

THE NATION

Desperate effort to aid miners

A predawn collapse trapped 6 men 1,500 feet underground in a Utah coal mine.

By ASHLEY POWERS and JANET WILSON
Times Staff Writers

HUNTINGTON, UTAH — Rescuers drilled and smashed through solid rock Monday in an attempt to reach six coal miners trapped deep underground by a massive predawn cave-in.

Searchers said they were within 1,700 feet of the miners but their initial approach failed. Workers could not contact the miners. Authorities were uncertain whether the men were still alive.

A top mining company official said the collapse was caused by an earthquake, but seismologists said they suspected the reverse.

Company officials and hundreds of workers at the Crandall Canyon Mine — 140 miles south of Salt Lake City — focused on trying to reach the six men, who were believed to be about 1,500 feet below the surface and 3.4 miles from the mine entrance.

Mine rescue teams from around Utah were arriving Monday night as other miners, exhausted and covered in black dust, promised to return after a few hours' sleep. The rescue effort was to continue overnight.

The identities of the miners were not released.

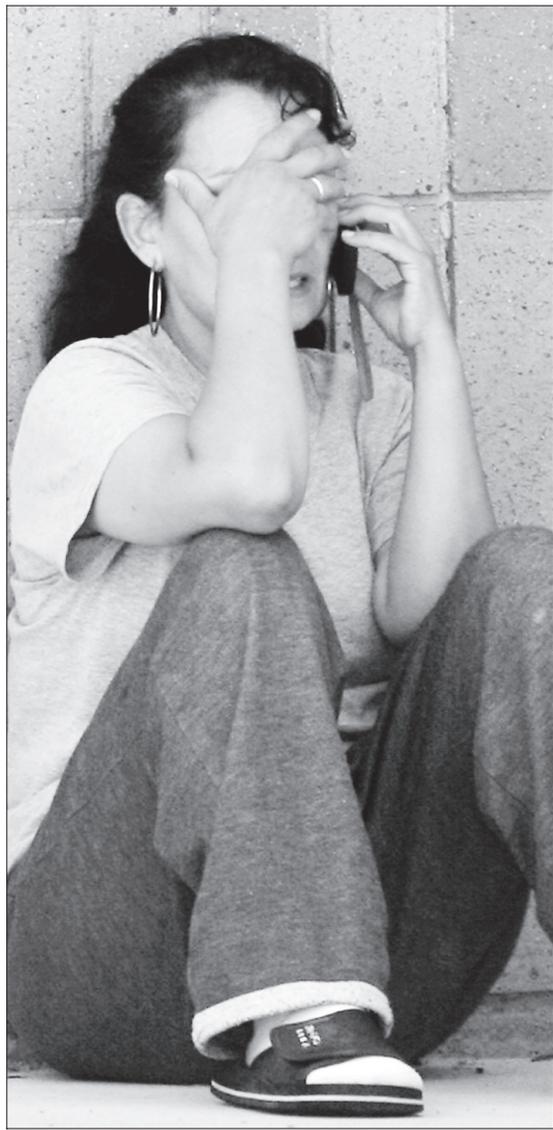
About two dozen family members were in a one-story brick senior center guarded by sheriff's deputies. The relatives, many of them red-eyed, sat on couches and nibbled snacks as the sun began to set in this arid patch of desert that makes up central Utah. Mining officials delivered regular updates.

"There's nothing on my mind right now but getting those miners out," said Robert E. Murray, chairman of Murray Energy Corp. of Cleveland, part owner of the mine. "All that is humanly possible is being done to gain access to these trapped miners," said Murray, who flew to the mine within hours of the accident.

It might take several days to reach the men, who could have enough oxygen and water to survive, Murray said. Four other miners escaped.

The mining company recruited about 200 employees to join the rescue effort. A command center was set up in Huntington, a rural town of 2,000 about 15 miles from the mine entrance. Rescuers divided into four teams, each taking a different route to where the trapped workers were believed to be.

