



Features

Humanity at its very best

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It must count as the most outstanding successful civilian rescue operations ever mounted. This week, after 69 days trapped deep underground following a collapse at the San Jose copper and gold mine in northern Chile's Atacama Desert, 33 miners were brought to the surface alive.

Nothing like it has ever been achieved in an industry synonymous with accidents and fatalities. Tributes to the rescue operation and everyone involved, including the trapped miners themselves, have rightly poured in from all over the world.

The way in which the 33 organised themselves underground, especially during the initial 17 days before they were found - a period they survived on only 48 hours of rations between them - was truly exemplary, reflecting humanity at its best.

Also exemplary was the way the rescuers kept the men fed and continued to monitor their physical and mental condition throughout the length of their ordeal. It was an operation that captured the imagination not only of Chile but the entire world.

The sight of each miner arriving at the surface in the rescue capsule used to winch them to safety, before being reunited with their friends and loved ones, was inspirational - evidence of how valuable and precious life is and the lengths to which humanity is able and willing to go in order to preserve it.

Chilean President Sebastian Pinera was at the surface to personally meet and greet each of the rescued miners when they arrived. The scenes of euphoria which the arrival of each miner unleashed at the surface were deeply moving.

Temporarily forgotten was the fact that Pinera is a billionaire and the men who were rescued were earning a paltry £1,000 per month working in a mine that was known to be unsafe. Over the past few days of the rescue operation's climax all that mattered was the sanctity of human life and the effort to bring every one of the 33 trapped underground to safety.

For the men and their families many challenges now lie ahead. The psychological damage suffered after being entombed three miles beneath the surface for so long is likely to have lasting consequences to varying degrees. Add to that their new-found status as national and

international celebrities. Adjusting to life after being rescued will not be easy.

But however hard those challenges might be, it is likely they won't compare to life working deep underground in Chile's copper mines. Mining globally has long been considered more dangerous and arduous than any other profession, a fact measured in the number of accidents and deaths each year.

The San Jose mine which became the Chilean miners' temporary tomb is a case in point. It is owned by Empresa Minera San Esteban, a company with an atrocious safety record. Several miners working at the mine have been killed in recent years, with the company receiving 42 fines for breaching safety regulations in that time.

In 2007 the mine closed temporarily after relatives of a miner who'd been killed sued the company. It reopened in 2008 even though the owners had failed to comply with all of the required safety regulations. Even more damning is that because of budget constraints there were only three inspectors for the Atacama region's 884 mines before the latest accident two months ago.

This set of circumstances clearly constitutes grounds for criminal investigation.

Mining is a major industry in Chile, but, as with any industry in which workers risk their lives, safety has been sacrificed in the quest for profit and shareholder dividends.

Chile's populist right-wing President Pinera, who lost no opportunity to capitalise on the rescue operation and its attendant publicity, reflects the mammoth inequality which has crippled the region for so long.

The son of a career diplomat, he grew up as part of Chile's privileged elite during the brutal reign of General Pinochet. Privately educated first in the US, where his father was Chile's ambassador to the UN, then later Chile, Pinera completed a postgraduate degree in economics at Harvard University before finally returning to Chile to take up a teaching career in 1976.

There is no record of any direct involvement or support for the Pinochet regime, but a career in business which saw him own Chile's biggest national terrestrial television station Chilevision, which he is currently in the process of selling to US giant Time Warner, as well as holding substantial shares in the airline industry and various other major national and international companies, suggests Pinera was no dissident either.

Unusually for a Catholic conservative, he voted No in Chile's 1988 national referendum. It was the No campaign that effectively brought Pinochet's regime to an end. However, in 1989, Pinera ran the presidential campaign of Herman Buchi, a former finance minister in the Pinochet government. Pinera's brother Jose served in Pinochet's cabinet, initially as secretary of labour and social security from 1978-80 and then, rather ironically, as secretary of mining from 1980-1. The president's brother now works in the US for the Cato Institute, a right-

wing free-market think tank based in Washington.

Described by opponents as Chile's "Berlusconi," Pinera was embroiled in a corruption scandal in 1982, when a warrant was issued for his arrest.

Pinera's election in 2009-10 following a run-off vote marked the election of the first right-wing president in Chile in 52 years.

His trademark is a propensity for mentioning God in his speeches, and during his election campaign he held raffles to give out household appliances. He also promised the poor a one-off cash bonus.

It is unlikely that the paths of the 33 men who spent 69 days trapped deep underground would cross Pinera's in anything other than the extraordinary circumstances over the past few days.

Now, with the billionaire president presumably safely ensconced in his private jet on the way back to the presidential palace in Santiago, the rescued miners contemplate what might have been and what the future holds in store for them and their families.

Today tens of thousands of men in Chile and across the world will be risking their own lives in mines deep underground.

For the companies which employ them, and for the rich who invest in those companies, their lives and health are of little consequence when compared to the drive for profit.

However, for a heroic 69 days of a rescue operation which culminated in the rescue of 33 of their number, that priority was reversed. In that time we have been privileged to witness the best of humanity in action, providing us with a glimpse of another world.

Surely it is a world worth fighting for.

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