

New gold rush fuels Amazon destruction

November 9 2021, by Joshua Howat Berger, With Valeria Pacheco In Brasilia



An aerial view of an illegal gold mine in Sao Felix do Xingu, in Brazil's Para state—as investors have sought a haven from the Covid-19 chaos in gold, illegal miners have responded by hacking rust-colored scars into the lush green of the Amazon.

Standing over the gaping pit in the middle of his small farm, Brazilian

wildcat miner Antonio Silva struggles to explain why he joined the new gold rush sweeping the Amazon.

The 61-year-old grandfather of six had planned to retire from illegal mining, and the environmental destruction that comes along with it.

He bought this farm in rural Sao Felix do Xingu, in the southeastern Amazon, and was starting a cattle ranch on a long-deforested patch of jungle where he would not have to cut down more trees.

But then the pandemic hit, gold prices soared, and Silva—a pseudonym, as the man is involved in illicit activity—couldn't resist the temptation of easy money.

He put his retirement plans on hold and spent 50,000 reais (\$9,000) of his meager savings to rent an excavator, hire four workers, and dig a hole the size of a large house that now dominates his emerald pastures.

Filled with murky gray-green water, the hole is outfitted with a pump sitting on a ramshackle raft that delivers muddy sediment to a sluice to be panned for gold. To his chagrin, he has found only trace amounts so far.

"I know it's wrong. I know the problems mining causes. But I don't have anything else," says Silva, who got his start mining in the gold rush of the 1970s and 80s at the infamous Serra Pelada mine, known for images of tens of thousands of mud-soaked men swarming its cavernous sides like ants, hauling sacks of dirt from its bowels.

Now, illegal mining is surging again in the mineral-rich Amazon basin, fueled by poverty, greed, impunity and record gold prices.

As investors have sought a haven from pandemic-induced economic

chaos in gold, illegal miners have responded by hacking giant rust-colored scars into the lush green of the world's biggest rainforest.



Illegal mining is surging again in the mineral-rich Amazon basin, fueled by poverty, greed, impunity and record gold prices.

Mining has already destroyed a record 114 square kilometers (44 square miles) of the Brazilian Amazon this year—more than 10,000 football pitches.

Silva's operation is relatively tiny, and the land he's damaging is his own.

But much of the destruction is on protected indigenous reservations.

There, gangs with heavy equipment and brutal tactics are installing huge mines, attacking villages, spreading disease, poisoning the water—and devastating the very communities experts say are key to saving the Amazon.

'You'll have to kill me'

The Brazilian Amazon has 1.2 million square kilometers (450,000 square miles) of indigenous reservations. Most of it is pristine forest, thanks to native traditions of living in harmony with nature.

Mineral-rich and remote, many reservations are also easy prey for illegal mining gangs. Their camps often are a breeding ground for other crimes, prosecutors say, including the drugs trade, sex trafficking and slave labor.

The government estimates there are 4,000 illegal miners operating on indigenous territory in the Amazon, though activists say the figure is much higher.

Recent studies found they used 100 tonnes of mercury in 2019-2020 to separate gold dust from soil—and that up to 80 percent of children in nearby villages show signs of neurological damage from exposure to it.



Illegal mining has exploded under Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who took office in 2019.

Mercury also poisons the fish that many indigenous communities rely on for food.

Native peoples facing this nightmare have begun organizing anti-mining patrols and protests—sometimes paying a heavy price.

Maria Leusa Munduruku is a leader of the Munduruku people, whose territory has been among the hardest hit.

When illegal miners started buying off community members with cash, alcohol and drugs in a bid to move in on tribal land, Munduruku, 34,

organized local women to resist.

Soon, she was getting death threats, she says.

On May 26, armed men swarmed her home.

"They poured gasoline on my house, then set it on fire," she says, red flowers crowning her black hair, her baby nursing at her breast.

"I said I wasn't leaving, that they would have to kill me. Somehow, my house survived. God only knows why it didn't catch fire. They burned everything inside it."

Munduruku, who has five children and a grandson, did not back down.



In this photo taken in 2019, an illegal gold miner weighs a small lump of gold on his boat in a river in the Amazon basin, south of Porto Velho—Brazil mined 107 tonnes of gold in 2020, making it the world's seventh-biggest producer.

In September, she traveled to Brasilia, some 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles) from her village, to help lead a protest of indigenous women demanding the government protect their land.

That rally came in the wake of another major indigenous demonstration in the capital a month earlier, also over land rights issues.

"We have to make sure our children have a river to fish in, land to live on," she says.

"That's why I keep fighting."

Backed by Bolsonaro

Brazil mined 107 tonnes of gold last year, making it the world's seventh-biggest producer.

Illegal mines have exploded under far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who has pushed to open indigenous reservations to mining since taking office in 2019.

A recent study found just one-third of Brazil's gold production is certified as legally mined.

Current regulations allow sellers to vouch for the origin of their gold by simply signing a paper.



Maria Leusa Munduruku is a leader of the Munduruku people, whose territory has been among the hardest hit by illegal mining.

The Amazon region is notoriously hard to police.

"We realized using only on-the-ground police operations was an exercise in futility," says Helena Palmquist, spokeswoman for the federal prosecutors' office in the northern state of Para.

Miners would flee into the jungle when police arrived, she says. Authorities burned the machinery left behind. But in a sign of how well-financed the gangs are, they easily replaced the excavators, which cost 600,000 reals apiece.

So prosecutors got creative, going after the powerful financiers trafficking illegal gold.

In August, they moved to suspend the operations of three major gold dealerships, asking a court to fine them 10.6 billion reals. The ruling is pending.

But there are powerful interests in play.

"Gold-sector lobbyists regularly meet with the environment minister, with top administration officials. They have direct access to the government," Palmquist says.

"And there's a very deep-rooted idea here in Brazil that the Amazon is a good that exists to be exploited."

That may be changing.



Dantas Ferreira, a 53-year-old cattle rancher, supports Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, but says the environmental destruction in his home region has gone too far.

In downtown Sao Felix, Dantas Ferreira is fishing at dusk on the Xingu River, a bright blue Amazon tributary, just upstream from where another river, the Fresco, dumps its turbid, brown-stained waters into the Xingu's crystalline ones.

Authorities say the Fresco is badly polluted with illegal mining waste.

Like most people in Sao Felix, Ferreira, a 53-year-old cattle rancher, is a proud Bolsonaro supporter.

But he says the environmental destruction in the region has gone too far.

The president "needs to stop this," he says.

"If they don't crack down on illegal mining, our water is never going to be normal again."

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Citation: New gold rush fuels Amazon destruction (2021, November 9) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-11-gold-fuels-amazon-destruction.html>

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