World view

By Bram Ebus

The high toll of organized crime in the Amazon

The global community must break the web of transnational crime networks and corruption threatening one of the world's largest carbon sinks.

In the heart of the Brazilian Amazon, armed men wearing balaclavas and wielding firearms intimidated me and two other journalists on a remote riverbank near the Colombian border in February. We had ventured into the rainforest to investigate the surge in violence and illegal mining and drug trafficking that the Amazon has witnessed since 2016, and to map the presence of cross-border armed groups. We are part of Amazon Underworld, a media alliance comprising more than 30 professionals.

We knew that the region harboured shotgun-carrying gold miners who illegally dredge the river with gargantuan barges, and Colombian guerrillas who cross into Brazil to shake the miners down for gold. But the armed individuals who stopped us were affiliated with the state – a rogue military police unit that oversees and shields illegal mining operations. Working outside the law, they amass millions of dollars in gold payments annually. There, in their shadowy domain, no one who asks questions is welcome.

The leader of the armed outfit demanded that we delete all the photos we had taken during two days of observing mining barges, before seizing our memory cards. Fortunately, we had a hidden backup.

Illegal mining is but one part of a complex web of transnational organized crime, corruption and resource extraction that is threatening the Amazon – a crucial climate regulator. Yet improving security in the Amazon was missing from the agenda at COP28, the 2023 United Nations climate summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Addressing this security dilemma is pivotal to safeguarding the Amazon rainforest, the populations it shelters and the global climate.

Violence and criminal activity in the Amazon have worsened since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments and law enforcement prioritized pandemic control over reducing organized crime. The rise in violence coincided with the 2019–22 Brazilian government of then-president Jair Bolsonaro, who openly called for mining Indigenous lands. In 2023, annual deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon decreased sharply. But the year also saw forest fires rage across Brazil and Bolivia, and news articles featuring images of malnourished Indigenous Yanomami children, whose ancestral lands are besieged by gold miners. In Colombia's southern Putumayo region – a crucial corridor for the cocaine industry – three or more people have been killed on 21 separate occasions since 2020, mainly because of a ruthless territorial struggle between two armed factions.

The allure of illicit profits has enticed urban gangs from Brazil, such as Primeiro Comando da Capital from São Paulo and Comando Vermelho from Rio de Janeiro and rural guerrilla outfits from Colombia to the Amazon. Some initially came for the cocaine – its prime ingredient, coca, can be grown there – but stayed for the gold and to launder drug profits. Especially in border areas with minimal state presence, illicit activities intersect with legitimate cattle and agricultural enterprises. Indigenous peoples are often put at risk when these activities overlap with their lands.

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One of these populations is the Yuri-Passé, an uncontacted Indigenous group living in a protected national park on the Colombian side of the Puré River, near to where the armed men tried to intimidate us on the Brazilian side. National park rangers abandoned their posts in 2020 after threats from a Colombian guerrilla faction, leaving the Yuri-Passé peoples unprotected. The community, of about 400 people, faces an existential threat from diseases, pollution and attacks by gold miners and armed groups.

This Amazonian region on the Colombian–Brazilian border is not an exception. Our investigation found crime groups in 70% of municipalities in the borderlands of Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela. Often, Indigenous youths are brought into organized crime by force or are enticed by non-governmental armed groups that supplant the state, carry out rudimentary 'justice' and levy taxes on the region's inhabitants and economic activities.

Authorities have so far failed to keep up with the increasingly complex criminal networks. Criminal organizations now forge alliances across borders despite cultural and ideological differences. The escalating violence and criminal presence could undermine international backing for conservation projects.

Solutions to these multifaceted issues might not be simple, but practical steps exist. Nations must cooperate to guard against this violence. They must support local communities – by increasing the state's presence in remote areas and promoting health care, education and sustainable economic development – and help them to safeguard the rainforest. For example, Indigenous peoples in Peru and Brazil are using drones and GPS devices to monitor their land and detect threats from violent invaders.

Indigenous peoples are the Amazon's best forest guardians, but they need more legally demarcated lands and protective measures, such as funding for Indigenous guards and rapid response and emergency protocols. In 2022, Colombia and Brazil saw the most deaths of environmental and land defenders worldwide. Developing effective strategies to enhance cooperation between law enforcement and local populations must also be a priority.

To prevent irreversible damage to the rainforest and the climate, security in the Amazon must be added to the global climate agenda.

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