Illegal mining in Venezuela: a map of the issue

The country’s economic crisis and the lack of expectations for most of its inhabitants have made Venezuela a breeding ground for despair that forces thousands of people to migrate to the Amazon. For many, illegal gold mining seems the way to beat the odds. The circumstances force equally young people without training, professionals, and criminals and professionals are forced to enter a mine to undergo this unhealthy activity. Indigenous communities are not immune to this illusory solution nor to its driving forces: they know that the mafias will go after them if they do not become miners or turn a blind eye. And as if this violence was not enough, the ecocide threat of deforestation and mercury contamination of rivers hangs over their communities.

By Luis Salas Rodríguez & Wataniba – July 1st 2023

It is no secret to anyone that Venezuela is going through its roughest period in modern history. Although it has become commonplace, it has lost nearly 80% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the last ten years, due to internal political conflict, government errors, the opposition sabotage, and the economic sanctions placed by the US and other western countries.

To give us an idea, it is more than doubles what Cuba lost during the so-called «special period.” Almost four times what Greece lost after the collapse of the post-financial crisis of 2008; and is, in fact, more than what Syria and Yemen lost during the devastating war held by both countries in recent years. The only GDP that has fallen even more than Venezuela’s in the last thirty years is Libya –a nation practically wiped off the map after the military invasion in 2011.
The debacle of the Venezuelan macroeconomy has its correlation within the so-called "micro" suffered by families. In a city like Puerto Ayacucho, the capital of the Amazonas state, a vehicle part, a liter of gasoline, or a plate of food usually are as expensive—or more—than in Caracas, with the aggravating circumstance that people earn much less. For indigenous communities, it is even worse. A brief plane flight to bring supplies to isolated communities is prohibitively expensive. If the trip is by river, the fuel—if available at all—is sold at a price higher than the official.

Aside from these tribulations are the recurring insecurity problems that the peoples must face, as well as the constant rattles (bribes) at checkpoints enforced by irregular groups, which elevate the costs of living even further. If dealing with large cities—such as Caracas, Maracay or Maracaibo—is difficult, doing so in villages in the province can be simply a desperate plight.

**Forced social mobility**

To a large extent, Venezuela’s current economy explains the large migratory flow to other latitudes. Although there is no consensus on the figures, we have some approximations. According to the R4V Interagency Platform—coordinated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Acnur) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)—**Venezuelan migration reached 7,239,957 people in March 2023**. If we take the most conservative numbers, we are talking about at least 3,000,000 people who have gone in recent years—10% of the estimated population for 2021, according to the 2011 census.

The statistics offer a better picture when the internal exodus is considered. Not only do Venezuelans depart to other countries seeking better opportunities but within the country’s borders. There are thousands and, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of people migrating from one area, city, or region to another. They change from one occupation to another, from one job to the next, aiming for a better quality of life. Though this phenomenon is barely studied, it is most likely that these internal migrations entail much more varied migratory flows than those that occur outside our borders.
When we talk about internal migration, we refer to families and people with middle to high incomes who move to Caracas attempting to leave behind the precariousness of the public services in their cities or towns of origin –especially the constant blackouts. Also, to people who are looking for a job opportunity that can allow them to survive and recover the expectation of a better future that otherwise seems even more uncertain and turbulent than the present. It is precisely on this breeding ground that «illegal prospers, as on the every-man-for-himself mode, which most of us share.

A proof of what we say is the pronounced growth of illegal mining in the heat of the deepening of the national crisis. According to estimates made by Wataniba, based on satellite images cross-checked in the field with members of the peoples, the land area directly affected by gold mining has grown at a rapid pace since 2016. In 2019 it reached approximately 33,900 hectares and, by 2021, about 133,700 hectares –a growth of 294%. The worsening of the national crisis fueled by the effects of the global pandemic played a significant role in this growth.

