

Four Thai boys trapped in flooded cave brought to safety

Patrick Martin
9 July 2018

The first four of 12 boys trapped with their soccer coach while exploring a cave in Thailand were brought to safety Sunday, as an international rescue effort intensified. The complex operation was halted overnight while workers recharged oxygen tanks and divers planned the next steps to be taken on Monday.

The four were taken immediately to local hospitals to be checked for the effects of dehydration, malnutrition and oxygen deprivation, as well as the stress and sheer terror of being trapped underground for more than two weeks.

The 12 youth, aged 11 to 17, and their coach, aged 25, have been trapped underground since June 23. They were largely given up for lost until a British diving team located them on July 2, still alive after 10 days with little food.

Four Thai Navy SEALs, one of them a doctor, are now with the boys in the cavern where they took shelter. They have brought in food, medicine and equipment vital to the boys' survival while they await rescue.

There was celebration in the town of Mae Sai, located on the northern edge of Thailand near both Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, where the Wild Boars soccer team is based. As families awaited the release of the names of the four boys rescued thus far, young men cruised the town on flatbed trucks cheering and waving.

Narongsak Osottanakorn, the governor of Chiang Rai province, who is in charge of the search and rescue operation, said there would be a break of from 10 to 20 hours to allow for replacement of equipment used along the long and difficult escape route, a distance of some four kilometers, which takes the most experienced cave divers six hours to traverse.

The cave opening is wide enough for only one person at a time, and none of the boys can swim, adding to the

difficulty of the rescue. Two divers are being used to escort each boy out. The divers are helping the boys with their diving masks and carrying their oxygen tanks. The rescuers reportedly prioritized the boys who were in the worst physical shape, taking them out first.

According to press reports, the boys must endure a mixture of walking, wading, climbing and diving while they cling to guide ropes put in place by the rescue workers. At the most difficult passage, divers have to take off their air tanks to squeeze through. All of this is done largely in darkness, with occasional lights placed by the rescue divers where possible.

A total of 90 rescue workers are involved, 40 from Thailand and 50 for around the world, including Australia, Britain, Japan and the United States. Of the 18 experienced cave divers doing the most dangerous work, 13 are from overseas and five are Thai Navy SEALs.

The dangers facing both the boys and their rescuers were underscored by the death of one diver, a retired Thai Navy SEAL, 38-year-old Saman Gunan, who ran out of oxygen himself while placing spare oxygen tanks along the underwater route.

The oxygen level in the Tham Luang cave where the boys and their coach are trapped has fallen to only 15 percent, well below the 21 percent normal in the atmosphere at sea level. Divers had to bring in oxygen tanks and breathing gear for everyone to use while they awaited rescue, to avoid hypoxia, which causes nausea, drowsiness and incapacitation and can ultimately be fatal. Strenuous activity, such as required in the prolonged exit from the cave, is far more difficult.

The 12 boys and their assistant soccer coach went into the cave for an outing on June 23 and were trapped there by rising floodwaters that came unseasonably early. The boys include one 17-year-old, a 16-year-old,

two 15-year-olds, three 14-year-olds, four 13-year-olds, and the youngest, only 11.

Even after they were located, there were fears that they would have to remain below ground for months, until the monsoon rains ended and the subterranean water level dropped sufficiently to bring them out.

Both the search for the missing boys and the subsequent rescue effort have been enormous in their scope. Massive pumps have been brought in to hold back rising waters from runoff due to ongoing rainstorms. Dozens of farms downstream from the cave have been flooded by the pumped water, with the government offering compensation.

The plight of the trapped children has attracted immense international attention, with hundreds of journalists flocking to the scene. Tens of millions of people have been following the progress of the search and rescue operation, commenting on it, and expressing their support and sympathy for the families of those involved.

This outpouring of human solidarity is in healthy contrast to the official vilification that would be visited on such children if they were Guatemalan asylum seekers seeking refuge in the United States, locked up in one of Donald Trump's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) prisons, or African refugees on board a ship in the Mediterranean Sea, denied landing rights by the right-wing government in Italy.

No one (at least publicly) is asking how much it costs to save the lives of these 12 boys and their young coach, or suggesting that the rescue operation should be shut down because "there is no money" to pay for it. On the contrary, the scale of the effort being mounted in a supposedly less developed country like Thailand puts to shame the incompetent and indifferent operation mounted by the US government in Puerto Rico last year.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)