

# Life as ore scavengers for ethnic minority children in northern Vietnam

TUOI TRE NEWS

Updated : 06/26/2017 19:05 GMT + 7



Ly Thi Tu, 10, breaks a stone open with a hammer to look for antimony ores at the dumping ground of the Mau Due antimony mine in Ha Giang Province.

Tuoi Tre

**Dozens of children of the Hmong minority in northern Vietnam risk their lives every day working from dawn to dusk at the dumping ground of a local mineral processing plant in order to pay for food and education.**

The children's tiny hands wearily scavenge through mountains of ore tailings in search of leftover ore to sell for money that pays for their education and puts food on their family's table.

In the middle of the night at the dumping ground of the Mau Due antimony mine in Yen Minh District, Ha Giang Province, Ly Thi Tu, 10, was carefully running her hands through a pile of refuse, equipped with little more than a hammer and a head-mounted flashlight.

Tu said she had been doing the job for years, and that she would work extra shifts at night during the summer break to earn some extra money.

From National Route 4C, the dumping ground of Mau Due towers into the sky like a giant silver mountain.

The antimony mine has been in operation for over 20 years, producing a crucial resource for the production of batteries, anti-friction alloys, cast alloys and cable coatings.



*An aerial view of ethnic Hmong children working at the dumping ground of the Mau Due antimony mine in Ha Giang Province. Photo: Tuoi Tre*

After a thorough process known as ore dressing, where commercially valuable minerals are separated from their ores, the leftover refuse is transported on a dump truck to the dumping ground.

It is here that the ‘business’ of ore-scavenging begins, as dozens of children jump at the raining ore tailings, using their hammers to break open the leftover stones in the hope of recovering bits and pieces of valuable antimony.

“We usually only go scavenging at night during the school year, but in the summer we are here all day,” said Thao Mi Tro, a seventh-grader from the local Mau Due Junior High. “I can retrieve 2-3 kilograms of ore on lucky days, and a few hundred grams on bad ones.”

Traders buy their ores directly at the dumping site, with prices ranging from VND15,000 (US\$0.66) to VND30,000 (\$1.32) per kilogram.

Sweat and dirt stick to the faces of these ragged children, like poverty has stuck to this piece of land and likely will for many years to come.

Below are photos of the life of the ore scavengers of the ethnic Hmong children at the dumping ground of the Mau Due antimony mine in Ha Giang Province, taken by *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) newspaper’s photojournalist Nguyen Khanh.



*Traders and ore scavengers gather at an open land plot near the dumping ground at night to trade ores.*



*Children risk their lives chasing rolling stones after a dump truck pours ore dressing refuse at the dumping ground.*



*Tho Thi Mai and Lu Thi Giang, both 13 years old, try to break a big stone open to look for antimony ores.*



*Ore scavengers follow a narrow, slippery trail leading to the dumping ground.*



*Vu Thi Ke (C), 9, goes ore-scavenging with her parents.*



*Vu Thi Cho, 11, is covered in dirty as she works extra night shifts during the summer break.*



*Worn out gloves are worn by a minor ore scavenger.*



*A piece of antimony ore is retrieved from the refuse.*



*A trader (R) weighs the ores recovered by scavengers at an open land plot near the dumping ground.*



*Ly Thi Tu (R), 10, receives money from a trader after selling nearly four kilograms of antimony ores she and two other family members have recovered.*



*Ly Thi Pa, 10, climbs a steep slope looking for antimony ores.*





*Ly Thi Pa has dropped out of school due to poverty, and now works full time to help her family.*



*Too exhausted to change his clothes, Ly Mi Toan, 11, jumps right into bed for a much-deserved nap after spending the morning ore-scavenging.*

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*Publication permit 1332/BTTTT-PTTH&TTĐT, granted by the Ministry of Information and Communications of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*