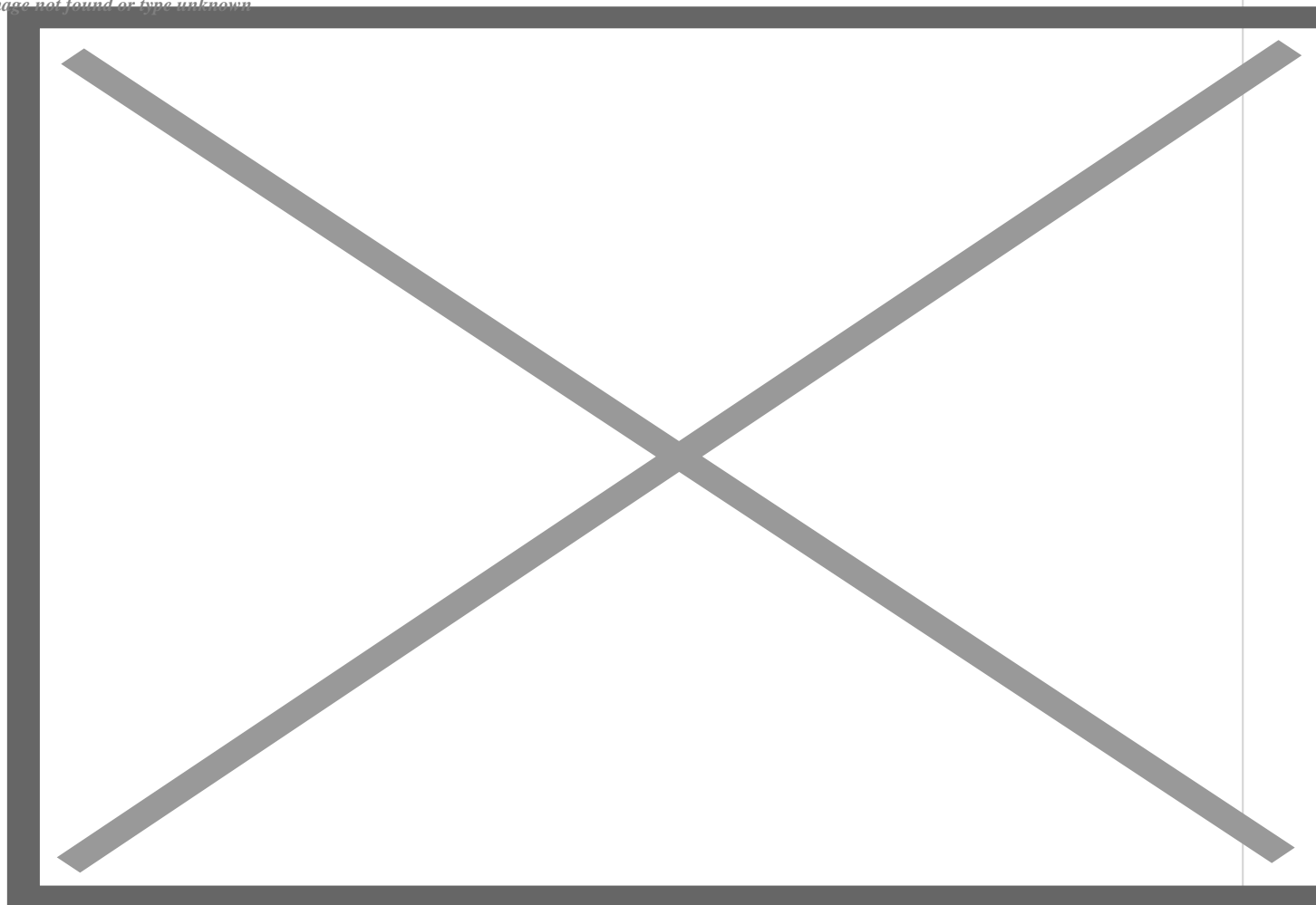


Brazilian police seize assets from illegal Amazon gold mining

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**A man holds a piece of gold in the palm of his hand
Brazilian police say criminal organisations used a US-based entity to export gold illegally
extracted from the Amazon [File: Edmar Barros/AP Photo]**

Brasilia, February 16 (RHC)-- Brazil's federal police have seized assets related to illegal mining operations in the Amazon rainforest, as the government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva cracks down on unsanctioned commercial activity that threatens the forest and the people who inhabit it.

In a press release issued in Brasilia, the federal police said they had seized more than 2 billion reais (\$383m) garnered from the sale of about 13 tonnes of gold, which had been illegally extracted from the rainforest and exported through an unnamed US-based entity.

The police also said they were carrying out 27 search and seizure warrants and three arrest warrants to disrupt the gold-smuggling operation. "More than 100 federal police officers are participating in Operation Sisaque, in addition to five tax auditors and three Federal Revenue analysts," the release said. "The objectives are to expand the volume of evidence to dismantle the criminal scheme and combat clandestine mining, especially in the Itaituba region."

The police are investigating crimes including mining without authorisation, money laundering and usurping property without legal authorisation.

The police operation comes as the Lula administration seeks to step up protections for the Amazon after years of degradation by illegal business activity, including logging, mining and farming. Former far-right President Jair Bolsonaro largely turned a blind eye to such activity, which led to record deforestation and violence against the Indigenous communities that call the forest home.

Some of the business interests expanding into the Amazon, particularly in the agricultural sector, were important constituencies for Bolsonaro, who viewed development in the forest as a tool to boost the economy.

In its statement, the federal police said criminal organisations operating in the Amazon had used a United States-based company to make their business dealings seem legitimate. The company oversaw sales of illegally extracted gold to Italy, Switzerland, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates, among other countries.

Generally, gold taken from the Amazon must be presented to financial brokers regulated by Brazil's central bank. Miners are required to document where the gold was discovered before it can be sold, but brokers are often unable to verify the information.

The effect of clandestine gold mining on the Amazon was brought into sharp focus when the Lula administration declared a public health emergency in January for the Yanomami Indigenous people, who suffered health defects, malnutrition and violence due to the intrusion of illegal mining activity on their lands.

Brazil launched raids earlier this month to remove the illegal miners from the country's largest Indigenous reservation. "The malnutrition crisis continues to be extremely serious. We believe the reopening of medical units can only be done when the miners are all removed," Indigenous health secretary Ricardo Weibe Tapeba said during a news conference earlier this month.

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