Helping in the fight against illegal gold mining in Colombia

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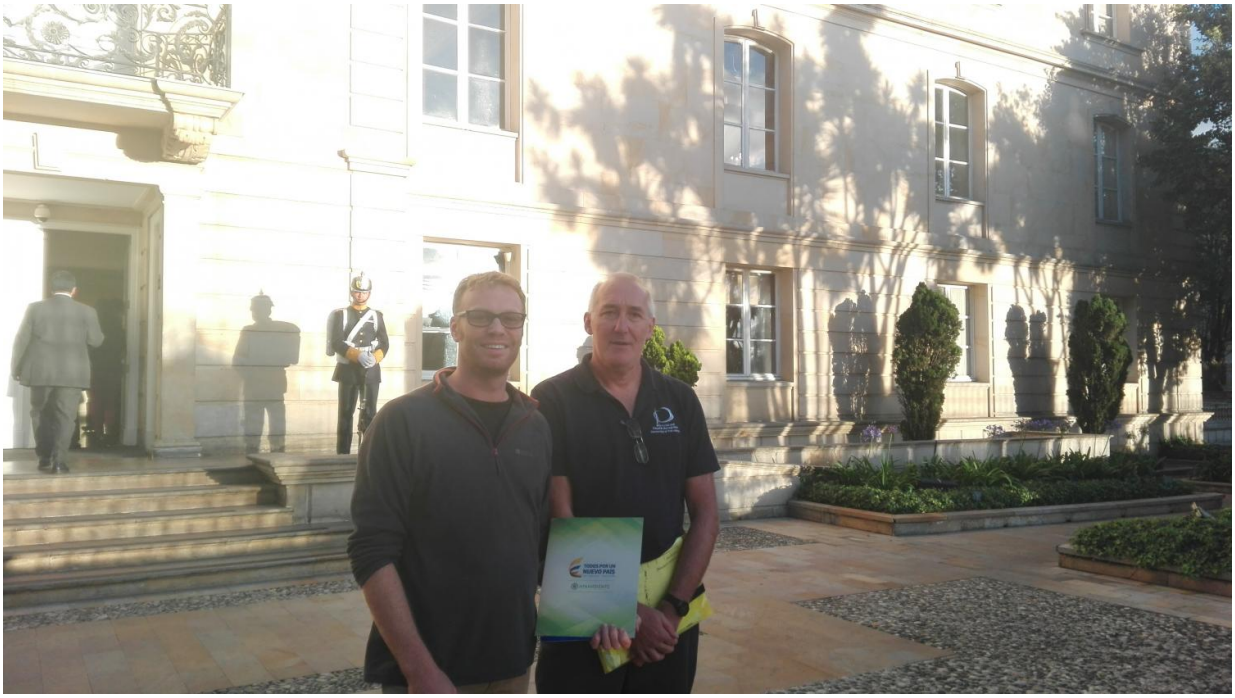


Dr. Richard Teeuw (right) and co-researcher Dr. Nick Mount of Nottingham University, outside the Presidential Palace in Bogata. Credit: University of Portsmouth

