned.

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