

Orinoco Mining Arc: Illegal Mining and Structural Violence

Mariangel Garcia Seijas



Photo: Eduardo Saavedra Altuve / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0), Orinoco River, Bolívar State, Venezuela.

Illegal mining in southern Venezuela is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a structural violence that has strengthened with the expansion of the Orinoco Mining Arc. This expansion has destroyed thousands of square kilometers of forest, including protected areas and national reserves, damaging entire ecosystems and endangering aquatic and terrestrial species.

Environmental degradation has brought profound social consequences: forced labor, child exploitation, and impacts on Indigenous communities are among the outcomes of this project. Communities in the region have lost access to clean water and traditional foods and are forced either to leave their ancestral territories or face illnesses linked to pollution and the proliferation of stagnant water.

Local and international organizations have denounced the presence of armed groups controlling extraction as intensifying both the ecological crisis and human rights violations (CSIS, 2020; Embajadores del Orinoco, 2026). This highlights the urgent need for measures that protect the health, culture, and territories of affected populations.

Orinoco Mining Arc

The Orinoco Mining Arc, created in 2016 under then-President Nicolás Maduro, is a project developed across the Bolívar, Amazonas, and Delta Amacuro states, south of the Orinoco River, covering roughly 12 percent of Venezuela's territory, an area about the size of Portugal (CSIS, 2020). The region is considered one of the richest in mineral resources in the world, with gold, diamonds, coltan, iron, and bauxite among its most notable resources.

The project's stated objective was to diversify Venezuela's economy amid declining oil revenues, generate fiscal revenue and foreign currency, and formally centralize mining in the region. In practice, this has not materialized. According to SOS Orinoco, the Arc lost approximately 520,900 hectares of forest between 2000 and 2020, with more than 44 percent of that loss occurring in just the final five years of that period (SOS Orinoco, cited in Embajadores del Orinoco, 2026). CSIS separately found that in just the first four years after the Arc's creation, over 2,821 square kilometers (approximately 282,100 hectares) of forest were destroyed, half of it inside officially protected territories (CSIS, 2020).

Crimes Against Protected Areas and Natural Reserves

The environmental consequences are visible even from satellite images: mining has invaded protected areas, including Canaima National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and Yacapana National Park (CSIS, 2020). The indiscriminate use of mercury for gold extraction has contaminated major rivers, including the Orinoco and Caroní, affecting wildlife, drinking water, and human health, with elevated mercury levels also documented in freshwater fish exported for consumption in neighboring countries (CSIS, 2020).

SOS Orinoco has described Venezuela's situation as among the worst environmental crises in the Western Hemisphere, warning that mercury contamination could leave affected ecosystems inhospitable for decades even if mining activity stopped immediately (SOS Orinoco, sosorinoco.org).

Indigenous Peoples at Risk

The area is home to Indigenous communities including the Yanomami, Ye'kuana, and Pemón peoples, among others, who have inhabited the Venezuelan Amazon and southern Bolívar and Amazonas for thousands of years, long before modern extractive activities arrived. Their way of life and deep cultural and spiritual bond with the forest and rivers allowed them to develop ecological knowledge systems that maintained natural balance and local ecosystems.

What was once a sustainable lifestyle based on traditional activities such as hunting, fishing, subsistence agriculture, and the preservation of ancestral territories has been deeply altered by the expansion of illegal mining and armed groups in the Orinoco Mining Arc. These communities have faced displacement, loss of ancestral lands, and health problems arising from pollution and disease proliferation. Mining has advanced over their territories without prior consultation, violating not only international standards but also environmental order and their role as protectors of nature in this region (CSIS, 2020).

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and its Rapporteurship on Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights have expressed deep concern over the impact of illegal mining on the Yanomami people specifically, citing mercury contamination, the spread of disease, and limited transparency that makes independent monitoring in the region difficult (IACHR/REDESCA, October 2024).

Unprecedented Health and Labor Crisis: Malaria, Violence, and Exploitation

The expansion of open-pit mines and extraction channels has created stagnant water that promotes the reproduction of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, increasing infection rates among miners and nearby Indigenous communities. Workers face extreme exploitation, laboring long hours without contracts or protection from toxic substances like mercury, an estimated 45 percent of them are minors (CSIS, 2020).

In a July 2020 report, then-UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said Venezuelan authorities should "take immediate steps to end labour and sexual exploitation, child labour and human trafficking, and should dismantle criminal groups controlling mining activities" (OHCHR, July 15, 2020).

Growth of Guerrillas and Abuse of Power

Before the creation of the Mining Arc in 2016, the region already had informal and artisanal mining activity, but it was scattered and primarily controlled by local communities managing their own resources. With the Mining Arc decree, the Venezuelan government officially opened the area to strategic mineral extraction, attracting both companies and individuals seeking quick profits.

In a context of absent state supervision, corruption, and economic crisis, this regulatory vacuum was quickly filled by armed groups, criminal gangs, and local guerrillas. These actors found a niche of power: controlling mines, imposing rules, collecting "taxes," and exploiting workers, creating a system of illegal and violent extraction. Institutional weakness and the lack of alternative economic opportunities for local residents allowed this model to consolidate and grow into the forced exploitation structure that dominates much of the Mining Arc today (CSIS, 2020).

A Problem with Global Impact

Venezuela witnesses some of the worst crimes not only against humanity but also against the environment that sustains life. The crimes occurring here and the destruction of the Venezuelan Amazon transcend national borders. Loss of biodiversity and forest degradation affect regional and global climate balance.

These losses reduce the Amazon's capacity to absorb carbon, one of the most important reserves on the planet, and exacerbate climate change at hemispheric and global levels. Venezuela ranks among the countries with the highest biodiversity in the world, with thousands of species of fauna and flora now facing habitat destruction and water contamination.

Amid political tensions and the humanitarian disaster Venezuela faces, situations like those in the Orinoco Mining Arc continue, profoundly affecting the health, culture, and future of the region. Indigenous communities, environmental defenders, and civil organizations continue to denounce a reality that largely remains invisible (IACHR/REDESCA, 2024; Embajadores del Orinoco, 2026). The negligence of authorities and the failure of the state in protecting rights have turned the Orinoco Mining Arc into a symbol of a painful paradox: a territory immensely rich in natural resources, yet devastated by an extractive model that threatens one of the planet's most vital green areas.

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