

Brazil launches plan to expand mining in Amazon

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Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has come under fire for his plans to expand gold mining in the Amazon.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro launched a plan Monday to expand gold mining in the Amazon rainforest, drawing criticism from environmentalists for bolstering an industry accused of rampant deforestation, pollution and attacks on indigenous peoples.

Bolsonaro signed a decree creating a program to support the development of artisanal [mining](#), a controversial activity known as "garimpo" that occupies something of a legal gray area in Brazil.

The decree says the aim is to "propose public policies and stimulate the development of artisanal and small-scale mining, fostering sustainable development for the region and the nation."

It also creates an inter-ministerial commission on artisanal mining, whose "priority region" will be the nine states that make up Brazil's 60-percent share of the Amazon.

Artisanal miners, or "garimpeiros," are divisive in Brazil.

Bolsonaro, whose father was once a "garimpeiro," defends wildcat miners as hardscrabble frontiersmen.

Critics paint a different picture.

Mining destroyed a record 125 square kilometers (nearly 50 square miles) of the Brazilian Amazon last year—more than twice the size of Manhattan.

Much of the destruction was on protected indigenous reservations.

The use of mercury to separate gold dust from soil has also left toxic pollution in rivers.

Prosecutors say illegal gold miners have links to organized crime, and there have been deadly clashes between armed miners and indigenous groups opposed to them.

Artisanal mining is legal in Brazil, provided miners have environmental licenses and work on authorized land.

But many don't.

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

"What (the government) should be doing is proposing and supporting environmental licensing of this activity and monitoring its implementation," said Suely Araujo of the Climate Observatory, a coalition of environmental groups.

"Instead... the Bolsonaro administration looks set to defend the sector's 'historical values,' which is to say, [environmental destruction](#)," she said in a statement.

Bolsonaro, who has pushed to expand agribusiness and mining in the Amazon, has faced international

outcry over the destruction of the world's biggest rainforest.

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has surged since the far-right leader took office in 2019, to a 15-year high of 13,235 square kilometers from August 2020 to July 2021.

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