

The
Economist

Americas view
The Americas

Mining safety in Chile

An ounce of prevention

Oct 13th 2011, 13:46 by G.L. | SANTIAGO



A YEAR has passed since Chile's 33 trapped miners were [hailed to freedom](http://www.economist.com/node/17251964) (http://www.economist.com/node/17251964) in the Atacama Desert. By and large, it's been a relatively safe year in the country's mines. The number of deaths from mining accidents has fallen sharply, from 27 in the first half of ~~2010~~ 2010 to 12 in the same period this year. Although it is too early to tell how much of that improvement will stick, the days when mining claimed hundreds of Chilean lives each year are thankfully gone. The government has increased the number of inspectors at Chile's mines from 18 at the time of last year's accident to 45 now. Those officials have carried out more than 3,800 inspections in Chile's 8,000

mines so far this year. In July the government sent a draft bill to parliament to overhaul mine safety regulation, describing it as the most important legislation in the area in 30 years.

Despite this good work, however, there is one glaring anomaly that needs to be addressed: Chile has yet to ratify the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention 176 on mining safety. The convention has been around for 13 years, and has been adopted by 25 countries from Albania to Zimbabwe. It establishes workers' rights to refuse work they consider unsafe, to leave a mine they consider dangerous and to elect their own health and safety representatives. In the days after last year's remarkable rescue Sebastián Piñera, the president, promised to ratify the convention. But today his government still seems hesitant to do so. It has asked the ILO for more information on how the measures would affect the mining industry, which accounts for around a fifth of the country's GDP.

Even though all 33 people trapped in the San José mine were rescued, last year was still the deadliest in Chile's mines for over a decade: 45 miners were killed at work. It's no coincidence that it was also the year in which the copper price averaged a record high of over \$3.40 a pound (\$7.50 per kg). When the price of Chile's chief export is high, accidents happen. That's because an army of part-time, unsupervised miners, often with little experience, head out into the Atacama Desert in search of the mineral. Mines that closed long ago because they were unprofitable suddenly find they can make money again and reopen, often with no better safety standards than when they closed. The reverse is also true: when the copper price is low, the accident rate falls. The safest year in the history of Chilean mining was 1999, with just 0.09 deaths for every million hours worked. That year copper sold for just 72 cents a pound.

This year copper has averaged over \$4 a pound. Mining is booming. All the more reason, therefore, to reflect on the extraordinary events of last year at the San José mine, and to invest a little more of the industry's handsome profits in safety improvements.