

# Chile's trapped miners: Victims of a ruthless drive for profit

By Cesar Uco  
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With 33 Chilean miners nearing one month trapped 2,300 feet underground, the human drama of what could prove a four-month ordeal before they are rescued has riveted attention worldwide. The struggle of these workers to survive and their determination and ingenuity in organizing themselves to confront what for most are unthinkable conditions has elicited the admiration and solidarity of people around the globe.

However, the extensive media coverage of this dramatic episode gives short shrift, if any mention at all, to the social, economic and political conditions that created the disaster in the first place, and the similar conditions confronting miners in hundreds of other small and unsafe mining operations in Chile. For the most part, the media studiously avoids the criminal responsibility of the mine owners and the Chilean government.

The 33 miners have been trapped in the San José mine in the Atacama Desert 500 miles north of Santiago since August 5, when an explosion produced a massive collapse, blocking the main access to the surface. They survived by rationing a two-day food supply to a minimum daily diet consisting of two spoons of canned tuna, a small glass of milk, half a cracker and slices of peaches with syrup.

Some men had lost 15 to 22 pounds when they were first found more than two weeks after the accident occurred. Today they are being fed solid and liquid food and vitamins. The diet has gone up to 1,200 calories a day and is expected to reach 2,000 calories in a few days.

Doctors who have been in contact with the miners have reported that at least five of them are suffering from depression. They were having trouble sleeping and were becoming increasingly anxious and irritable after being confined in the cramped space for so long, Chilean Health Minister Jaime Manalich told CNN.

The rescue plan calls for the trapped miners to work around the clock in shifts to remove 3,000 to 4,000 tons of rock that will fall as a tunnel is drilled from the surface to the shelter where the trapped men have taken refuge. Engineers have estimated it will take until the end of the year to pull the miners to safety. It will be the longest time men have been trapped inside a mine on record.

There is growing popular anger in Chile over the reckless behavior of the mining company, San Esteban, which specializes in mining copper and gold. The record shows that the company was at fault on several counts: it delayed reporting the accident, had violated several security measures and hadn't paid social security for the miners, according to complaints. A trapped miner said that when they reached the shelter "the energy was cut off and there was no ventilation."

The San José mine had a record of 80 accidents. In 2004, a miner died after a cave-in. In 2006, a truck driver in the mine was also killed

in an accident. That same year 182 workers were injured, 56 of them seriously, according to GlobalPost.

The mine was closed in 2007 after a rock explosion caused the death of a geologist. The owners were charged with involuntary manslaughter, but the case was dropped in 2008 after they agreed to pay the family some USD 170,000 in compensation.

A condition for reopening the mine was that San Esteban commits itself to constructing a ladder that would lead from the shelter to the surface. Following the cave-in, the miners tried to reach the surface through a ventilation shaft. They got only a third of the way up before discovering that the mine owners had never bothered to finish the ladder to the top.

The Argentine daily *Página 12* quoted José Rojo, who has been a miner for 20 years, as saying that the bosses had "turned a blind eye to the San José mine. They told us that it was coming down, every so often there were cave-ins. They knew it was going to happen. At times when I was there with the Jumbo drill, I had to stop because I saw that the roof was coming down on me." On the day of the cave-in, he wasn't working because the machinery he operated was broken.

The *Times* of London interviewed Philippe Sanchez, 51, who worked at the mine between 1987 and 1999 and whose nephew is among those trapped. "It is one of the worst mines in the area," he said. "It has always been dangerous. There are accidents all the time and when you are hurt, you had better not complain or you will be sacked—there is a culture of silence."

A former parliamentary deputy for the area and a specialist in mining, Antonio Leal, blamed the owners for the accident.

"The main ones responsible for the tragedy are the owners of San Esteban, Marcelo Kemeny and Alejandro Bohn ... because they have regularly violated the law in spite of the many accidents that occurred between 2003 and 2010, costing the lives of three miners and another two gravely injured," Leal said.

He pointed out that the owners "have been insensitive to the demands for more security, lying to government officials and the union with promises never fulfilled."

The mining unions have also denounced the dangers in the San José mine, pointing to the many accidents that occurred in the past. This led the National Service of Geology and Mining (Sernageomin), the state organ responsible for supervising the security of mining operations in Chile, to close the mine.

"At the time the manager and owner Alejandro Bohn threatened Anton Hraste [then the director of Sernageomin] to have him removed from his post if he didn't reopen the mine," said Leal.

A lawsuit against the Chilean state and the company has been filed

in the name of 24 of the 32 Chilean miners (one miner is Bolivian). Their families are complaining that none of the miners has received a paycheck, and they are forced to rely on donations from the Chilean people to make ends meet.