Murray said some rescuers were drilling vertically from the top of the mountain while others moved horizontally, using heavy



DANNY CHAN LA Salt Lake Tribune

FEARING THE WORST: An unidentified woman makes a call outside the site where miners' relatives gathered to await news.

machinery to break through solid rock. Murray said he was hoping rescuers could find an old mining shaft that would allow them to get within 100 feet of the miners.

"The idea is to get a hole into where they are," Murray said. "They could be in a chamber 1,000 feet long or they could be dead."

The Crandall Canyon Mine, in Emery County, burrows deep into a mountain in the Manti-La Sal National Forest, a sparsely populated area. The mine entrance is large enough to accommodate trucks that transport workers into the tunnels.

Federal safety inspectors have issued more than 320 citations to the mine since January 2004, including more than two dozen this year. The citations included inadequate ventilation

and too few mine rescue teams. Mine owners have paid more than \$150,000 in penalties.

Bruce Dial, who was a mining inspector for 24 years and is now a consultant based in North Carolina, said most of this year's citations were for minor infractions. The mine, Dial said, had "a better safety record than many others."

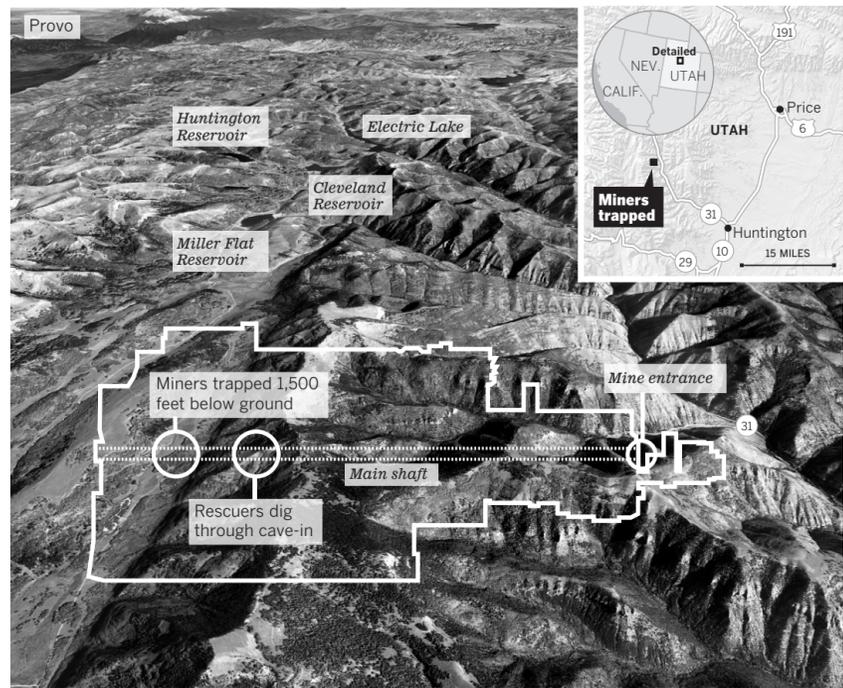
Murray said the mine had not had a serious accident in more than two decades. But the county is still haunted by a 1984 fire that killed 27 in the nearby Wilberg mine.

Percy Mounteer, 55, is a former miner and the owner of a popular hangout, the Star Grill. He was the radio dispatcher in the 1984 fire.

"If you can imagine what it's like down there, like a lot of us, it's even scarier," he said. "It's

Trapped underground

Hundreds of rescuers dug through a collapsed underground shaft Monday in an attempt to rescue six miners trapped in a Utah coal mine. Here's an approximate boundary of the Crandall Canyon Mine:



Digital image from Google Earth

Retreat mining

The miners may have been using a technique called retreat mining, which involves gleaning the coal in pillars that had been left standing to support the mine's ceiling. How it's done:

- 1 After coal pillars are mined, ceiling is allowed to fall.
- 2 Process is repeated as miners retreat.
- 3 Coal is transported to surface via uncollapsed mineshafts.

