Break the silence on Azerbaijan oil workers' deaths

In Azerbaijan, oil workers and their families are demanding answers about offshore safety standards, but the authorities have stayed silent for nine months about the causes of a disaster that killed 31 people.

Nine months after 31 workers drowned in Azerbaijan’s worst-ever oil industry disaster, the country’s authorities have still not said a word about how it happened or what mistakes could be avoided in future.

Most of the victims were thrown into the water when a lifeboat smashed against the side of production platform no. 10 at the Guneshli oil field in the Caspian sea, as they tried to escape a fire during a force 10 gale on 4 December last year.

The Oil Workers Rights Protection Organisation (OWRPO), a campaign group, says state oil company managers broke safety laws for the sake of keeping production going, and that workers did not even have life jackets on during the attempt to evacuate the platform.

State officials lied to the media and the public during the emergency, and treated oil workers’ families with contempt, the OWRPO said in a report published in February.

The government was quick to dismiss the report – but its own 14-person commission, set up to deal with the disaster’s consequences, has not breathed a word. The prosecutor has opened a criminal case (which is standard procedure), but has made public no details of its investigation. It is not known whether it has questioned managers accused by oil workers of glaring safety breaches.

Mivvari Gharamanli, president of the OWRPO, said in an interview: “It’s ‘oil first, people second’, just like in Soviet times. The human factor is devalued. It should be other way round: people first, and then the oil.

“People should have been evacuated in a timely way. Attention should have been paid to these safety issues. But the human factor comes at the end”, she said.
The oil workers’ trade union should have been monitoring safety standards, but were “not interested” in that, nor in investigating the causes of the accident, she said. “They helped with a bit of money to the families, that’s all. And we are talking about human lives here.”

The events of 4 December, as described in the media and the OWRPO’s report, were as follows. (The OWRPO report is here; there are news agency reports here and here; and a valuable analytical article on the Caspian Barrel web site.)

Wind speed had risen to 38-40 metres per second, and the height of waves rose from 8 metres to 9-10 metres. At about 17.40, a submarine gas pipe running from the platform broke. There was an explosion of gas escaping from it, and a fire broke out, which soon spread to a number of the oil and gas wells operated from the platform.

Due to the strength of the storm, firefighting and rescue vessels were unable to reach the platform, which is operated by Azneft, a production division of Socar (the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic). There were 63 workers on the rig; most of them evacuated via the north side of the platform and boarded two lifeboats. The OWRPO says that the way the evacuation was implemented by those in charge on the platform showed a lack of safety training and awareness.

Both of the boats were lowered on cables to about 10 metres above sea level: it was decided not to lower them into the water for fear of being dashed against the platform by the storm.

One of the lifeboats was blown by the wind and got wedged between the platform’s supporting legs. That saved the lives of its occupants, who were rescued after the storm subsided.

The cables holding the other boat snapped. It was blown against the side of the rig and broke into pieces. Those on board were thrown in to the water.

The rescue vessels, still held back by the force of the storm, only managed to pull three men from the water, one of whom died straight away.

The rest of those who had been on that lifeboat perished. The OWRPO concluded that there were 12 dead and 19 missing, presumed dead (listed in the OWRPO report). There has been no official list of victims published by the government or Socar.

Three other Azerbaijani oil workers lost their lives on 4 December – Dzhavad Khudaverdiev (44), Bakhman Dzhafarov (54) and Rovshan Mamedov (41) were swept out to sea from production platform no. 501 at the Oil Rocks oil field – bringing the total number of deceased on that day to 34.

The OWRPO conducted its own investigation into the tragedy, and published it on 24 February this year. The organisation concluded that:

- Workers had reported a gas leak from the pipeline a day before the disaster. They were told by the managers of the ‘28 May’ oil and gas production department not to stop production – although doing so might have minimised losses when the accident happened.

- The practice, and legal requirement in Azerbaijan, of reducing worker numbers on rigs to the minimum during stormy weather, was not followed. Of the 63 people on the rig when the fire began, 15 were members of a construction and drilling team – in breach of the Labour Code, which states that construction, installation and dismantling work on platforms should be stopped during stormy weather.
There were other non-essential workers, including five catering staff, on the platform. “The heads of departments are obliged to explain to society, and the families of killed and missing oil workers: why didn’t they send them away, if they received information about a hurricane?” the OWRPO report states.

