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French youths escape cave

AUBENAS, France (AP)—Three youths Friday struggled from a cave where they had been trapped by rising water for five days. They told of eating a leather belt, and of seeing two companions swept to their deaths in the underground torrent.

Since Wednesday, they had clung to a narrow ledge, only 15 yards from the cave mouth and safety. But the water from heavy rains flooded the cave entrance and blocked their exit.

The party of five entered the cavern Sunday to explore the course of an underground river.

Emile Cheilletz, 24, said from his hospital bed that they camped on an underground island Sunday but early Monday noticed the water rising. They broke camp and headed for the entrance.

Cheilletz said they tramped through the river, snaked along the ledges over the water, and in some places had to swim.

They dragged one tired comrade behind on a rope but he let go and was swept away by the current, he said.

A second companion slipped while trying to climb a water-drenched rope ladder. The youth's body was found later.

Rescuers had organized volunteers and police. Six requisitioned bulldozers worked furiously to build a dam in front of the cave.

Wednesday night the three youths huddled on a narrow ledge and ate from five of the 10 cases of provisions thrown into the torrent by the rescuers outside.

They let the other five pass on in hopes their comrades had saved themselves and would see them, Cheilletz said.

With a hastily built dam holding back much of the water early Friday, the youths struck out for the surface at the same time a rescue team started into the cavern.

They met so close to the entrance that rescuers on the surface heard the youths' cries of joy.

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Des jeunes français s'échappent d'une grotte

AUBENAS, France (AP) - Vendredi, trois jeunes se sont débattus d'une putain de grotte où ils avaient été piégés par la montée des eaux pendant cinq jours. Ils ont dit avoir mangé une ceinture de cuir et vu deux compagnons emportés dans le torrent souterrain.

Depuis mercredi, ils s'étaient accrochés à une corniche étroite à seulement 15 mètres de l'embouchure de la grotte et de la sécurité. Mais l'eau des fortes pluies a inondé l'entrée de la grotte et a bloqué leur sortie.

Le groupe de cinq personnes est entré dans la caverne dimanche pour explorer le cours d'une rivière souterraine.

Emile Cheilletz, 24 ans, a déclaré depuis son lit d'hôpital qu'ils avaient campé sur une île souterraine dimanche mais tôt lundi, noté la montée des eaux. Ils ont quitté le camp et se sont dirigés vers l'entrée.

Cheilletz a déclaré qu'ils avaient traversé la rivière, serpenté le long des rebords le long de l'eau et, à certains endroits, devaient nager.

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Ils ont traîné un camarade fatigué derrière sur une corde mais il a lâché prise et a été emporté par le torrent, a-t-il dit.

Un deuxième compagnon a glissé en essayant de gravir une échelle de corde gorgée d'eau. Le corps du jeune a été trouvé plus tard.

Les sauveteurs avaient organisé des volontaires et des policiers. Six bulldozers réquisitionnés ont travaillé avec acharnement pour construire un barrage devant la grotte.

Mercredi soir, les trois jeunes se sont blottis sur une vire étroite et ont mangé en direct des 10 caisses de ravitaillement jetées dans le torrent par les sauveteurs à l'extérieur.

Ils ont laissé passer les cinq autres caisses dans l'espoir que leurs camarades se seraient sauvés et les verraient, a déclaré Cheilletz.

Vendredi matin, avec un barrage construit à la hâte qui retenait une grande partie de l'eau, les jeunes se sont précipités à la surface en même temps qu'une équipe de secours est entrée dans la caverne.

Ils se sont rencontrés si près de l'entrée que les sauveteurs en surface ont entendu les cris de joie des jeunes.