

# Rescue attempts abandoned for seven buried Peruvian miners

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Attempts to rescue seven Peruvian miners buried under an avalanche of mud and stones have been largely abandoned one week after the disaster that trapped the men in a tunnel hundreds of feet underground.

Rescue workers and firefighters from Peru's southern city Arequipa were withdrawn five days after the disaster. Local residents accompanied by four specialists and firefighters from the nearby town of Nazca continued a desperate attempt to reach the trapped miners, but were forced to suspend their efforts on Sunday following another small avalanche that placed their own lives in danger.

Summer—January to March—is the rainy season in Peru's Andean mountain chain, when thousands of avalanches and landslides take place. Nonetheless, every summer, tens of thousands of peasant-miners, most of them Quechua speakers, risk their lives, in an attempt to secure a little more money to feed their families by entering dangerous abandoned and informal mines.

This year has been particularly rainy, with avalanches and landslides forcing the temporary closure of main roads in the country's south.

The tragedy at the Las Gemelas mine occurred on the afternoon of Monday, January 16. Heavy rains unleashed a flood that covered the entrance and exit of Las Gemelas, which is located in a remote area far from the valleys that cut through the Andes in the district of Acarí, in the Arequipa region. Initially, there were 15 miners in the mine, but eight managed to get out before the barrage covered its entrance and exit.

Immediate aid came from 11 miners from Orcopampa, who arrived to help in the rescue.

The regional manager of Energy and Mines stationed in Arequipa, Vladimir Bustinza, reported that it was not

until the early hours of Wednesday that rescue brigades were notified. "It is a well that goes down four galleries, which are 250 meters deep and we have seven trapped miners with very little life expectancy," he said. It is estimated that the miners are located between 80 and 100 meters down.

Bustinza added, "The company had failed to pass the necessary regulations to become a formal mine. Chinchilico Perú SAC is a company that is dedicated to the extraction of gold."

The informal mine is located two hours by road from the city of Nazca in the department of Ica, and seven hours from Arequipa, Peru's second largest city and the commercial center of the south.

*RPP Noticias* reported, "A rescue team formed by firefighters from the Arequipa Company left this afternoon [Wednesday] with 20 rescuers to Acari in an Army Aviation helicopter, which was carrying the submersible pump provided by Sedapar required to save the miners."

Due to heavy rains and rough terrain, the helicopter could not land. The head of the Seventh Command of the Arequipa Fire Company, Commander Jorge Martínez, told *RPP Noticias* that "the team will travel a trail about two hours to reach the mine." He added that the mine was a 200-meter-deep tunnel, with mud covering about 50 meters."

The rescue work was delayed by a defect in a generator, which forced rescuers to wait for the arrival of other equipment.

Mothers and wives of the trapped miners also gathered at the site, expressing their determination to stay until the miners were brought out.

On Thursday, the body of one of the miners, Eduardo Urquia Tonama (32), was recovered.

According to *RPP Noticias*, "The miners' relatives

told the National Police that those who have been trapped are Antony Lovón Mercado (19), Eduardo Laura Chiclla (27), Luis Alberto Huaraca Nuñez (30), Gilber Llantoy Ayala (23), Hussein Yelssen Flores Paico (22), Alberto Huamán Jiménez (52) and Eduardo Urquia Tuanama (30)."

There are thousands of such informal mines in Peru, with miners risking their lives working for third parties in abandoned mines under highly dangerous conditions

In November of last year, six miners died after inhaling toxic gases in an abandoned mine located in the Mazocruz sector of Santiago de Chocorvo in the central province of Huaytará, where several informal mines operate.

Neighbors could not help out of fear of toxic gases. One survivor stated that there were strong toxic odors when they decided to enter the mine.

In April 2012, nine miners were rescued in time. They were employed as informal workers—meaning off the books—in the Cabeza de Negro mine in the department of Ica. They were trapped underground for six days, surviving by means of a tube that brought in oxygen and food.

The owner of the Las Gemelas mine is Buenaventura, whose general manager is Roque Benavides, a multimillionaire who is a partner of foreign capital in large mining projects.

In many cases, miners, desperate for work, refuse to divulge to authorities the names of the individuals who hired them.

There are also a large number of informal miners who work on their own account, seeking out abandoned mines to see if there is anything left to dig out. As these small illegal operations are located in remote areas, they are rarely inspected.

The major mining companies bear responsibility for the dozens of deaths that take place in these abandoned mines each year. They are responsible for closing mines that they have stopped exploiting and ensuring that others cannot get into them. As such precautions are viewed as a drain on profits, they fail to take them, with fatal consequences.



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