

Brazil dam burst: 17 dead, dozens missing as mudslides flatten a village and engulf homes at BHP co-owned site

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Firefighters have rescued about 500 survivors from a torrent of mining waste that killed at least 17 people and destroyed a village after two dams burst in southeastern Brazil.

They searched frantically for survivors after the mudslide erupted from waste reservoirs at the partly Australian-owned iron ore mine.

The torrent ripped the roofs off some houses and left villagers clinging to their roofs.

"There was a horrible noise and we saw the mud approaching. We ran for it. It is a miracle that we are still alive," said Valeria de Souza, 20, with a baby in her arms and tears in her eyes.

The mudslide flattened Bento Rodrigues, a village of about 600 people near the southeastern city of Mariana in the historic mining region of Minas Gerais.



Rescuers are searching for more survivors in Bento Rodrigues. (AFP: Douglas Magno)

Ms De Souza spoke to the media after arriving at a gymnasium in Mariana, where 150 survivors from the destroyed village were being housed.

There were 17 people officially confirmed killed and 50 injured, "but more bodies have been found," said Adao Severino Junior, the fire chief in Mariana.

He warned that more than 40 people could be missing.

"There is no way to survive under that material," he said of the mudslide.

Fifteen-year-old Marcos Junior de Souza told the Folha de Sao Paulo newspaper he fled across the rooftops to escape the torrent.

"All my life I had heard people saying the dam was going to break," he was quoted as saying.

"I never thought much of it until the water flooded my house."

Environmental damage 'enormous'

Firefighters said they had rescued 500 people who were covered in iron and mineral deposits that were then washed off.



A rescue helicopter searches the village of Bento Rodrigues covered in red toxic mud from the burst mine dam. (AFP: Christophe Simon)

The local Mariana miners' union said the sludge was toxic, but the company operating the mine, Samarco, said it was "inert" and contained no harmful chemicals.

Officials and experts said the mud threatened nearby wildlife.

"The environmental damage is enormous," said one of the state prosecutors investigating the disaster, Carlos Ferreira Pinto.

Most of the village's inhabitants work for Samarco, jointly owned by BHP Billiton of Australia and Vale of Brazil.

Samarco said the causes of the rupture were not known.

Experts at Sao Paulo University's Seismology Centre said four small earthquakes were recorded in the region on Thursday, though it was unlikely such small tremors would break a dam.

Shares in Vale and BHP Billiton plunged on Friday on the Sao Paulo and London stock exchanges.

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BHP to investigate as at least 15 people killed by torrent when mining dam burst in Brazil (*David Taylor*)

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Brazilian mining dam floods neighbouring towns in mud

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