

The ravages of illegal mining in Ecuador



By María Josefina Arce

In recent years illegal mining has expanded vertiginously throughout Latin America and has become another cause of the destruction of the Amazon. Deforestation, loss of ecosystems and contamination of water, soil and atmosphere are some of the impacts of this phenomenon, which endangers the health of local populations, mainly indigenous.

According to studies, there are more than 2,000 unauthorized extraction points in the so-called "lungs of the planet" and some 30 rivers where this activity is carried out and which serve as a route for machinery to enter and for minerals to leave.

Napo, one of Ecuador's 24 provinces and located in the Amazon region, is one of the most affected areas. Statistics show that between October 2021 and last January alone, illegal mining took over 70 hectares of the left bank of the Jatunyacu River. No better fate has befallen Yutzupino, which, according to experts, has been largely dried up by illegal mining for about five years.

The presence of copper, iron, manganese, lead and zinc in the tributaries exceeds the permitted limits by up to 500%. These heavy metals can be transferred to humans through the trophic or food chain.

The constant denunciations in recent weeks led to a military operation in Yutzupino in recent days, in which dozens of backhoes and equipment for gold and other mineral extraction were seized.

However, in view of the delicate situation, indigenous organizations of Napo declared an emergency in the province. The Amazon region of Ecuador, they said, will remain in constant denunciation and mobilization.

Zenaida Yasacama, vice-president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, CONAIE, denounced that mining continues in Napo, even though the government finally decreed a temporary suspension.

The truth is that the claims of the affected populations have been ignored, there are many interests. Therefore, the indigenous people demand an end to impunity and that local authorities, judges and prosecutors be investigated for irregularities in the judicial processes against this illegal activity.

They are also requesting a comprehensive diagnosis of the health of the inhabitants of the communities settled along the riverbanks due to possible illnesses and diseases caused by environmental contamination.

The Ecuadorian Constitution, approved in 2008 under the mandate of then President Rafael Correa, states that the Amazonian provinces are part of an ecosystem necessary for the environmental balance of the planet.

However, the reality is different. There has not been an adequate and rapid response against illegal mining, which has also turned the region into a place of violence and insecurity for its inhabitants.

Furthermore, the policy of President Guillermo Lasso's government to rapidly expand mining in the Amazon also brings with it, according to various organizations, an increase in illegal mining.

The indigenous communities are defending their right to live in a protected and healthy environment, as is their daily relationship with the environment, which is a lesson for many who, for money, are determined to destroy our planet.



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