

Two impoverished teenagers die working in an illegal Peruvian mine

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Two Peruvian brothers, ages 14 and 17, died on February due to inhaling toxic gases while working in a mine to earn money to pay for their school supplies for the upcoming school year. The “informal” mine had not been registered with the Ministry of Mines and thus was operating illegally.

This is yet another tragedy added to the toll of thousands of miners killed in mines where the government has expressly denied registration for failure to comply with safety regulations, or those like the one where the two impoverished youth were killed that do not even attempt to register because of appalling conditions.

The two brothers and another 16-year-old teenager were hired a few weeks ago to work at the mine located in the village of Llacuabamba in the Andean region of La Libertad, in the north of the country.

The newspaper *La Industria* reported that the youth “were on site when suddenly it started to emanate toxic gases that spread all over the place”. The two brothers ran to the mouth of the pit, but “inhaled the gas and vanished.... The other child was able to leave the scene and was taken to the sector hospital, where he has been recovering.”

Relatives of the minors are demanding justice for this crime—that the case be investigated and the mine owners prosecuted. An aunt of one of the youth said: “They work without having the necessary safety equipment and were exposed daily to toxic gases, unfortunately on Tuesday they were no longer able to leave the site.”

Several of the illegal mine owners—some locals and others living in lavish neighborhoods in the capital Lima—have hired gunmen to oversee the exploitation of the mines and their workers. *Peru21* reports that “The head of the Third Police Macroregion of La Libertad,

General Lucas Núñez, warned that crime has spread to the Andean area, like Pataz [district in Parcoy Province],” the region where the three teenagers inhaled toxic gases in Llacuabamba. “He pointed out that the violence has increased because illegal mine owners hired hitmen who have been released from prison because of overcrowding.” *Peru21* further reports that the gunmen are mainly composed of released convicts known as “Los Topos del Frío” (Moles of the Cold). *El Comercio* reports that 18 members of this gang were captured earlier this month “with almost US \$10 million in gold... extracted from pit mines of the La Libertad Andes mountains, and sent to Europe and Asia by two foreign financiers. Authorities retained more than 200 kilos of gold ore from the criminal organization in warehouses.”

A Chinese citizen was arrested in a building which operated as a front business through which the illegal gold was exported.

The center of operations of this criminal network were the Pataz district villages of Retamas and Llacuabamba, where the two youth recently died. It had tentacles extending into up to five regions of the country.

The Moles of the Cold are not the only criminal band involved in the exploitation of the miners. Other organizations are “The Octopuses” and “The Damned of Triumph”, which include ex-convicts as well as ex-army personnel, according to *El Comercio*. In 2019, 169 people were assassinated in 19 robberies in the mining areas of La Libertad.

Such killers are responsible for the January murder of five miners in Trujillo, the capital of the La Libertad region, arising from a dispute between illegal mining operations. Their bodies were found in reed beds near the Moche River, each shot in the head, execution style.

The executed miners had been operating a truck with 30 tons of minerals, mostly gold ore.

The scale of illegal mining operations is vast. According to a 2016 study by José de Echave titled “Illegal Mining in Peru—Between informality and crime”:

Along with the mining boom across the country, Peru has seen illegal mining grow in its territory. In the ranking of the main criminal activities according to the amount of money they mobilize, illegal mining continues to share the first places with drug trafficking and illegal logging, despite the fall in mineral prices on the world market. Illegal and informal miners have even succeeded in deploying effective influence strategies and built bridges to politics.”

According to de Echave, in the last years of the boom formal, registered mines and illegal mining operations often worked side by side:

In many of these areas, the gold rush has caused entire communities to turn to extraction in areas close to operations and concessions from large and medium-sized formal mining companies. In some of these cases, coexistence ends up generating competition and open dispute over access to concessions.

Crimes in the last few years against Peruvian miners, who are forced by poverty to work in informal, unsafe operations, without safety equipment and other basic safety protections, include:

- In April 2019, eight miners died and three more barely survived after poisonous gases filled an informal gold mine in El Toro mountain located in the Andes in La Libertad, that is, the same mining region where the teenagers died on February 11.
- In June 2018, a 17-year-old and a 12-year-old died from gas intoxication inside the informal mine in Gran Chimú, in the Ancash region, south of La Libertad.
- In January 2017, seven Peruvian miners were

buried under an avalanche of mud and stones that trapped the men in a tunnel hundreds of feet underground. The tragedy at the Las Gemelas mine occurred when heavy rains unleashed a flood that covered the entrance and exit of the mine, which is located in a remote area in the district of Acarí, in the Arequipa region. Initially, there were 15 miners in the mine, but eight managed to get out before the barrage covered its entrance and exit.

De Echave’s reference to of illegal mining’s “bridges to politics” finds expression in President Martin Vizcarra’s recently sworn in Minister of Energy and Mines, Susana Vilca Achata.

Vilca Achata acknowledged while serving as Deputy Minister of Mines under former President Ollanta Humala (2006-2011) that she “owned mining concessions.” What Vilca Achata failed to declare was that she “was accused in Congress of owning 17 informal mining concessions in different areas of the country... since 2003, the Brandon HV mining concession, located in the Ancash region,” as *La Industria* reports in its February 13 edition.

The proliferation the illegal mining operations is tolerated due to corruption at the highest levels of the Peruvian government as well the direct involvement of members of the political establishment.



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