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Research Report

Topic 3: Reiterating the need for proper defence against illegal gold mining in the Amazon Forest.



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Introduction

Illegal gold mining in the Amazon rainforest is one of the most destructive environmental issues of our day and age because it affects Indigenous people's rights, climate stability and environmental governance. Across nine South American countries and covering over 5 million square kilometres, the Amazon is the world's largest tropical rainforest and one of the most important regulators of global climate systems, carbon storage and biodiversity. However, the increasing amount of illegal gold mining has only undermined these functions. Working outside of the state's regulations, these mining operations contribute to deforestation, river degradation, ecosystem collapse and social disruptions, as well as severe soil and water contamination.

While governments and other organisations have acknowledged the dangers of these mining operations, their efforts have been underfunded and politically weak. Enforcement projects haven't been very successful because in remote regions where the state does not have much coverage, it is hard to interfere with these illegal mining operations. For a lot of these cases, these operations do not stop at illegal mining but are also linked to organized crime, transnational trafficking routes and illicit financial systems. This amount of depth has changed illegal gold mining from a local environmental threat into a broader security crisis. These operations also rely on unsafe and unmonitored working conditions, often involving labour exploitation due to the absence of legal oversight. That is why there is a major need to stop these illegal mining operations. This prevention

should include environmental monitoring, legal enforcement, Indigenous territorial protection, and international cooperation to stop these illegal operations. Without a sustainable strategy to combat this issue, the Amazon is in risk to reach an ecological point of no return that would have irreversible consequences to global environmental stability.

Background Information

Illegal gold mining in the Amazon can be linked back to the 20th century development policies that tried to integrate the rainforest into the country's economy. Starting in the 1960s, governments in Brazil, Peru and the other countries started grand infrastructure projects like highways, dams, and settlement programs. These projects were created in the belief that economic development in this region required the exploitation of natural resources. Gold mining wasn't the main objective of these programs, but it facilitated the movement into inaccessible areas in the forest. The idea later expanded with the gold boom of the late 1970's when international gold prices skyrocketed and made the forest a prime target for mining operations. Thousands of gold miners migrated to the region after these events. These miners also mostly operated illegally and used dangerous extraction techniques. Mercury was one of these dangerous techniques used because of its low cost and effectiveness however, mercury contamination created many problems with miners' health and ecological problems. In the 1990's, environmental awareness grew, and so Amazonian states started creating legal frameworks to regulate the operations and to protect Indigenous lands. However, enforcement couldn't keep up with the laws. Geographical aspects, limited resources and political instability made it hard for these governments to make a meaningful impact. Indigenous communities who had gold rich land, had to force invasions, violence, and contaminated water sources. This situation only got worse in the early 2000s and 2010s.

Today, illegal gold mining in the Amazon is seen as a biproduct of historical development, shift in global economics, weak governance and inequality. The issue lasting many years shows how enforcement alone is insufficient without internation collaboration and legal accountability to back it up. Understanding the historical background only highlights the need for more tangible actions to fully combat this issue.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Brazil: About 60 percent of the Amazon Rainforest is in Brazil. Within the recent years there has been a growth in the amount of Indigenous land affected by illegal gold mining, such as Sararé. Reports suggest that between 2023-2025, a total 4219 hectares of rainforest were affected by illegal gold mining, in four Indigenous zones¹. The prominent mining in Brazil puts them at the centre of this issue, as they have the most individual jurisdiction over the Amazon, making them a model for other nations on how to respond to the situation.

Peru: Mining in Peru is focused on the Madre de Dios and Loreto regions, but new zones are emerging. Mining, using dredges, leave behind traces of mercury which is shown to harm the environment. Satellite imagery of the regions show that 225 rivers have been affected since 2017². This causes harm to the population as it affects the fish from the rivers as well as possible drinking water to the population. This is a significant issue for Peru as it also poses a threat to the population, as the population can be harmed through negative health effects such as defects for newborns.

Columbia: Due to rising prices of gold, it has surpassed cocaine as the primary source of income for criminal groups and other organised crime groups. 69 percent of the gold mined in Colombia was illegal, in 2020³. A low percentage is legal due to the high cost and tight government regulations to obtain a legal license to mine in the region. The prominence of organised criminal groups in mines poses a national, possibly international, security threat. Columbia's government would have to find solutions to reduce the percentage gold mined illegally, to protect national security, the environment, its neighbours, and possibly other countries. This is crucial as gold prices are expected to keep on rising.

Venezuela: In 2016, Nicolás Maduro passed the Orinoco Mining Arc, a designated zone comprising of 12 percent of Venezuela's territory to promote investments and generate revenue from mining⁴. However, the act failed to attract interest from investors and members from the state turned to backdoor deals for access to the Arc to criminal organisations, according to a US

¹ (Greenpeace International)

² (Taylor)

³ (Berg et al.)

