

Amazon in danger: the true price of gold



The Amazon, the largest tropical rainforest on the planet and one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world, faces a growing and critical threat: the uncontrolled expansion of illegal gold mining. This activity, driven by criminal networks and armed groups, spreads across rivers and remote territories in all Amazonian countries, creating a severe environmental and humanitarian crisis.

The intensive use of mercury in gold mining activities affects public health, wildlife, and the ecological balance of the region. It also endangers hundreds of Indigenous communities, including those in voluntary isolation.

The problem of gold mining in the Amazon is a matter of global concern, and urgent action is needed to find solutions.

A silent and lethal threat.

Mercury is a highly toxic substance that can travel long distances, accumulate in the food chain, and cause severe harm to human health and the environment. There are no safe levels of exposure.

While mercury has been eliminated mainly from industrial use in the Global North, its trade and consumption continue to devastate communities in the Global South.

The Amazon is the largest mercury sink in the world. The rainforest receives 30% of all mercury pollution on the planet, registering the highest levels ever documented globally.



Bolivia is a major importer of mercury in South America, with imports reaching 200 tons annually. (IPEN, 2025).

It is estimated that forests near gold mining sites capture 71 micrograms of mercury per square meter each year, surpassing even industrial areas in China. (CINCIA, 2022).

In the Madre de Dios region of Peru alone, artisanal gold miners use between 44 and 50 metric tons of mercury annually. (EIA, 2025).

Indigenous Peoples: The most affected

High concentrations of mercury in the Amazon are severely impacting the health of communities and threatening their well-being and survival.

Mercury emissions extend beyond areas near mining activities, as this metal can travel and deposit far from its source. Analyses in remote Indigenous territories in the Colombian Amazon in 2024 showed that from 10% to 28% of the fish species consumed by the communities have mercury concentrations above a safe limit for health.



79% of the population in six native communities in Loreto, Peru, have mercury levels above a safe limit for health according to WHO. (SZF, 2024).

In some Colombian Amazon communities, mercury levels have been **recorded at 15 times—or more—**above the limits set by the WHO, with reported neurological problems in children and birth defects.

Between 1.5 and 17 of every 1,000 children in subsistence fishing areas in Colombia show cognitive disorders resulting from the consumption of contaminated fish. (Olivero, 2025).



Biodiversity at unmeasurable risk

The increasing combination of environmental crimes linked to illegal gold mining has a devastating impact on biodiversity in the Amazon biome, which harbors more than 10% of the Earth's species diversity. This activity even occurs in protected areas, reserves, and Indigenous territories.

Illegal mining has transformed over 13,100 km² of the Amazon region, with acceleration documented since 2018. Also, since then, gold prices have increased over 220%, driving the expansion of illegal mining in the Amazon.

A study in Brazil shows that 81% of carnivorous fish had detectable mercury levels, exceeding the WHO standard for fish (0.5 µg/g). (WWF, 2019).

River dolphins face a severe threat, with mercury directly impacting their liver, kidneys, brain, and reproductive system, jeopardizing their survival. (WWF, 2024).

In Peru, approximately 3,000 tons of mercury have been released over the past 20 years; fish in mining ponds exceed the allowed limits by 37%.



Territory defenders at risk

Illegal mining has fueled escalating violence against Indigenous peoples, environmental and territorial defenders.

Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for environmental defenders, with 79 killed in 2023 (40% of all global cases) and 461 over the past decade, including 31 Indigenous leaders.

In Brazil, attacks have primarily targeted Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. (Global Witness, 2024).

Illegal Activities

Controlled by national armed groups and transnational criminal organizations, illegal gold mining fuels extortion, corruption, and human rights abuses in the Amazon. As the international price of gold has steadily risen over recent decades, armed groups have increasingly turned to gold mining to finance their operations and launder drug trafficking proceeds.

At least 200 tons of mercury were trafficked from Mexico to South America between 2019 and 2025. (EIA, 2025).

Illegal gold mining has transformed more than 13,100 km² of the Amazonian region, with documented acceleration since 2018. (FCDS, 2025).

In Peru, an estimated 69% of municipalities in the Amazon's border regions are affected by the presence of illegal armed groups.

By 2025, **illegal mining activities were reported in nine Amazonian regions of Peru.** Madre de Dios has recorded over 11,000 hectares of deforestation caused by this activity, both inside and outside the Mining Corridor. (ACCA 2025).

