

Honduran government suspends gold mine rescue effort

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8 July 2014

Eight mine workers remain trapped since last Wednesday in the aftermath of a mine collapse at the San Juan de Arribo mine, an informal gold mine in southern Honduras. On Friday rescuers pulled out three of the trapped miners. The other eight remain buried and are feared dead.

The three young miners that were rescued are 19-year-old Byron Maradiaga, 20-year-old Bryan Escalante and Nehemías Méndez, who is 28. They all exhibited signs of severe dehydration. One of them has a fractured right leg.

The Mexico City daily *La Jornada*, described a scene of jubilation among the 300 neighbors and volunteers as the men were lifted out of a hole in the ground in a basket.

The volunteers risked their own safety, removing debris with their bare hands and some hand tools from the narrow tunnel that was blocked by the collapse of the wood structure that held it up. The next day, rescuers paused the search for the remaining men, as expectations diminished of finding them alive.

A group of 22 workers had entered the mine on Wednesday afternoon. When the mine began to collapse, 11 managed to get out. None of the men were professionally trained miners.

The lack of any maps of the mine's tunnel network prolonged the search for the victims. Also lacking was safety and ventilation equipment that could prolong the lives of those below.

On Sunday, rescuers moved into a tunnel parallel to the collapsed mine. Geologist Anibal Godoy, in charge of the operation, declared to the AFP press agency that the new plan was to at least retrieve the bodies of the men who are believed to be 80 meters (260 feet) below the ground.

Nevertheless, when informed that Chile had offered

to send in experts with experience in the rescue of the 33 miners trapped deep inside a mine in Atacama for 69 days in 2010, Godoy welcomed the offer. "The operation is very complicated," he said. The risky operation, which involves a downward sloping entrance and narrow and unstable tunnels, was again suspended Sunday night.

Gold mines in this region have been in operation since colonial times. San Juan Arriba is located in a mountain region near the city of El Corpus, 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Tegucigalpa, Honduras' capital city. Between 80 and 100 narrow tunnels branch out below the point where the collapse occurred.

This is not the first time mine workers have been injured and killed at San Juan de Arriba. In 2013 a young worker lost both his legs from an unsafe machine, and two others died in a mine collapse.

El Corpus mayor Luis Andrés Rueda pointed out that over 50 small mines are active in this region, some of their tunnels reach 200 meters (660 feet) below ground. Often groups of mine workers lease them from absentee owners. Hundreds of men work the mines with picks and shovels to extract tiny pieces of gold and silver. They work long hours for hunger wages. In total, some 4,000 workers undertake this hazardous work every day near El Corpus.

La Tribuna, a Tegucigalpa daily, posted an interview with a miner on YouTube, a relative of Emilio Muñoz, one of the trapped miners, describing the hellish conditions that these workers face every day, using technology that is not much different from that used by the Aztecs before the Spanish conquest. Mineworkers climb primitive and dangerous ladders carrying sacks of ore on their backs to the surface. They face extreme heat during the day and cold at night in return for 200 Lempiras per day (US \$9.50), below the Honduran

minimum daily wage for mining (240 Lempiras). There is no compensation for injuries.

The worker described how his cousin, Emilio Muñoz, was working a double shift and was filling bags with ore when the collapse began first as a rain of pebbles, but he was not able to leave the mine in time.

Typically, groups of miners, mostly young men with little or no experience, dig up soil from the mines, carry it home in sacks, where family members mix it with mercury and boil it to extract more gold.

The noxious fumes from the boiling affects everyone in the miners' households; that is not all—the leftover mercury mixture eventually finds its way into the rivers of the region, contaminating the water, fish and all those that ingest them.

In mining regions across the world there has been an explosion in such operations over the last decade, peasants with no other option, often expelled from their lands and attracted by the high price of gold and other metals, undertake this laborious task.

The human cost is incalculable.

All these conditions came together at El Corpus, triggered in large part by the effects of the US-sponsored military coup of June 2009 against president José Manuel Zelaya. The purpose of the coup was to eliminate even minimal opposition to the enactment of free-market policies benefitting transnational big business. Predictably, the new regime enacted legislation and decrees that gave the green light to transnational mining and agricultural interests, assigning them vast concessions, virtually tax free, with no regards to community or environmental concerns. They have been given the right to expel those living there—a land counter-reform.

The redistribution and re-concentration of land in the hands of big business is a worldwide phenomenon affecting 60 nations at last count on every continent. Resistance to such land grabs is routinely criminalized, as it is in Honduras. In 2010-11, 50 peasants resisting expulsion from their land were summarily killed.

While the government brands these mines “outlaw, unregulated” mines, it is largely indifferent to their operation and to the risks and environmental consequences.

La Jornada reports that 61 percent of Honduras' 8.6 million inhabitants live in poverty. About 10 percent of the population goes to bed hungry every night.

After government authorities suspended the rescue effort Monday, fellow miners and family members vowed to continue with or without government help.



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