Azerbaijan’s law requires that in storms of force 8 or greater, most types of production work should be stopped, and that in storms of force 10 or greater, all work, except to flush and cool tools, should be stopped. This did not happen.

Many of the workers were not wearing lifejackets during the evacuation. Mirvari Gharamanli said that this is confirmed by photographic evidence from the scene, and her own meetings with survivors in hospitals. (Note. There are different requirements for safety clothing in different countries. On the North Sea, the standard now is for each worker to have a survival suit; in some oil producing countries, lifejackets are still the norm. UK oil worker trade unionists say that it is unthinkable that, during an evacuation during stormy weather, that either survival suits or lifejackets were not available.)

“Safety rules were seriously violated”, the OWRPO said; direct responsibility lies with the heads of the “28 May” oil and gas production department, the complex drilling trust, the transportation department, Caspian Catering Service and others.

“During the rescue operation, oil workers were not given proper instructions.” (The report stated that some industry experts believed that the evacuation should not have been attempted, and that workers would have had a better chance of survival by remaining on the platform, in the living quarters. Other industry specialists dispute this.)

Questions were raised by industry specialists about the quality of the lifeboats, and when they had been inspected.

The OWRPO report also detailed the fog of lies and deceit created around the accident by the government and Socar on the evening that it took place.

For six hours after the emergency began, no public comment was issued by Socar or the ministry of emergency situations; then Socar issued a statement that there had been no injuries or deaths. Mirvari Gharamanli explained in her interview how her Facebook page became a lightning-rod for information in the midst of an official blackout.

The OWRPO also accuses the authorities of treating oil workers’ families with contempt. Although, under pressure, they established a central information point, no psychological support was provided – and some families were sent away by intolerant officials.

Socar in March issued an inconsequential rebuttal to the OWRPO report (reported here), which failed to deal with any of the main points, but has itself said nothing about the causes of the disaster, or the possibility that safety procedures could be improved.

It is hard to think of a more cynical, money-grubbing attitude to the safety of a company’s employees. The background to the disaster is the generally poor safety culture in the Azerbaijani oil industry, the OWRPO says. In 2014, 19 people were killed; in 2015, as a result of the accident on platform no. 10, this figure more than doubled to 40. The organisation blames production-oriented management and the spinelessness of the officially-sanctioned trade union, which has raised no protest at the official failure to investigate last year’s tragedy.
But this is also an issue for the oil industry, and oil workers, internationally. (James Marriott raised some key issues in December last year, in this article.)

The Guneshli death toll was the highest on an offshore oil platform since the explosion on Piper Alpha in the North Sea, which killed 167 British workers in 1988, and the highest in any offshore accident since the American drilling ship Seacrest capsized in the Gulf of Thailand in 1989, killing 90 people. And yet the international reaction to it has been minimal.

The British government, a key supporter of the Azerbaijan regime, has maintained a polite silence. BP, which operates the largest oil and gas fields in Azerbaijan and has billions of dollars’ worth of joint projects with Socar – although it has no operational involvement whatever with the Guneshli field where the accident took place – sees the Azerbaijani company as one of its most important business partners.

An acquaintance who works in the oil business said: “You could see how important they think the lives of oil workers are, at the annual oil and gas business conference in Baku in June. No-one from the oil companies or the government expressed any regret about the disaster. It was not even mentioned by any of the main speakers. Not even a moment’s silence.”

Senior BP managers and Baroness Nicholson, representing the UK government, were among those who had more important things to discuss.

Oil is an international business; we need to find a way to link up international struggles in workers’ and communities’ interests.

Let’s hope the international trade union federations can find ways of putting pressure on Azerbaijan over its appalling safety record. Maybe British and Norwegian oil workers could take up the issue.

Let’s find ways of supporting OWRPO’s efforts to organise Azerbaijani oil workers, to improve workplace conditions and dismantle the safety culture that subordinates human life to production.

■ “It’s ‘oil first, people second’, just like in Soviet times – interview with Mirvari Gahramanli, Oil Workers’ Rights Protection Organization president.

This article first appeared on People & Nature.