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Ecuadoran Government Alleges Mafia Involvement In Small-Scale Mining

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Early last November, an incident between a military platoon and Shuar communities living on the banks of the Río Zamora, in southern Ecuador’s Amazon region, resulted in the death of an indigenous man named Freddy Taish. Later that same day, in a nationwide broadcast, the government blamed the incident on foreign "mafias" involved in arms and drugs trafficking and money laundering. Authorities say the outside criminal groups have infiltrated the Zamora area’s artisan (small-scale) mining industry. Artisan mining is a subsistence activity traditionally carried out by local indigenous and campesino communities.

The military claims it was attacked while conducting an operation to requisition dredges that local gold miners use to collect sand and gravel from the riverbed. Five soldiers ended up with minor buckshot wounds. Two others, including one who lost an eye, were hospitalized after sustaining more serious injuries.

Barely breaking even
Small-scale prospecting is essential to the survival of indigenous groups, which have practiced it for generations, especially in Ecuador’s southwest region. As of last year, the ancestral activity is now subject to national regulations. Article 134 of Ecuador’s new Ley de Minería, approved in June 2013, establishes that artisan miners can use tools and machinery to extract limited amounts of material that can then be sold to cover the needs of the community, individual residents, or family groups (NotiSur, Aug. 10, 2012). The new law does not subject small-scale mining to any technical or economic parameters but limits extraction to 10 tons per day in underground mines and 120 cubic meters in rivers.

The dredge mining that occurs in Zamora, where residents continue to use techniques handed down from their ancestors, does not produce anywhere close to those limits. Local miners do not use heavy machinery or chemicals that are hazardous for the environment. Miners do, in some cases, use mercury, but only in small quantities and far away from the river.

To extract the gold, communities have traditionally used mining pans, a time-tested technique that involves scooping up sand and gravel from the riverbed and then manually sifting through the material to collect gold nuggets hidden within. To extract the gold, miners use either magnets or drops of mercury. As a general rule, one drop of mercury is enough to produce a gram of gold.

Starting roughly eight years ago, Afrodescendent migrants from the Ecuador/Colombia border region began to arrive in the area around Río Zamora. The newcomers introduced the use of dredges as a way to facilitate sand and gravel removal. The technique caught on among local communities, which have also taken to using motor-driven pumps. The artisan miners do not, however, use mechanical shovels of other equipment of that kind.
Given how sparse the river’s gold resources are, many of the Afrodescendent migrants gave up on mining and sold their dredges to local community members. A few, nevertheless, stayed in the area, particularly those who formed families with Shuar or campesina women.

The Afrodescendent presence in Shuar communities put the military on alert. The military’s concerns, however, are largely unfounded. On a particularly good day, a small-scale mining operation might produce up to four grams of gold, worth approximately US$120 (US$30 per gram). Most days, though, miners collect between one and two grams. Overhead costs include US$15 per day for a pump operator, US$10 per day for gasoline, and US$4 per day for oil. Some miners employ an assistant, at a cost of US$10 per day. Overall earnings, therefore, are modest at best: an operation might take home US$50 one day (three grams), US$20 the next (two grams), and nothing the third day (one gram or less)—hardly the kind of cash flow that might finance international drugs or arms trafficking, let alone money laundering, as the government alleges.

**Baseless accusations**

To justify military intervention, the government also accuses artisan miners of polluting the river. That claim is unfounded as well. Once miners have finished sifting, most take the remaining material home, where they complete the gold extraction process at a safe distance from the river. In the final phase of the process, a miner may focus on a 10-gram mixture of sand and gold particles. He or she can then decide how much mercury to use—generally one drop per gram of gold the mixture is presumed to contain—to "wash" the material and thus extract the precious metal.

In addition, miners have a strong economic incentive afterward to collect and reuse the mercury, which is expensive and difficult to obtain. Some miners do not even use mercury, instead extracting the gold specks with a magnet.

The process does not pollute the river. It can, however, be harmful to the miners, most of whom are ignorant of the health consequences of direct exposure to mercury and do not use gloves or masks when handling the product. The government has done nothing to protect the miners in this regard.

The use of dredges accelerates natural erosion in the river and provokes the temporary loss of riverbank beaches. It also alters the riverbed’s natural sediment balance, which, in turn, affects the ecosystem’s biological chain. The impacts, however, are minor and impermanent. During the wet winter months, when high water levels force miners to stop using their dredges, Río Zamora’s beaches, for example, form once again.

If all of the government’s talk about pollution is unfounded or simply false, why then does it continue to outlaw dredging? Why not issue permits to those artisan miners who require them?

**Subjects of intimidation**

Domingo Ancuash, a longtime Shuar leader, has his own questions about the government crackdown: "Why do they come to our doorstep to kill us?" he asks. "Why do they want to stop us from doing artisan mining?"

Ancuash is one of many locals who oppose industrial-scale mining in Zamora and Morona provinces, precisely the areas the Shuar call home (NotiSur, Nov. 11, 2011). The indigenous leader believes that, to protect the territory and the environment, multinational mining firms must be kept out. For that reason, the government—if it hopes to resolve the conflict sparked by the death on Nov...
7, 2013, of Freddy Taish—must revoke the mining concessions it issued to large companies, Ancuash argues.

Cupiamais, the Shuar community from which Ancuash hails, along with Shuar communities in Cantón Bomboiza, where Taish was killed, are particularly active in opposing large-scale mining. Ancuash believes last November’s military operation was a direct response to that opposition. It had nothing to do with clamping down on mafia groups, which don’t actually exist, but was instead aimed at intimidating the outspoken Shuar communities, he claims.

Adding credence to Ancuash’s assertion is the fact that the government has made no effort to crack down on illegal mining elsewhere. A case in point is Shagly, in the southwest of Azuay province, where unauthorized operations involving heavy machinery are known to be taking place. Social leaders there have spoken out publicly against the illegal activity. And yet the authorities have done nothing to stop it.

Freddy Taish belonged to a family of leaders who have long defended the Shuar territory. His death will not easily be forgotten or allowed to go unpunished. Nor is there much likelihood that the Shuar will allow the arrival in their lands of multinational mining companies, especially with Taish’s death serving as a rallying cry for the continued defense of their nationality.

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