



OP-ED

Published 8 June 2019

Originally published in *The Guardian*

By Bram Ebus, Crisis Group Consultant

Venezuela's Mining Arc: A Legal Veneer for Armed Groups to Plunder

Late 2016, Nicolás Maduro tweeted a photograph of himself with a smile on his face and a gleaming ingot in his hands – but not all that glitters is gold.

Venezuela claims to possess some of the largest untapped gold and coltan reserves in the world, and the country's gold rush picked up when the president decreed the creation of a massive area of 112,000 sq km destined for mining, known as the Orinoco mining arc. In a recently published development plan Venezuela set the goal to produce more than 80,000 kilos of gold a year by 2025.

The project, launched in February 2016, was supposed to drive development, but many mining projects announced by the government have failed to materialize, and the mining arc now seems little more than a legal veneer for plunder by an expanding range of armed groups.

Multiple non-state armed groups are spreading their hold over southern Venezuela, adding another unpredictable factor to the country's current crisis – and complicating any efforts for a peaceful resolution.

Their methods and origins may be different, but their motivation is one which has driven violence in Latin America since colonial times: a hunger for gold and other valuable minerals.

Venezuelan crime syndicates have run informal mines for years. More recently, Colombian guerrillas – dissidents from the now-demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc) and members of the National Liberation Army (ELN) – have expanded their reach hundreds of miles into Venezuela.

The groups are deeply entrenched in local communities, and often work in volatile alliances with parts of the military who privately profit from illegal mining.

At least 300,000 people work at wildcat mines which have caused huge environmental damage, and sparked a malaria epidemic.

Confrontations between the rival armed groups make southern Venezuela one of the most violent regions in Latin America. "Everybody wants to be boss," explained a former miner who fled to Colombia to avoid the escalating violence.

Numerous sources confirm the army's participation in illicit mining and report that military death squads have occasionally entered mines to settle disputes. Most killings go unrecorded, but local media have reported more than a dozen massacres since 2016. Municipalities in the mining region cope with homicide far above that of Caracas, the world's most violent capital city.

Of these factions, the ELN is one of the most prominent, operating in 13 of Venezuela's 24 states and extending its reach across the southern mining regions to form a corridor across Venezuela to near its disputed border with Guyana.

The ELN's tactical and ideological alignment with the Venezuelan government is grist to the mill for those arguing for a military intervention against Maduro.

But any foreign incursion could potentially trigger a disastrous escalation of violence, possibly leading to a low-intensity conflict that

would cause tremendous suffering for Venezuela's most vulnerable populations.

The ELN is now Latin America's biggest guerrilla army, and has vowed to defend Maduro's government in the event of a foreign intervention.

Local sources have described how the guerrillas embed themselves in local communities, giving political and military training.

"They make [the locals] fall in love, offer them weapons and they indoctrinate them," said one indigenous leader from Bolívar state. As in Colombia, the rebels intervene in local disputes and offer a measure of authority in lawless areas – wildcat miners confirm that they prefer the presence of the guerrillas over the brutal and less tolerant Venezuelan crime syndicates.

So what should be done? The freedom with which armed groups operate south of the Orinoco river reflects the weakness of the Venezuelan state. But threats of foreign military intervention will simply embolden the guerrillas and strengthen their ties to Caracas.

Humanitarian aid is essential for the inhabitants of the region, but its safe entry will depend on the Venezuelan government's consent – and will not be served by the sort of forced entry attempted in February.

The communities facing the most urgent humanitarian needs are remote and indigenous populations in the south, which are already suffering from epidemics and shortages. Food shortages are exacerbated by the dependence on gold as currency in mining towns.

Outside actors should work to clean up Venezuelan mineral supply chains. Foreign states should enforce due diligence frameworks on mineral exporters and commodity exchanges to minimize risks that they buy minerals that finance conflict and human rights abuses.

For now, the extraction of gold, coltan and other minerals funds armed groups and harms indigenous communities. Even the minerals that are sold by Venezuelan state companies and the Venezuelan central bank (BCV) stem in part from the same mines controlled by armed groups and should therefore be classified as conflict minerals.

Forgotten parts of southern Venezuela are of key importance to the political future of the country. Communities abandoned by the state – and the armed groups that prey on them – merit more concern from international actors disputing Venezuela's future. Peace in Venezuela cannot be achieved without taking the south into account.