

## **Say NO to Illegal Gold Mining in French Guiana**

### ***A mostly illegal gold rush***

Since the 1990s, following a significant increase in the price of gold that has made exploitation of low-grade deposits and pre-existing mines viable, French Guiana has been hit full force by a new gold rush, characterized by a very high proportion of illegal mining: The amount of gold smuggled out of the country every year is estimated at approximately 10 tonnes, while the officially declared annual production varies between 1 and 2 tonnes! This is therefore a far cry from an illegal activity existing only on the margins of the legal sector.

### ***Uncontrollable practices***

The activity of legal gold miners is governed by French legislation, which is among the most stringent in South America: The use of mercury is prohibited, contaminated water is managed in a closed system and there is an obligation to restore the forest as work proceeds. The activity of illegal gold miners, on the other hand, is subject only to the law of short-term profit. Alluvial exploitation takes place in rivers, destroying waterways and polluting them with suspended matter that can have an impact several hundred kilometres downstream. The methods used to clear trees destroy the soil and lead to long-lasting deforestation. The use of mercury to extract the gold contaminates terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and eventually affects local Amerindian populations. Abandoned sites are veritable rubbish dumps and the source of a wide range of pollutants.

### ***The main cause of environmental degradation on the Guiana Shield***

The forest of the Guiana Shield, an integral and unique part of the Amazon biome, constitutes the largest remaining continuous area of relatively intact tropical forest. In the space of 20 years, uncontrolled gold mining in the region has become the main source of environmental degradation. The environmental impacts of illegal gold mining are felt outside the exploited area and persist long after mining activity has ceased..

For instance, when illegal mining sites are deforested the soil is stripped to a depth of several meters. Left in this state, it becomes extremely poor and infertile, which makes the regeneration of a natural ecosystem very difficult.

The mercury used to amalgamate the gold is a dangerous pollutant which accumulates in the natural environment and becomes concentrated along the aquatic food chain, attaining high levels in carnivorous fish. Mercury contamination can endure for centuries and extend several hundred kilometres downstream from gold mining sites.

Illegal gold mining sites are home to a variety of pollutants, both during exploitation and after they are abandoned: refuse, fuel, freezers, etc.

## *Severe social consequences*

Structured around clandestine immigration networks, illegal goldmining brings a raft of other negative activities in its wake (drugs, prostitution, guns, gang warfare, etc.). The local populations of the interior are subjected on a daily basis to disruptions caused by illegal mining activities. There is real insecurity in the forest, the atmosphere is tense and there is a feeling of “not being at home,” particularly among Amerindians, for whom a connection with the land is essential.

Thefts of equipment, fuel and harvests from the populations of the interior are frequent and regular, and over time seriously compromise their way of life. Thefts of boat engines are the most common and pose a problem for populations largely dependent on river transport for their food.

Police operations, while proving to be ineffective at stopping this scourge, too often exact a heavy toll on security forces.

## *Catastrophic implications for health*

The diets of populations in the interior rely heavily on the consumption of carnivorous fish, which have the highest levels of mercury contamination. The most recent studies show that a third of the population of the Upper Maroni have mercury levels that are much higher than the safety limits set by WHO.

The presence of huge numbers of migrants who are literally exploited and lack access to proper health supervision has also resulted in a resurgence of malaria in the regions affected by illegal gold mining. The most frequently-cited example is the village of Saül, which saw a peak of illegal activity between 2008 and 2009 that coincided with a particularly severe peak in cases of malaria. Some experts today speak of French Guiana as a “ticking time-bomb” for the emergence of drug-resistant strains of malaria as a result of illegal gold mining.

## *Organised theft*

Today, the vast majority of illegally produced gold in French Guiana is smuggled out to the bordering countries (Brasil and Suriname) via stealthy and efficient transporters. This gold is therefore phantom gold for French Guiana, which retains no trace of it except for the string of disastrous impacts that accompany its extraction. Effective cooperation between France and her neighbours in this battle has yet to take shape.

**Faced with this worsening situation, the Howlers of French Guiana ask for your support so that together we can say:**

- ✓ Yes to the establishment of a state of law
- ✓ No to human exploitation
- ✓ No to the violence, instability, thefts and trafficking we are all victims of !
- ✓ No to mercury contamination, to the damages inflicted on the health of local populations, to the pollution of waterways and the destruction of the Amazon Rainforest
- ✓ No to the destruction of traditional ways of life
- ✓ No to the pillaging of French Guiana's resources
- ✓ No to indifference
- ✓ Yes to rallying together