⁴ (Abulu)

Congress report. An OHCHR press statement, has mentioned that there have been some human rights violation such as lack of adequate basic needs like food, shelter, and water as well as sexual exploitation. Additionally, there are reports of illegal gold being leaked across the border into Venezuela, possibly creating a blurred line in terms of number of illegal gold mines. Venezuela would have to increase crackdown on the situation as it appears to foster criminal organisation both inside and outside the country, as the rest of the world is viewing them in a negative manner.

UNODC: The UNODC is the centre UN organisation focused on transnational crime, and there are numerous links connecting illegal gold mining exports to criminal organisation. Their assistance could be key to implementing to limit the issue.

Relevant UN Resolutions

Preventing and Combating Crimes that Affect the Environment – General Assembly Resolution A/RES/76/185⁵

1. Urges Member States to adopt effective measures to prevent and combat crimes that affect the environment, such as illicit trafficking in wildlife, including, *inter alia*, flora and fauna as protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, in timber and timber products, in hazardous wastes and other wastes and in precious metals, stones and other minerals, as well as, *inter alia*, poaching, by making the best possible use of relevant international instruments and by strengthening legislation, international cooperation, capacity-building, criminal justice responses and law enforcement efforts aimed at, *inter alia*, dealing with transnational organized crime, corruption and money laundering linked to such crimes, and illicit financial flows derived from such crimes, while acknowledging the need to deprive criminals of proceeds of crime;

Tackling illicit trafficking in wild fauna and flora, including timber and timber products, the illegal mining of and illicit trafficking in minerals and precious metals, illicit trafficking in waste and

⁵ (“A/RES/76/185 Document Viewer”)

other crimes that affect the environment – The Economic and Social Council Resolution E/RES/2025/17⁶

1. Recognizes that illicit trafficking in wild fauna and flora, including timber and timber products, and the illegal mining of and illicit trafficking in minerals and precious metals, as well as illicit trafficking in waste, may constitute crimes that affect the environment of a serious nature and are increasingly being exploited by transnational criminal organizations as a source of significant profit of their operations;
5. Also urges Member States, in accordance with their domestic law, legal systems and international obligations, to provide one another with the broadest possible assistance, including mutual legal assistance, as appropriate, within their financial means, to enhance the effectiveness of action aimed at tackling illicit trafficking in wild fauna and flora, including timber and timber products, and the illegal mining of and illicit trafficking in minerals and precious metals, as well as illicit trafficking in waste and other crimes that affect the environment;
8. Further encourages Member States to establish, in accordance with their national legislation, where appropriate, the illegal mining of and illicit trafficking in minerals and precious metals as serious crimes, as defined in article 2 (b) of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and to take suitable measures, where the offence is transnational in nature and involves an organized criminal group, to prevent and combat the illegal mining of and illicit trafficking in minerals and precious metals;

Previous Attempts to Address the Issue

CCPI Amazonia Efforts

The CCPI Amazônia is a police cooperation between countries with the Amazon region, including Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, Venezuela, and French Guiana. The purpose of this cooperation is to fight transnational crime through joint operations, and closely

⁶ (“E/RES/2025/17 Document Viewer”)

working with international agencies like Interpol. It's most recent effort in Brazil, disabled 277 dredges, resulting a total economic impact of 193 US dollars on criminal organisation running the dredges⁷. Joint operations and continuous efforts like this are examples of the key steps required to solve the issue and signalling the importance of a unified approach.

Operation Green Shield 2025

Operation Green Shield was a major international law enforcement campaign pushed by the UAE and the UNODC. It was a cross-border effort that used many resources including officers and various technology, which led to 90 arrests and seizing goods totalling more than 64 million dollars⁸. Operation Green Shield is a key example of how international countries can impact the situation in South America, demonstrating regardless of where a state is an impact can be made.

Andean Community Ruling

The Andean Community (CAN) is a South American bloc. It comprised of various South American states since its foundation in 1969. The current members are Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. The purpose of the bloc is to foster economic, social, and political dialogue between the countries. The significance of the bloc is that it serves as regional governing body. Regarding the issue of illegal gold mining, on the 6th of October 2025, it ruled that the Peruvian government had failed to do its duty to combat illegal mining, it was raised to CAN via a complaint from an Indigenous community. The result was that Peru had to act within 20 days or possibly face sanctions⁹. This is a great example of an organisation playing an active role, and a possible extension of this to other countries within the region could expand the efforts to combat the issue.

Proposed Solutions

- Increasing local law enforcement, regulation, and surveillance to rely less on one-time efforts and show local resilience.

⁷ (“Brazilian Authorities Dismantle Hundreds of Illegal Dredges in Major Anti-Mining Operation”)

⁸ (“Operation Green Shield Strikes Huge Blow to Environmental Crime Networks across the Amazon Basin”)

⁹ (“Andean Community Condemns Peru for Inaction on Illegal Activities in the Amazon | Peru Support Group”)

- Improving measures regarding the supply of gold and being transparent on the legitimacy of how the gold was mined, before entering international markets.
- Empowering indigenous and local communities near the mining to improve communication between local members to state employees.
- Provide alternatives for members guided towards illegal mining for economic security.
- Using international states and organisations, for funding or any other assistance to promote Pan-South American approach to the issue.

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