

# Risky gold rush: Indonesia tackles illegal mining boom

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Authorities in Sumatra's Jambi province, which has one of the biggest concentrations of illegal mining sites in Indonesia, have started a determined fightback, combining a crackdown with attempts at regulation.

Hulking excavators claw at riverbanks on Indonesia's Sumatra island in the hunt for gold, transforming what was once a rural idyll into a scarred, pitted moonscape.

It is one of a huge number of illegal gold mines that have sprung up across the resource-rich archipelago as the price of the precious metal has soared, luring people in rural [areas](#) to give up jobs in traditional industries.

Now authorities in Sumatra's Jambi province, which has one of the biggest concentrations of illegal mining sites in Indonesia, have started a determined fightback, combining a crackdown with attempts at regulation.

Declines in the price of rubber, which provided a livelihood for many in the area who had worked on plantations tapping the commodity, has driven many locals to more lucrative—and dangerous—gold mining.

Iwan, a 43-year-old who works at an illegal site by the Tabir river, left his job on a rubber plantation to become a gold miner two years ago but said life was still difficult.

"This year has been tough because there are days when we don't find any gold," the miner, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told AFP.

"But it's still better than being a rubber farmer because rubber is very cheap nowadays."

The illicit industry in Jambi started off in a handful of places with small-time prospectors panning for gold, but has exploded to about 100 sites in recent years.

With authorities apparently doing little to stop the boom in its early years, [miners](#) became increasingly bold and began openly using excavators.

Mining in the province is usually carried out at open sites next to rivers, where workers dig shallow pits in the hunt for gold deposits that typically build up next to waterways.

## **Miners' lives at risk**

In Jambi, the wildlife-filled jungles have been degraded by the expansion of mines and plantations to devastating effect.

But it is not just the environment that is suffering, miners are putting their lives at risk.

Burning mercury mixed with raw ore to extract gold is common, but can cause serious neurological damage. Miners sometimes develop problems such as tremors and persistent coughing from inhaling the fumes.

In recent months, authorities have stepped up their fight back.

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