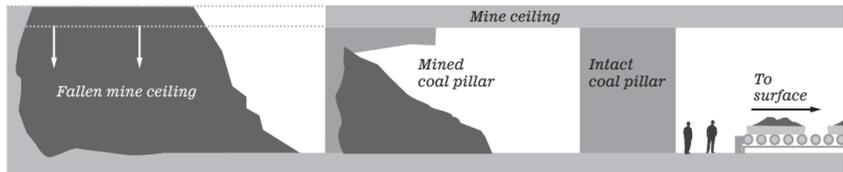


Diagram is schematic

Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas, Murray Energy Corp., Associated Press
Graphics reporting by BRADY MACDONALD, MARK HAFFER, MATT MOODY

RAOUL RAÑO, MARK HAFFER Los Angeles Times

something you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy."

For much of Monday, townspeople wandered in and out of the Huntington diner trading news and consoling one another.

Mining, of course, has always been a dangerous occupation. This year, 30 miners — 10 of them coal miners — have been killed in the United States, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration.

Mine rescue operations face the same perils.

"You don't want to make the situation worse," said John Baza, director of the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining. Boring or blasting through rock, if done in the wrong place or time, could kill trapped miners. Baza characterized rescues as "incredibly complex."

The cause of the cave-in was

in dispute Monday.

Murray insisted that a 3.9-magnitude earthquake a mile from the mine had caused the collapse.

"Our active mining did not cause this earthquake a mile away," he said. "How could our active mining a mile away cause an earthquake to happen a mile away?"

Seismologists at the University of Utah detected the quake about 2:40 a.m. and said data they had collected so far indicated the cave-in probably caused the tremors. Mine cave-ins have caused similar seismic waves in the West. But they said they could reach a definitive conclusion until all the evidence had been assessed, especially data from within the mine.

The company has long used a method called "retreat mining,"

in which columns of coal hold up the ceiling. Once an area has been mined, the columns are mined too, then intentionally collapsed, closing off that section as the miners retreat.

But the company began using a more modern technique in the mid-1990s.

It's unclear whether retreat mining is still used in some parts of the mine.

Utah was the 12th-largest producer of coal in the United States last year, and Emery County ranked second in the state in coal production.

ashley.powers@latimes.com
janet.wilson@latimes.com
Powers reported from Utah, Wilson from Los Angeles. Times staff writers Lynn Marshall and Tomas Alex Tizon contributed to this report.

Democrats content to let Gonzales twist in wind

If he remains in office, they expect voters will focus on Bush, not the 2008 GOP nominee.

By PETER WALLSTEN AND RICHARD B. SCHMITT
Times Staff Writers

WASHINGTON — Democrats are not winning the battle to force Atty. Gen. Alberto R. Gonzales from office, stymied by a legal system that gives the Bush administration wide discretion to block investigations of itself. And they are not getting the White House witnesses or records they have demanded in recent weeks.

But many Democrats are fine with that.

Although they may prove fruitless, the Democrats' investigative efforts may help keep President Bush and his administration the center of attention in next year's elections, even as the Republican Party chooses a new standard-bearer and tries to move on.

With Congress beginning a monthlong summer recess last weekend — and with Gonzales still entrenched at the Justice Department — the focus is turning to the candidates and their opinions of Gonzales' tenure. Lawmakers also will hear what constituents make of the attorney general's performance.

Even if Gonzales survives un-

til Bush leaves office, strategists hope his continued presence damages GOP candidates across the country.

"This becomes a piece of the race," said David E. Bonior, a former Michigan congressman who is managing Democrat John Edwards' presidential campaign. By highlighting Bush's allegiance to Gonzales, Democrats hope to make a point about how a Democratic administration would be different, drawing "the contrast of what we have and what we could have," Bonior said.

Gonzales has come under fire for his shifting explanations about his role in the politically charged firing last year of eight U.S. attorneys, and for his testimony about an electronic surveillance program that Bush launched after the 9/11 attacks. In that case, his statements have appeared to contradict testimony from the FBI director.

