

Toxic Gold

How Illegal Gold Mining in the Amazon Fuels Environmental Destruction, Indigenous Rights Violations, and a Shady Global Trade

Executive Summary

Between 2019 and 2022, policies promoting gold mining exploitation led to a 265% increase in illegal gold mining, undermining Indigenous rights and causing severe environmental harm. Since 2023, the Lula government has implemented security operations and monitoring efforts, with the intent to reduce illegal mining in a number of Indigenous territories.

However, recent monitoring data of Greenpeace Brazil from 2023 to 2024 reveal a troubling trend: the mining activities have not reduced but merely shifted from one Indigenous territory to another. While illegal mining decreased from 2023 to 2024 in the Yanomami region (-7%), the Mundurucu region (-57%) and the Kayapó region (-31%), it has increased exponentially in the Sararé region (+93%). Illegal gold mining in the Amazon remains a major driver of deforestation, mercury contamination, biodiversity loss, and social disruption, impacting mainly rural and urban populations, quilombolas (descendants of Afro-Brazilians) and, above all, Indigenous communities.

The route along which the gold illegally mined in the Amazon enters the legal supply chain is complex and spans various stages. It can range from the falsification of documents and registration of gold mines, to the smuggling, laundering and the pseudo-refinement of gold. At the end of the chain, the gold is exported worldwide, with Switzerland being one of the main international gold refinement and processing destinations. Significant discrepancies between Brazil's recorded gold exports and Switzerland's recorded gold imports suggest irregularities in the international gold trade. In 2022, Swiss imports exceeded Brazilian exports by 67%, and in 2023 by 62%, amounting to approximately 9.7 and 8.7 tonnes of gold, respectively. These gaps highlight the opacity of the international gold trade and the need for stricter oversight and transparency.

Highlights

- Despite the Brazilian government's efforts to combat illegal mining, in the last two years, 4,219 hectares of rainforest have been destroyed by gold miners in the four Indigenous territories mentioned—an area equivalent to almost half the total area of Manhattan.
- Illegal gold mining affects everyone, as large areas of the Amazon rainforest are destroyed and poisoned with mercury to extract gold. This poses a serious threat to Indigenous peoples, wildlife, and the planet's climate.
- Significant discrepancies exist between Brazil's recorded gold exports and Switzerland's recorded gold imports, with imports exceeding exports by 67% in 2022 and 62% in 2023 (amounting to approximately 9.7 and 8.7 tonnes of gold respectively).
- The current gold rush is exacerbated by central banks - a few powerful players who hold substantial shares and, as a result, wield significant influence over the gold market. The trend is likely to continue, as many central banks declared their intent to stock up on gold reserves.