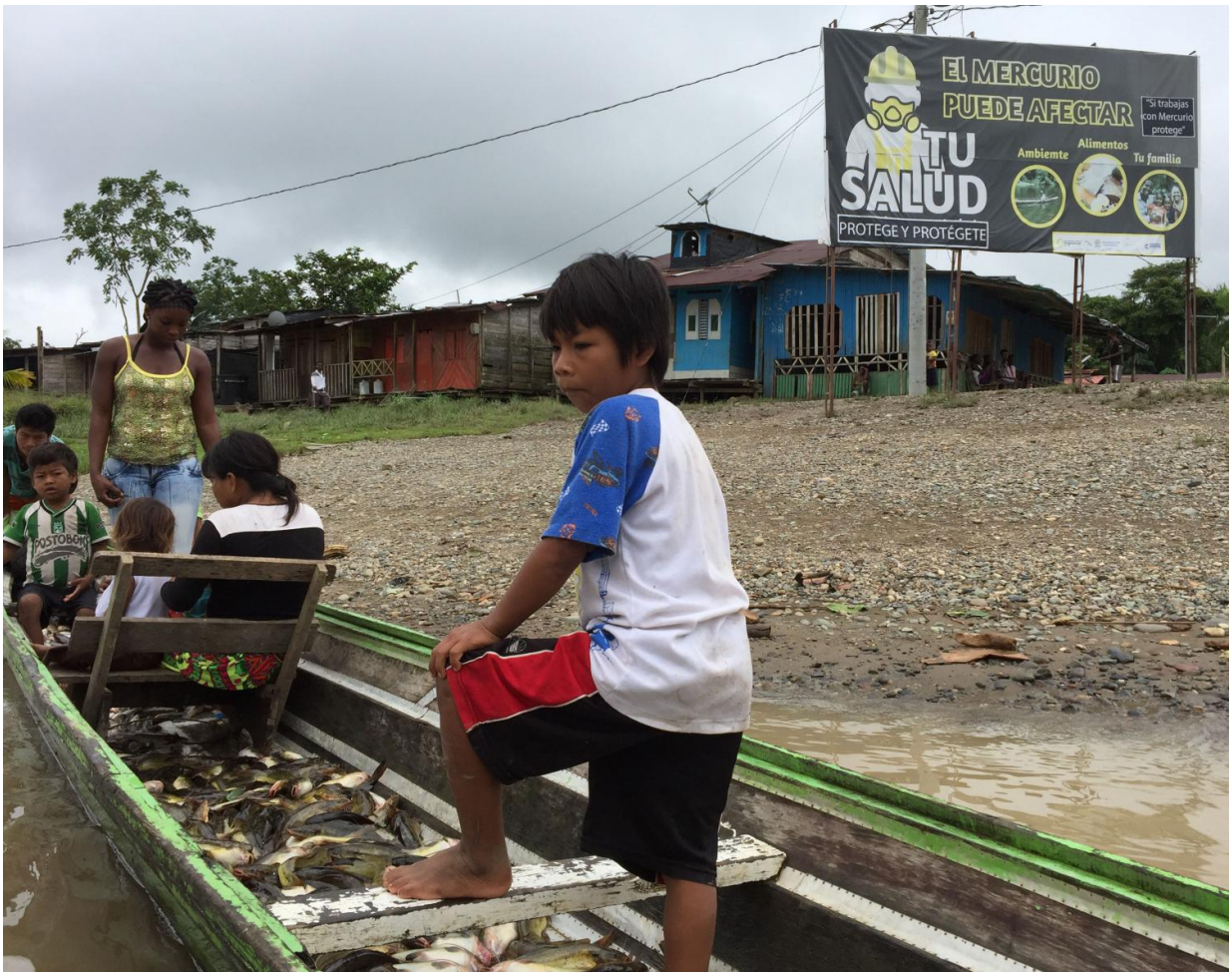
A University of Portsmouth disaster specialist is helping with the fight in Colombia against illegal gold mining and its impacts, from deforestation and toxic pollution, to socio-economic pressures on nearby communities.

Dr Richard Teeuw is part of a multidisciplinary team of scientists, human rights NGOs (led by London-based ABColombia), and MPs from Ireland and England, supporting Colombian communities in bringing legal cases against the mining organisations behind the devastation of people's villages, livelihoods and the environment.

Dr Teeuw's expertise is providing satellite imagery of deforested areas to detect and monitor illegal mining activity. Focusing on one of the most impacted areas, the Rio Quito area, near Quibdo in Colombia's Pacific Region, the satellite image analysis has shown that since 2014, some 17 km2 of rainforest has been destroyed by illegal mining.

"The extent and rapidity of the mining and deforestation is shocking. I've worked in similar mining districts in West Africa, Guyana and Borneo, but have never seen so much devastation from mining in such a short time," said Dr Teeuw.

The team recently conducted a fact-finding mission to the Rio Quito area, visiting communities impacted by the illegal mining and associated pollution, notably toxic mercury from the gold processing. The visit was hosted by Choco Technical University, an agency of the Environment Ministry, local NGOs, the Diocese of Choco and local communities.



