

Beat: Miscellaneous

China discloses 31 deaths in tunnel fire after nearly 2 weeks

-, 14.03.2014, 17:02 Time

USPA News - At least 31 people were killed and nine others remain missing after an explosion and fire engulfed dozens of vehicles in a tunnel in northern China earlier this month, authorities said on Thursday, disclosing a much higher toll than previously reported. The accident happened at around 2:50 p.m. local time on March 1 when two tankers loaded with methanol rear-ended inside Yanhou Tunnel that links Jincheng in Shanxi province and Jiyuan in Henan province.

The collision caused a spill before a fire ignited the flammable liquid, engulfing 42 cars and trucks with cargo. Chinese authorities initially said only a dozen people were killed and put the final death toll at 13 about 24 hours after the accident, when they said rescue operations at the scene had ended. But Yang Yuhong, a spokesperson for the State Administration of Work Safety, confirmed on Thursday that the death toll had risen to 31 and that nine others were still missing. It was not immediately clear why it took nearly two weeks for more information to be released, but the confirmation of the higher death toll came hours after China wrapped up an annual session of the National People's Congress. The timing led to speculation that the true scale of the tunnel inferno was kept quiet to avoid disruption at the high-profile convention. Chinese authorities, however, said it had been difficult to identify the victims due to the nature of the accident. "Because the vehicles burned for a long time, the remains were highly carbonized. It is very difficult to confirm the number and identities of the victims," said Li Jing of the State Administration of Work Safety, adding that DNA identification was being used. Roads in China are known to be among the most dangerous in the world with more than 70,000 fatalities and 300,000 injuries a year, according to the country's Public Security Ministry. Many accidents are the result of drivers violating traffic laws, fatigue, poor road conditions and overloaded vehicles. In June 2013, a bus in the city of Xiamen in eastern China burst into flames, killing 47 people and injuring 34 others. And in June 2009, a bus in the Chinese city of Chengdu caught fire, killing 25 passengers.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-2000/china-discloses-31-deaths-in-tunnel-fire-after-nearly-2-weeks.html>

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