

Rescuers hunt for Ecuador mine survivors

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QUITO, Ecuador --

Rescuers struggled Tuesday to find survivors from a gold mine explosion that killed at least one miner and injured about 40 more in southern Ecuador.

Interior Minister Gustavo Larrea said Monday night that about 60 miners were trapped after the blast in the village of Ponce Enriquez, 230 miles southwest of Quito.

But police officer Manuel Cueva, speaking by telephone from Ponce Enriquez, said Tuesday that it was still not clear if any miners were trapped in the tunnels.

He said rescue teams brought in from outside the region had been had been working since dawn to find survivors.

"We still don't have more precise information because there's no signal" for cellular telephones at the mine, he said. "The only thing we have is that there is one dead and about 40 injured."

Larrea said the mine was run by a local cooperative with "limited safety" measures in place.

"It was an explosion in the mine - we still don't know the cause - and the injured are being taken to Machala," a nearby town, Larrea told Channel 1 television. He did not say how many people were injured.

Another officer at the Ponce Enriquez police station, Jose Pazmino, said that the explosion occurred at 7 p.m. (7 p.m. EST) in the Liga de Oro mine's munitions storehouse, "but at the moment we don't know what set off the blast."

"Everyone from Machala is in the mountains, where the mine is, trying to help in any way they can," Pazmino said Monday.

Machala is 15 minutes away from the mine by vehicle, but the explosion was so powerful it could be heard in the town's center, said Machala firefighter Segundo Guillen.

Larrea promised an immediate response from the government.

The explosion "demonstrates the need for responsible mining in Ecuador," Larrea said.

The minister didn't give any figures on the number of dead or injured.