The company was also ordered by a local judge to freeze \$1.8 million in revenue so that it can pay future compensation to 26 of the families. A representative of San Esteban said the company may declare bankruptcy rather than meet these obligations. Meanwhile, it was reported that the company is planning to begin operations at another mine in the Atacama Desert.

The Chilean House of Deputies has called for an investigation, and Chile's right-wing president, Sebastián Piñera, who took office last March, said his government will "investigate responsibilities and sanction those who are found at fault."

Such governmental action is routinely announced in an attempt to appease popular anger when such mining accidents take place. However, the conditions at the San José mine were by no means unique. It is one of hundreds of small mines in Chile working under precarious and unsafe conditions in the attempt by owners to reap a profit from high metal prices. They attract workers by offering higher than average salaries and benefits.

According to the National Director of Sernageomin, Alejandro Vio Grossi, the mine was reopened without his knowledge, under the authority of a subordinate. Vio Grossi was fired by President Sebastián Piñera following the accident.

The reality is that Sernageomin lacks the funds and personnel required to fulfill its responsibilities. Due to budget constraints, it has just 16 safety inspectors for more than 4,500 mines in Chile. It has only three inspectors responsible to supervise 884 medium and small mines in the Atacama region.

Under these conditions, the government proposal to increase personnel from 16 to 45 and its budget from 12 billion pesos (\$24 million) to 28 billion pesos (\$56 million) by the end of 2011 is barely a drop in the bucket.

For many mine owners, it is more profitable to pay fines for breaking mine safety rules than to invest in improving safety conditions for their workers. It should be added that bribery of low-paid government officials is standard operating procedure for Chilean capitalists.

The mayor of the town of Caldera, Brunilda Gonzalez, charged that Sernageomin's failure to insist on inspections and other normal procedures before allowing the mine to reopen had been the result of a payoff. "There has been a bribe," she said. "There has been influence-peddling and negligence on the part of the state and public officials."

In interviews with the Associated Press, relatives of the trapped miners said the men risk their lives working under unsafe conditions in small mines because it is the only way of lifting their families out of poverty. Some of the men travel more than a thousand miles to their hometowns to see their loved ones when they are not working in the San José mine.

Chile is the world's largest producer of copper, which makes up 40 percent of the country's exports.

Chile's 4.1 percent annual per-capita growth rate over the past two decades, as reported by the World Bank, has been accompanied by a widening of social and economic inequality. Fourteen percent of Chile's population, or 2.3 million people, live in poverty, with millions more barely making it above the poverty line.

According to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and

the Caribbean, the Atacama region has experienced "dynamic growth", but this has not translated into reducing poverty levels in the mineral-rich region.

Posing as the miners' benefactor is President Piñera, a billionaire businessman and political descendant of the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, in whose regime his brother served as minister of labor and of mining. In the latter capacity, José Piñera pushed through a Constitutional Mining Law in 1981, clearing the way for the privatization of much of Chilean mining, thereby creating the conditions for a sharp deterioration in safety conditions. Sebastián Piñera himself ran for president on a platform that included the partial privatization of the main state-owned copper mining enterprise in Chile, provoking miners' strikes in opposition to his proposal.

Just as in the wake of the earthquake that devastated the south coast of Chile six months ago, he is attempting to capitalize on a disaster and a human tragedy to advance his call for "reconciliation" among all Chileans, an attempt to suppress class struggle and bury the past of torture, mass executions and repression for which virtually no one has been held accountable.

The right-wing president has tried to claim ownership of the rescue effort, appearing at the mine site and attempting to turn the entire operation into an exercise in patriotism. When first contact was made with the miners, officials cautioned their families that it could not be confirmed and waited until Piñera could make it to the mine and appear before the TV cameras to read the note that had been brought up from the mine shaft stating that all 33 men were alive. The presidential palace this week announced plans to organize the entire country in singing the national anthem on September 18, with the miners dragooned into the exercise via a video broadcast from the damaged mine.

Piñera's call for unity with those whom Pinochet viciously repressed has not gone unanswered by his ostensible opposition, the Socialist Party, which had ruled the country in partnership with the Christian Democrats for 20 years before Piñera's election. This was symbolized by the embrace he received at the mine site from Socialist Party Senator María Isabel Allende Bussi, the daughter of former president Salvador Allende, who was overthrown in the September 11, 1973 military coup.

The unity of the big business-backed politicians, however, cannot conceal the deep-going class divisions and hostilities that underlie the Chilean mine disaster. An Associated Press article on the trapped miners made the perceptive observation that their courage recalled the "moving stoicism and hope which could be observed in previous decades in the demonstrations of the victims of the Pinochet dictatorship."

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