

A Year Out of the Dark in Chile, but Still Trapped



Tomas Munita for The New York Times

Claudio Yáñez, a survivor with a new home but no job, said, “We're in really bad shape.”

By ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO

October 12, 2011

COPIAPÓ, Chile — After his dramatic rescue from a mine last year, Jimmy Sánchez traveled the world, cruising the Greek islands, visiting Britain, Israel, Los Angeles, Disney World — all paid for by people who were moved by the Chilean miners’ story of courage and perseverance.

But today Mr. Sánchez, like many of the 33 miners who survived 69 days nearly a half-mile underground, is jobless and at wits’ end. Twice a month, he boards a bus to Santiago, Chile’s capital, traveling 11 hours each way for a short visit with a psychiatrist. He is one of nine

miners receiving sick-leave pay for prolonged post-traumatic stress; a handful of others say they are seeing private therapists.

“Most of us are in the same place with emotional and psychological problems,” said Mr. Sánchez, 20. “It was the fear that we would never again see our families, that we were going to die. We just can’t shake those memories.”

One year after their globally televised rescue, after the worldwide spotlight faded and the trips and offers have dwindled, the miners say that most of them are unemployed and that many are poorer than before.

Only a handful of them have steady jobs, they say. Just four have returned to mining. Two others, Víctor Zamora and Darío Segovia, are trying to make ends meet by selling fruits and vegetables, one from a stall, the other out of his truck.

“They made us feel like heroes,” said Edison Peña, another miner, who is now in a psychiatric clinic. “In the end, we are selling peanuts. It’s ironic, isn’t it?”



Miners Cheated Death, but Normal Life Proves Elusive



The 33 Chilean Miners, Then and Now

Some miners have been paid to do interviews or give motivational speeches. But those opportunities proved fleeting for most. Now many are counting on a Hollywood movie about them — which still does not have a script — to be their economic savior.

Mr. Peña, the miner who became famous for his love of Elvis Presley and running, is coping with trauma caused not only by his time below but also by the aftermath of the rescue, when the demands of instant celebrity proved overwhelming, his doctor said, leading him to abuse drugs and alcohol.

Three miners, including Mr. Sánchez and Mr. Segovia, recently resumed psychiatric treatment after the nightmares and sleeplessness returned. Doctors said that they expected more of them to have a relapse, and that many now get by on a steady regimen of sedatives and antidepressants.

“This is very similar to how Vietnam veterans suffered,” said Rodrigo Gillibrand, the psychiatrist treating the nine men on sick leave covered by labor insurance, though the mine has been closed down. “They have post-traumatic symptoms that could be chronic.”



The New York Times

In the wake of the rescue, the miners benefited from an outpouring of sympathy and support. A Chilean mining magnate, Leonardo Farkas, gave the miners more than \$15,000 each so they could rest and recuperate. He also gave free homes to two who were marrying, and he said he helped one miner find psychiatric care after the miner found his fiancée with another man.

Mr. Sánchez, like many of the 16 miners interviewed, said he wanted to return to the mines. But Dr. Gillibrand has recommended that none of them work underground again.

José Ojeda tried to go back in February. After descending more than 1,000 feet in a drilling truck, the water was cut off. An assistant went to turn it back on, leaving Mr. Ojeda alone. He suffered a panic attack.

“I started to sweat a lot, a cold sweat,” he said. “I don’t even remember how they took me out; I blacked out.”

Potential employers in Copiapó have declined to hire the miners for fear that they were psychologically scarred by their experience, several miners said.

Some people wonder whether the miners are trying. Mr. Farkas said no miner took him up on his job offer. But their requests for money keep rolling in.

He said he “felt taken advantage of” by Claudio Yáñez, a miner for whom he bought a house worth \$63,500, at least twice as much as he would usually pay for a worker’s house. Mr. Farkas said that he wanted to give him a less expensive house, as he had done for his own employees, but that Mr. Yáñez used a television crew to press him to buy the costly one.

