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Colombia: Notes On Gold Mining In Amazon Region

by Barbara Khol
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In the 19th century, Colombia was the world's leading gold producer. At present, the nation is eighth world-wide, and third in Latin America, after Brazil and Chile. For the past five years, unemployed professionals, vacationing teachers, members of Amazonian indigenous tribes, miners and others have attempted to supplement their incomes by prospecting gold in the southeastern Traira Mountains. The mountain range takes its name from the Traira River, which runs along the Colombia-Brazil border. The principal mining center in the jungle is Pedrera, a 12-day walk from Leticia and an eight-day trek from Mitu, the two nearest towns. One of the world's largest mining operations the Parana Panema Industrial Exploitation Company operated in the Brazilian river bank until a few months ago. Since mid-1990, when a ban on dynamite imports paralyzed gold extraction in the mountains, prospectors have opted for exploitation of alluvial gold deposits in the Traira River and the abandoned Parana Panema camps. In October 1990, Brazilian soldiers occupying the Parana Panema camps detained and later deported 78 Colombian miners illegally extracting gold in the area. On Feb. 26, about 40 armed Colombians attacked a Brazilian military post, killing three soldiers and wounding nine others. Two Colombian miners died in the incident. In another incident on March 5, a Brazilian military unit and suspected members of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) clashed, resulting in the deaths of seven Colombians. An investigating team comprised of representatives from the Colombian foreign ministry, the attorney-general's office, and civilian and military authorities visited the area and prepared an initial report March 12. The group and the Pedrera Mining community met April 2 and agreed to send 120 Colombian soldiers to defend the area and repair the airstrip to facilitate contact with the outside world. German Montana, assistant manager of the state-run mining company (MINERALCO), attributed the rush for gold to the unemployment problem affecting Colombian professionals. (Basic data from Inter Press Service, 04/16/91)

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