Hanoi - Attracted by rising prices for scrap metal, students have been dropping out of school to scavenge unexploded ordnance near Vietnam's former demilitarized zone, an official said Thursday.

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Since early March, 24 students ages 11 to 15 quit Cam Tuyen secondary school in the Cam Lo District in Quang Tri to scavenge full time, said Nguyen Van Binh, the district's deputy director of the Education Department.

The students, mostly from poor families, have started searching for scrap metal in nearby hills where land mines and unexploded ordnance still litter the landscape nearly 30 years after the Vietnam War ended, Binh said.

Scavengers often trigger blasts by handling such ordnance, which kills or maims dozens of people each year.

Binh said district authorities have sent representatives from the district People's Committee and the Education Department to the students' homes to urge their parents to send their children back to school. Six have returned to class and district authorities are considering offering aid to the families, he said.

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