“I did plenty for the miners; now they have to do it on their own,” Mr. Farkas said.

Mr. Yáñez, 35, denied taking advantage of Mr. Farkas, who he said gave him the house “from his heart.”

He said he used a cash gift from Mr. Farkas to “completely furnish” the two-story home. But he has not worked since the rescue. “We are in really bad shape; we don’t have work, and no one wants to hire us,” he said.

Much has changed in Chile since August 2010, when the miners were trapped after a gold-and-copper mine collapsed, only to be all discovered alive 17 days later. Their inspiring struggle to survive motivated Chile’s president, Sebastián Piñera, to show the world that his country was at once compassionate and capable.

After a determined effort that cost millions of dollars, workers rescued all 33 miners last Oct. 13. The popularity of Mr. Piñera's government soared. He took maximum advantage, traveling around the world with the note in which a miner had first signaled that they were alive. But this year, amid months of protests about educational and environmental policies, the president's ratings have dropped to their lowest levels since he took office.

Despite criticism by politicians and some miners that Mr. Piñera has not done enough for them, the government recently gave \$500-a-month pensions to 14 miners (the oldest and those with the most serious physical problems). But they were less than half of what most earned as miners.

On Thursday, local officials in Copiapó will commemorate the rescue by unveiling a 39-foot statue donated by a Chinese foundation. The miners say that they have been better appreciated abroad than at home in Chile. "We feel a little abandoned here," said Mr. Peña, 35.

Mr. Peña became an instant celebrity upon exiting the mine. Soon he was invited to visit the grave of his hero Elvis Presley at Graceland. He appeared on "Late Show With David Letterman" while on a free trip to run the New York City marathon.

But the spotlight proved disorienting. The normally shy Mr. Peña turned to drinking and drugs. Last month, he walked into a private clinic that had offered him free care out of sympathy. These days, he spends his days painting and in numerous therapy sessions, he said.

A handful of miners continue to profit from their fame. Mario Sepúlveda, dubbed "Super Mario" after his kinetic show of emotion

upon exiting the mine, started a company to give motivational speeches, prompting jealousy among some of the other survivors.

“If I am persistent and keep on working, one day I might be a millionaire,” he said last week before flying to Costa Rica to give another talk.

Still, Mr. Sepúlveda, 41, is among those on sick leave for post-traumatic stress. “This has been the worst year of my life, although you would not believe it,” he said.

He recently joked on Twitter that he should act in the movie about the miners. Mike Medavoy, the Hollywood producer who has worked on films like “Black Swan” and “Annie Hall,” said on a visit here last month that he hoped to film in the Atacama Desert using relatives of the miners as extras.

“There is a lot of pressure now to do this right,” Mr. Medavoy said at a lunch with the miners’ families. “Look at what would happen if I let these people down, forget the rest of it.”

While some miners are waiting for the movie to provide financial salvation, others are taking more concrete steps.

Pablo Rojas, 47, is a partner in a small mining operation with four employees. Another miner, Pedro Cortez, 26, inspired by setting up video feeds for the trapped miners to talk to their families, is studying electronics.

“Thirty-three people enter into a mine,” Mr. Cortez said. “We didn’t exit the mine 33 friends.”

With an 8-year-old daughter to support, he sold a motorcycle he was given as a present after the rescue. A Swiss-Chilean man from Zurich who had read about Mr. Cortez's educational ambitions visited Copiapó last month and paid 70 percent of his tuition for the second semester, vowing to help him next year as well.

As a gesture of thanks, Mr. Cortez gave the man, Christian Ferrari, his last Chilean flag signed by all the miners.

“I have to get my family ahead; we can't be in the same place we were before,” Mr. Cortez said. “They fought for me for 70 days. Now it's my turn to step up.”

Aaron Nelsen contributed reporting from Copiapó and Santiago, Chile.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 12, 2011, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Year Out of the Dark in Chile, but Still Trapped.