Democrats are already eyeing potential gains from the controversy in at least one battleground state, New Mexico, home to one of the U.S. attorneys whose firings sparked the congressional inquiries.

The party recently aired a radio ad linking a vulnerable Republican congressman there, Heather A. Wilson, to the controversy.

And one of the sponsors of a new resolution pushing for Gonzales' impeachment, Rep. Tom Udall (D-N.M.), is considering a run for the seat held by Republi-



CHARLES DHARAPAK Associated Press

ALBERTO R. GONZALES
The attorney general has altered explanations about his role in prosecutors' firings.

can Sen. Pete V. Domenici, who Democrats have said helped engineer the prosecutor's firing.

In the Democratic presidential primary, the Edwards camp has seized on the controversy most directly, distributing a fundraising appeal last week describing the attorney general as "the man who helped enable torture at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and illegal spying on Americans." The e-mail also sought 25,000 names for an anti-Gonzales petition, to be delivered to his office with an oversize copy of the Constitution.

On Capitol Hill, Democrats are growing more aggressive.

Four senators recently called for a special prosecutor to investigate Gonzales for possible perjury in his testimony before Con-

gress on the fired U.S. attorneys and on Bush's post-9/11 electronic surveillance program.

The House Judiciary Committee has recommended that the Justice Department bring contempt charges against two senior White House aides — former counsel Harriet E. Miers and current chief of staff Joshua B. Bolten — who have refused to testify or produce documents about the prosecutors' firings. Democrats say they want to find out who ordered the firings and why.

Karl Rove, the president's top political advisor, last week refused to honor a subpoena to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee about his involvement in the firings.

But even left-leaning scholars say the Democrats are unlikely to succeed on the legal front.

For instance, the Justice Department already has put Congress on notice that it won't bring charges if the full House asks the department to prosecute Miers and Bolten for contempt. Legal experts say the federal law making contempt of Congress a crime is unenforceable against executive branch officials who, at the behest of the president, invoke executive privilege in refusing to testify.

The House is considering bringing a civil action in federal court against the officials, but legal experts believe that a court would not entertain a suit without a certain statute authorizing it.

A third option involves a proceeding known as inherent contempt, in which the House would hold a mini-trial along the lines of an impeachment. The last time that was tried: 1935.

Administration officials have shown no signs of backing down in their defense of Gonzales, a longtime friend of Bush and a fellow Texan.

White House spokesman Tony Snow last week dismissed the Democrats' intensifying assaults as a "race to be most toxic" and "designed to turn up the temperature rather than to turn on the light."

Vice President Dick Cheney, on CNN's "Larry King Live," accused Democrats of conducting "a bit of a witch hunt on Capitol Hill, as they keep rolling over rocks hoping they can find something."

But Democrats say the controversy plays directly into their hands as they attempt to frame 2008, like their takeover of Congress last year, as a "change election."

That was the thrust of talking points distributed recently to House members by Rep. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. The memo did not directly address the U.S. attorneys' episode or Gonzales. But it argued repeatedly that next year's campaigns "must be about change and accountability."

"As we show Americans that we are bringing accountability

back to government, the public's confidence in us will continue to grow, as will the chorus of leading conservative voices such as William F. Buckley and Bob Novak saying that Republicans are headed for electoral disaster in 2008," Van Hollen wrote, invoking two well-known conservative columnists.

When voters go to the polls next year, Democrats want them to be thinking about Bush, even though he won't be on the ballot. Jim Jordan, an advisor to the presidential campaign of Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.), said the historic correlation is "almost absolute" between the ratings of an outgoing president and the ability of his party's next presidential nominee to win the general election.

The Democrats' increasing aggressiveness against Gonzales, he said, is "part of building and maintaining the broader political atmosphere."

Times staff writer Claudia Lauer contributed to this report. peter.wallsten@latimes.com richard.schmitt@latimes.com

The next debate

Democratic contenders will attend the AFL-CIO Presidential Candidates Forum at Soldier Field in Chicago today. The event will be broadcast from 4 to 5:30 p.m. PDT on MSNBC.