**The black hole of the mine**

The illegal mines in the states of Amazonas and Bolívar are full of men and women from all corners of the country pursuing the El Dorado myth. There are all sorts of people there: delinquents, youngsters from the East Side of Caracas to doctors, lawyers, teachers, former police officers, former soldiers, workers, fishermen, and accountants. Also women, girls, and elderly people. Entire families have even been known to move to the mines. In the mine located in the Yapacuana National Park, which the locals call “La Finca”, an estimated 15,000 people live together, most of them criollos (that is, non-indigenous). If the numbers are correct, La Finca would be the second largest agglomeration in the state of Amazonas after Puerto Ayacucho, its capital.

This precarious workforce lives with indigenous communities, which are seriously affected in their social, cultural, and economic structures, by the actions of irregular groups and mafias that have become strong in the area. Despite the fact that migrants decide to enter
a mine hoping of change their destiny and that of their loved ones, the reality is usually less benign. Indigenous and non-indigenous youth die from violence or precarious working conditions; women of all ages fall prey to forced prostitution; and people end up working in semi-slavery conditions to pay debts and inputs to the "owners" of the mines (many of them foreigners). This situation is known to all, even if no one dares to speaks out loud for fear of the consequences.

The mines, like a black hole, end up dragging indigenous men and women, some come «voluntarily», but many others by force. We say «voluntarily», in quotation marks because people who «choose», to get into this job often do so simply because they have no other options. It is either that being condemned to an existence without expectations in the midst of the most acute precariousness; it is taking the risk or living poorly with the certainty that your family will go hungry and suffer all kinds hardship in the absence of decent jobs and wages. Indigenous people do not have much of a choice: either they become miners or the mafias run them over. The options are collaborating with the business or turning a blind eye. The mines, like a black hole, end up dragging indigenous men and women, some come «voluntarily», but many others by force.

The situation affects the indigenous people by forcing them to migrate to the mining camps as their only alternative to receive some wages, and it also affects those who remain in the communities. Their daily routines have changed. Fewer people cultivate conucos (plots destined for the cultivation of cassava and other produce) or make a living of trading of their traditional products. As a result of the existence of conflicting opinions about mining activity amongst community members, their governance structures are fragmenting- Furthermore, the possibilities to face the pressures of external groups are less and less. All of this affects the productive capacity of indigenous peoples over their lands, territories, and resources, as well as the right to autonomy and self-government.

An environmental liability that is becoming irreversible
An additional element to consider is the serious ecological impact that unswervingly affects indigenous communities. Most of the country is sensitive to the ecological damage in our Amazon, but most people do not consciously nor directly suffer its consequences. Indigenous peoples have a cultural, affective, and worldview relationship with nature that connects them to nature in another level and their livelihood is much more intertwined with what surrounds them. There are innumerable reports of poisoning derived from the consumption of mercury from the mines. The rivers are contaminated and then the fish, which are the main source of food for the indigenous people. At the same time, outsiders spread diseases that wreak havoc on communities. The spread of malaria observed in recent years is also the result of mining, since deforestation and erosion of the land create stagnant water conditions where mosquitoes proliferate.

The Venezuelan Amazon has special features that make it especially sensitive. The antediluvian age of the soil implies that its immensely rich biodiversity can only be regenerated at extremely slow rates –if the damage is not irreversible. For this reason, it is not just a question of reforesting what was deforested or cleaning the waters of the rivers as one cleans the channel of a dammed creek; it is a matter of stopping the damage urgently.

We must remember (and this is something that does affect all of us, especially those who live in large cities) that deforestation in the Amazon implies a reduction in water sources. For Venezuela, this has consequences for crops, due to increased drought, and for electricity generation (already deficient) that is produced almost exclusively through the Guri system in the Bolívar state. In 2023, we will probably experience a sharp sample of this, given the forecasts for the El Niño weather event. In this sense, we can go through situations as or more severe than those experienced in 2016 and 2009.

Finally, what for the rest of Venezuelan can result in an ecocide that outrages us to a greater or lesser degree, for the indigenous people is equivalent to the end of their world. It is not only about seeing their habitat disappear, but also their way of understanding and living life, their sacred places and the land of their ancestors and their gods. All under the
predatory action of individual and groups moved by ambition. This places a good part of the indigenous population of the Venezuelan Amazon facing an impossible dilemma: either they face it knowing that it is an unequal fight, or they join the mining extermination with the hope of, at least, making a profit for their loved ones.

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