Advocating to stop illegal mining in the Venezuelan Amazon Rainforest

EMBAJADORES DEL ORINOCO NEWSLETTER # 3

(April 2025)

Welcome to our **third newsletter!** Our initiative to bring you closer to what is happening in the Venezuelan Amazon Rainforest. We select the most relevant news and reports in English and Spanish and include our own content in English to help you stay updated.

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News and Noteworthy

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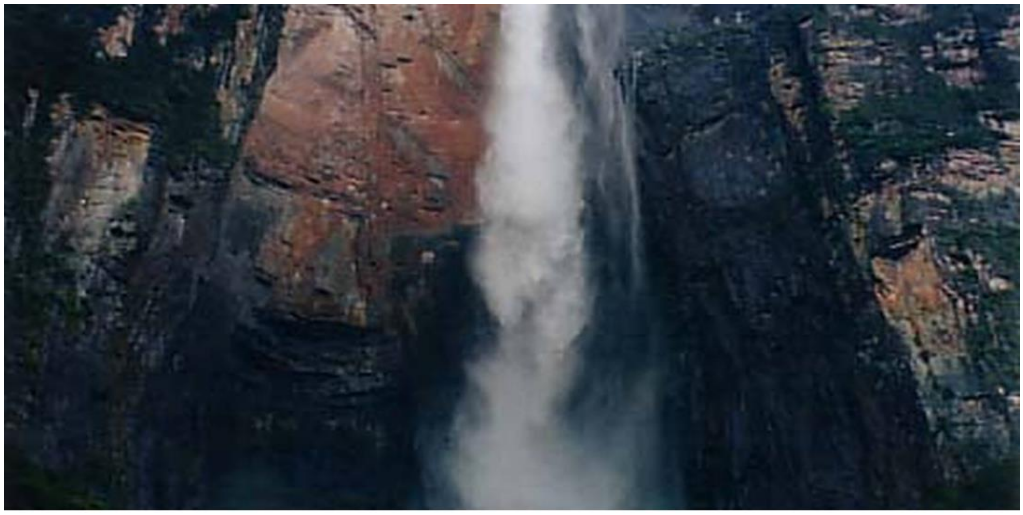
Did you miss it? On 20 March we participated in a talk organized by the European chapters of **Foro Penal** about the challenges of defending indigenous peoples' rights in Venezuela.

Contact us to know more and to be invited to similar events.

❖ Illegal mining reaches Venezuelan famous Angel Falls

Embajadores del Orinoco was glad to contribute to this article in the **Miami Herald** that provides an update on the criminal expansion of illegal mining in Venezuela that has reached natural wonders and protected areas such as Angel Falls (highest water fall in the world) located in Canaima National Park (a park the size of Belgium, protected area and UNESCO site). Gold mining operations reach Venezuela's Angel Falls | Miami Herald

Surprisingly, despite its obvious relevance, this sadly remains an underreported issue in international media. In the face of Venezuela's regime persecution of environmental and human rights activists, we will continue to take every opportunity to denounce to the world, the ecological and human devastation caused by illegal mining in the heart of the Venezuelan Amazon Rainforest. We are grateful to journalist Antonio M. Delgado and the Miami Herald for exposing this. (Image and quotes taken from the source).



With a height of 979 meters, Angel Falls is considered to be the world's water fall and was declared as an UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Gran Sabana region of Bolívar State in Venezuela. Wikimedia Commons

"We have seen serious violations of human rights. We are talking about crimes against humanity... murders, tortures, severe beatings, mutilations, things that in Venezuela we had never heard before but that show the mafia type of control that is now in place in that region," said Sonia Zapata, founder of the environmental group Embajadores del Orinoco.

"And it is not that regime officials are turning a blind eye to this, it is that they are directly involved, because it is no secret that it is the Venezuelan military that is in control, in alliance with criminal groups and leftist guerrillas," she said.

- **Ye'Kwana community attacked by miners**

Indigenous Ye'Kwana people who had managed to evict miners from their land, were met with extreme violence in January. The attacks included burning their homes. We are grateful to **Survival International** for giving visibility to this horrendous ambush. https://www.survivalinternational.org/films/1051961390

- **More than 5,000 Venezuelan wildlife specimens illegally traded in 2024 by corrupt state officials**

One of the largest and most profitable environmental crimes – The illicit Trade of Wildlife- is perpetrated in Venezuela by the State itself through its so-called Ministry of "Ecosocialism".

A study by award-winning investigative journalists in **Armando Info** shows that Maduro regime allowed the export of more than 5,000 wildlife specimens in 2024 to a private zoo in India owned by one of Asia's richest oil tycoons. The cargo included 70 macaws, 25 tapirs, 138 Arrau turtles, 12 Orinoco caimans, 2 Harpy eagles, 94 spider monkeys and other vulnerable and critically endangered species.

There is of course no government transparency about these illegal transactions or the corresponding revenues. This contravenes CITES ratified by Venezuela and in force since 1978.