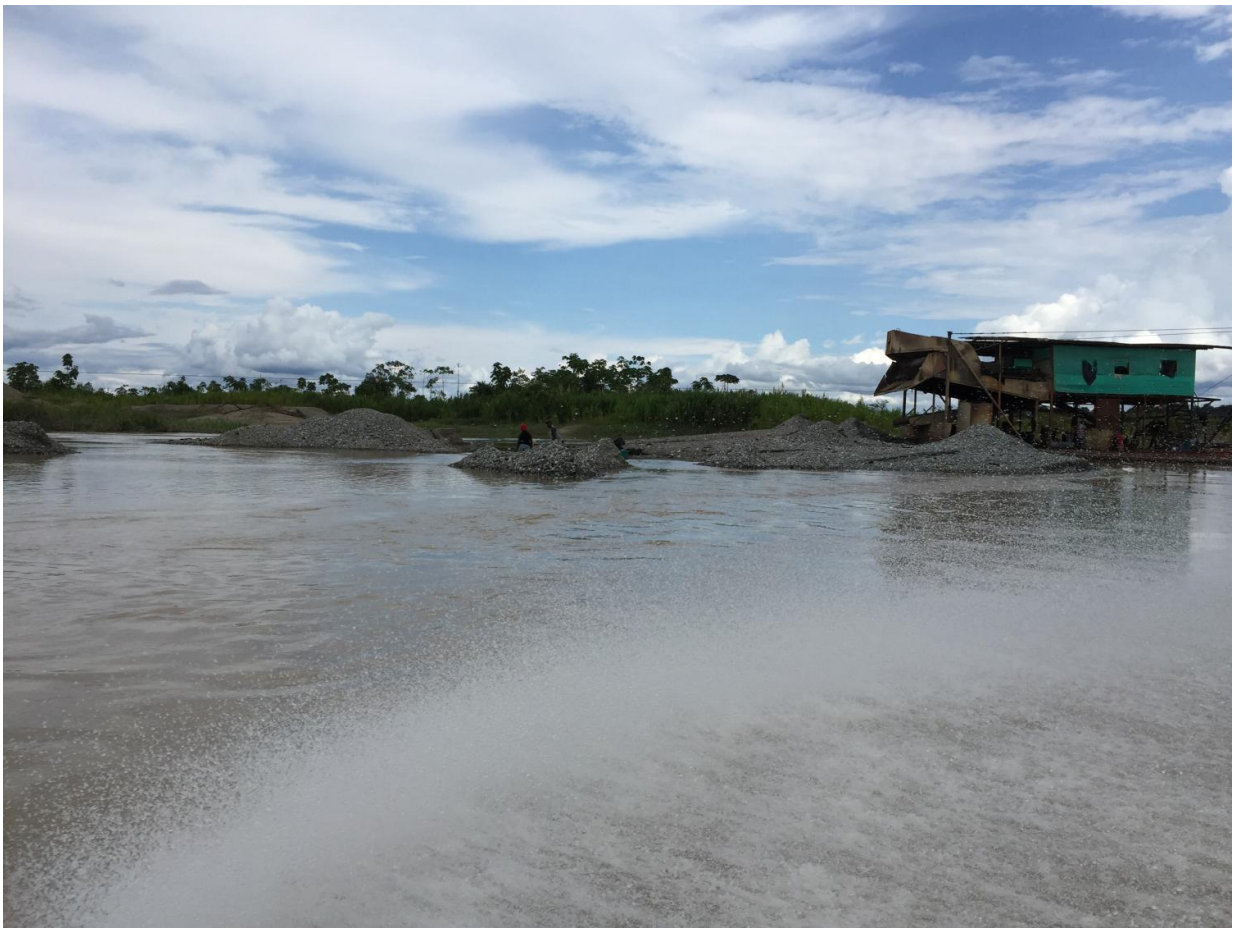
A billboard highlighting the risk of mercury poisoning. Credit: University of Portsmouth

Following the visit, the team met with Colombia's Minister for Environment and Sustainable Development, Luis Gilberto Murillo. Dr Teeuw said: "We discussed ways of mitigating the impacts of the illegal mining, reforesting the thousands of hectares of associated deforestation, stabilising the devastated Rio Quito and assisting affected communities.

"We reported on community-hosted discussions in the mining district - those communities and their schools need to be involved in the study of

damage done to the ecosystem, as well as the search for ways of rehabilitating the mined areas and providing better livelihoods.

"Ending the devastating illegal mining is important because the region is a biodiversity 'hotspot'. The Rio Quito is a tributary of the Rio Atrato, one of only three river systems in the world that have been given legal protection because of their bio-cultural value."



Dredging in the Rio Quito area. Credit: University of Portsmouth

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