

In their own words...

Nicaragua: Juan, Enrique and Junior



E. Giannotti/ILO

1 In a dim and dangerous tunnel lit only by the flicker of candles, **Juan Laguna** and four other children toil with rusty pick-axes to loosen chunks of rock they hope will yield at least a little bit of gold.

Juan then undertakes the arduous process of milling and washing the ore. If it is a good day, it will give him enough gold to sell for about US\$3 (€2.30). But he is not always lucky. "Not every day goes well," says Juan, who is 12 but has the slight build of a child half his age. Working with hundreds of other youngsters, Juan has spent five years scratching the walls of tunnels in the La India mining district, more than 100 miles (160 km) west of Nicaragua's capital Managua.

According to the ILO and Nicaragua's National Commission for the Eradication of Child Labour, nearly 400 children work down the shafts and potholes. Child miners suffer malnutrition and dehydration, kidney diseases, gashes and serious accidents in the scorching, gas-filled tunnels.

2 Enrique Urrutia is only 17 but his thin body and calloused hands bear witness to the 10 years he has spent mining gold

"to buy food and clothes and to help in the house". Enrique and three friends meet early in the morning in their village and walk two hours to the mines, returning home exhausted as darkness falls with their loads of stone.

3 Junior Calderón, 12-year-old says, "I come every other day," although he added he only mines when he has no classes.

The incentive to find gold is not surprising given that its price on international markets recently hit 16-year highs of nearly US\$460 (€352) an ounce. These miners receive only a fraction of that, but they have precious few options. "For people who only have their physical strength to work with, it is an attractive thing, particularly when the gold price goes up," said one official from a multinational company exploring in the district.

(From "Gold tempts Nicaragua Children" by Ivan Castro, Reuters, December 2004.)