Check the source in Spanish Un marajá petrolero recibe ofrendas de fauna venezolana

Images taken from the above source/link. Credit: Federico Parra and Andrew Alvarez/AFP

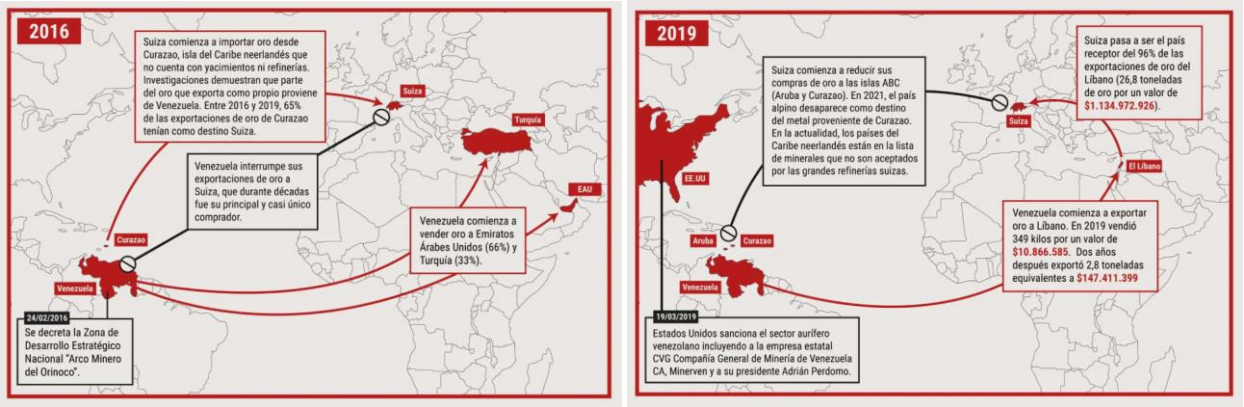
- **Where does the blood gold from Venezuela go?**

Another equally interesting article from **Armando Info** shows the flows of Venezuelan illegal gold over the last years. It reveals the prominent role of Switzerland in the acquisition of Venezuelan blood gold. This role is something we, at Embajadores del Orinoco, denounced in our **2022 Orinoco Oslo Summit** (check the Event section in our site and listen to the intervention of our Founder, Sonia Zapata)

Switzerland, one of the largest international gold trade hubs, was the largest official purchaser of Venezuelan gold until 2016.

Despite several challenges, sanctions and restrictions, it seems Switzerland has managed to continue profiting from Venezuelan illegal mining activities by simply changing suppliers over the years. In 2016 it re-routed its purchases through the Caribbean A, B, C islands (mainly Curacao); and when US sanctions on Venezuelan gold were imposed in 2019, Lebanon became the new "intermediary".

Below are the routes from this important Armando Info's article: Oro de verdad por oro verde: el comercio de conveniencia entre Líbano y Venezuela



- **86% of an estimated annual (2024) gold production valued at USD 5.6 billion, goes to the corrupt state elite and irregular groups.**

This comprehensive Report by **Transparency Venezuela** provides estimates of Venezuelan blood gold production. It discloses state corruption (identifying 72 companies partnering with the regime), organized crime networks and human rights violations linked to these illegal activities: Gold-Mining-in-Venezuela.-Transparencia-Venezuela-en-el-exilio.pdf

According to these estimates, 2023 production stood between 45 and 54 tons with an estimated value between USD 2.75 and 3.3 billion. 2024 assumptions provide an estimated value of USD 5.6 billion, 86% of which went to criminal organizations and the political elite.

One of the main takeaways from the Report is that, despite the growth in Venezuelan gold production, and regardless of the recent significant increase in gold prices, this has not resulted in higher state revenues nor welfare for the Venezuelan people.

- **Latin American dictators are increasingly relying on illegal mining to stay in power**

An article published late last year in **Council on Foreign Relations** reminds us that several authoritarian regimes and criminal organizations in Latin America are replacing drug trafficking with illegal gold mining as a major source of income. The article explains that both Venezuela's Maduro and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega use illegal mining to buy loyalty from the military.

In line with various other US organizations and activists, the article denounces that the proceeds of environmental crime in Latin America, including illegal mining, often end up in US shell companies. Although there have been some efforts by US officials to address this, the authors acknowledge that there is much more to be done and propose 4 concrete actions, including passing the "Legal Gold and Mining Partnership Act", a bipartisan bill reintroduced in 2023 focusing on a strategic multi-year plan to curtail illegal mining. Check the article here. Illegal Gold Finances Latin America's Dictators & Cartels. The United States Must Lead the Fight Against It. | Council on Foreign Relations

When it comes to US legal efforts in this area, one must mention the valuable work and progress by the **FACT Coalition** who have been working hard on measures to combat environmental crimes and, despite recent backlashes, have championed the battle for more transparency in the use of US shell companies through beneficial ownership disclosure requirements.

- **UN joint letter highlights flaws in current funding process to indigenous communities**

The letter warns that funds are often channeled through intermediaries and that indigenous organizations and communities are critically underfunded. It also demands greater transparency and accountability in the funding process and seeks to avoid conflation of indigenous people with other groups. Read the full letter here: https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/news/joint-letter-UNPFII-SR-EMRIP

On a similar note, but related to criticism regarding the financing of biodiversity protection by the Global Environmental Fund (GEF), we strongly recommend this article by **Survival International**: https://www.survivalinternational.org/articles/8977/COPorCON

- **The dilemma of indigenous people in Amazonas state**

This recent Report (in Spanish) by **FUNDAREDES** exposes the dilemma of indigenous people in Amazonas state who are forced to choose between joining illegal mining activities or having to leave their ancestral lands: #InformeDDHH: El dilema de los indígenas del estado Amazonas (2025) - ONG Fundaredes | According to the Report *"the control of mineral trafficking in the area called Eje Carretero Sur is a problem that reflects the complex dynamics of power and criminality in this region. This highway, which connects Puerto Ayacucho to the deepest areas of the Amazon and the borders with Brazil and Colombia, has become a vital artery for both the illegal economy and displaced indigenous communities seeking escape routes"* (free translation by Embajadores del Orinoco- Image credit: Fundaredes)

- **Beware of new governance standards designed to protect mining companies**

Human rights experts are skeptical about new mining certification standards (called *Consolidated Mining Standard Initiative*) that seem to overlook current requirements and good governance practices and deviate from UN, OECD and EU stricter existing rules.

The proposed standards are criticized, amongst others, for suggesting that mining projects may move forward in some circumstances without agreement of the indigenous people involved. The standards risk being used as a greenwashing tool for mining companies.

https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/30/major-problems-mining-industrys-new-certification-standard

- **Human rights victims are suing London's Gold Bullion Market Association (LBMA)**

For the first time in history, victims of gold mining are suing LMBA for wrongly certifying gold from a mine in Tanzania as free from human rights abuse. The trial, based on a claim filed by a London Law Firm on behalf of 2 miners killed in Tanzania, will be heard by the High Court in June 2026.

This is a ground-breaking case that can have significant impact hopefully improving gold standard and certification procedures.

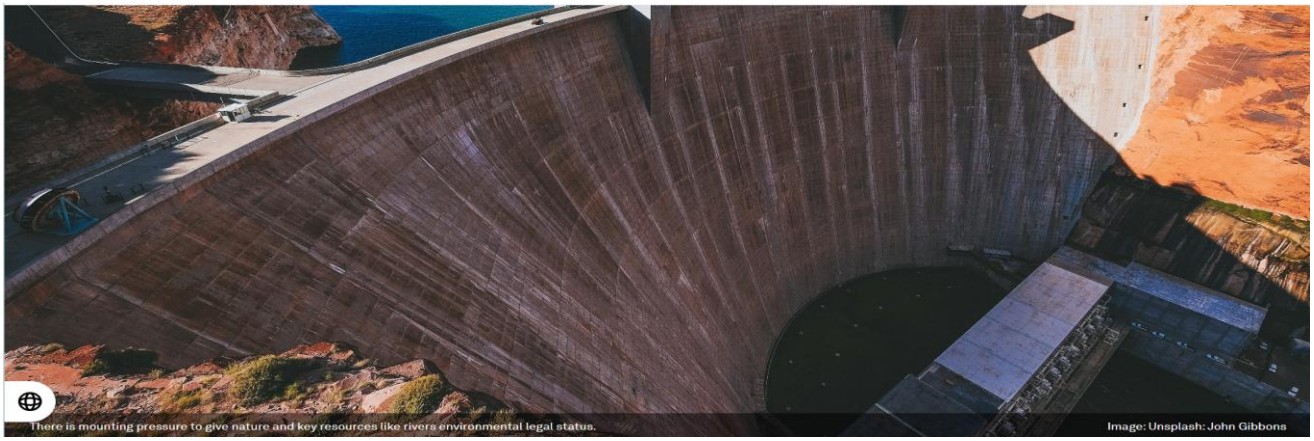
https://www.leighday.co.uk/news/news/2025-news/trial-of-the-london-bullion-market-association-to-go-ahead-at-the-high-court-next-year-following-alleged-human-rights-abuses-at-african-gold-mine/

Image credit: Moneygold.de

- **Could Orinoco and other rivers have legal rights one day?**

The question was raised at the 2025 annual meeting of the **World Economic Forum (WEF).** Although the proposal is not new, it is gaining more support as many recognize the

need to scale-up efforts globally to protect nature. Since nature cannot defend itself, the goal of granting legal personality to nature (forests, rivers, trees, mountains, etc.) is to allow individuals to take legal action against those destroying it. There are already several examples of this in the world. Read the full story here: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/02/environmental-personhood/ (Image taken from the source).



- **Artivism**

This time we share a short film (in Spanish) by **Fundaredes** denouncing the devastating and destructive influence of illegal mining on children living in Bolivar state.

Watch it in Youtube: https://youtu.be/Rz84Z_c3yNg

Do you like what we do? Check our webpage and follow us in social media (@Emborinoco): Embajadores del Orinoco – Embajadores del Orinoco (emborinoco.org)

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