

Thirteen gold mine workers massacred in Peru

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The Peruvian government has ordered a suspension of mining activity and imposed a 12-hour nightly curfew in the province of Pataz in the northern region of La Libertad after the massacre of thirteen gold miners in a mine shaft.

The killings, carried out by a gang at the La Poderosa gold mine, have ignited outrage across Peru. The kidnappers had demanded a ransom of 4 million soles (about US\$1.1 million), which the mine owners ignored, effectively sentencing the miners to death.

Their naked, bound bodies were found on May 4, with signs of torture, having been executed with gunshots to the head and neck. Shocking videos have circulated on social media showing the men being shot at point blank range. They were last seen alive on April 25.

La Poderosa described Pataz as “a lawless territory” plagued by rampant violence. While the company claims the kidnapped individuals worked for a security firm, it bears responsibility for leasing its galleries to Libmar S.A.C. The trend of outsourcing labor in the mining sector has weakened miners’ unions and reduced costs for employers.

Relatives reported the disappearance of the 13 miners on April 26. However, their complaints were ignored by authorities, raising suspicions of possible police complicity in the crime.

Patricia Carranza Ramírez, the partner of one of the missing miners, expressed her frustration: “I haven’t heard anything. The company has completely ignored us.” Amid tears and demands for justice, the families called for urgent intervention in the area and criticized the silence of Libmar S.A.C. and La Poderosa, the companies involved.

The authorities’ inaction and indifference to the families’ suffering, highlights a broader crisis in Peru, where crime has increased, with four to six murders occurring each day.

According to the mining company La Poderosa, the massacre of the 13 brings to 39 the total number of murders of its workers and contractors attributed to criminal groups since 2020. The violence continues despite the province of Pataz being under a state of emergency since February 2024, allowing the Armed Forces, in coordination with the National Police, to exercise control over the area.

Following a previous attack in Pataz, La Poderosa issued a

statement asserting, “Illegal miners, after the rainy season, have returned to Pataz to sow terror.” They demanded that the government act immediately to restore order, stating, “We cannot wait for more deaths to address criminal activity.”

La Poderosa is owned by the Arias, whose net worth is estimated at \$1.8 billion, making them among the wealthiest families in the country. La Poderosa, their central holding, is valued at approximately \$800 million, with Luz Evangelina Arias Vargas de Sologuren as the majority shareholder. The Arias family lives in luxury in Lima, far removed from the poverty and dangers faced by miners in Pataz.

An anonymous source close to the Arias family claimed that the situation resembles a war between mining companies in the La Libertad Andes mountains. To protect themselves, La Poderosa maintains a security force of up to 1,000 men, including contractors. Fearing for their safety, the owners of La Poderosa have refrained from traveling to the Pataz for years, even before the pandemic.

Since 2020, La Poderosa has reported 21 attacks on electrical infrastructure in their operational area, which includes 17 explosions at towers and the deaths of 18 workers. Additionally, at least 25 tunnels have been seized by illegal miners.

The families of the victims believe that the 10-day delay in locating the bodies of the murdered miners, whose remains were severely decomposed, indicating that they had been executed shortly after entering the mine, was a result of police complicity. One family member stated on Exitosa radio, “The police knew this. We told them where the bodies were, and they never listened.”

Authorities have identified Miguel Rodríguez Díaz, also known as “Cuchillo”, as the mastermind behind the massacre. He is linked to other deadly attacks and has accumulated a fortune of 80 million soles (approximately US\$ 22 million) through the illegal gold trade. Despite his notoriety, “Cuchillo” currently faces no arrest warrant and has fled to Colombia, finding refuge due to his connections with narco-trafficking organizations.

With his considerable wealth, “Cuchillo” can buy the silence and cooperation of corrupt police officers. The mayor of Pataz has stated that the “state is complicit” in his escape and

denounced Boluarte's state of emergency as "useless."

Local newspapers have reported suspicions of police involvement in the Pataz massacre. The Prosecutor's Office is investigating claims that two officers from the Peruvian National Police (PNP) are associated with an informal security company R&R, which hired the victims to enter the La Poderosa mine shaft.

The Peruvian government and mining companies categorize three distinct types of mining under the term "illegal mining": artisanal, informal, and illegal. Together, these three categories account for 97 percent of mining operations in Peru. Ninety percent of the so-called "illegal" mining companies fall under artisanal and informal classifications.

Artisanal mining companies typically consist of self-employed individuals, many of whom are farmers who have left their land in search of better income opportunities. In contrast, informal and illegal mining companies often involve capitalists who employ miners and use expensive gold extraction and refining machinery.

The minority of illegal miners are the ones involved in criminal activities. With the price of gold soaring to \$3,500 an ounce, the profit motive driving increased illegal mining has risen accordingly.

The massacre has further exposed the deeply unpopular government of President Dina Boluarte. She announced the deployment of over 1,000 National Police officers and plans to establish a military base in the area. However, Pataz has been under a state of emergency since February 2024 with little effect. During this period, both the Armed Forces and National Police were supposed to maintain internal control, yet criminal gangs have continued to dominate the region.

Meanwhile, the budget for combating illegal mining has been cut by 34 percent since 2019, with only 81 million soles allocated for 2025, a 10 percent decrease from 2024.

Boluarte announced the elimination of 14 programs related to infrastructure projects across various state sectors. According to the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), this measure will save approximately 4 billion soles (US\$ 1.1 billion) by 2026. Peru is following the trend of other countries, reallocating funds from social programs to increase military spending for the National Police and Armed Forces.

Just three days after the discovery of the murdered miners, the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) proposed to double the president's salary to 35,000 soles per month (about US\$ 9,500). This increase would double her current salary of 16,000 soles and is justified by the MEF as being in line with other South American presidents' salaries.

This proposal reflects a blatant hostility to Peruvian workers. The president, who has a 94 percent disapproval rating, will have a new salary that is 31 times Peru's minimum wage.

Two days after the discovery of the bodies of 13 miners, micro and small business owners from the Gamarra shopping center in La Victoria—a working class district in Lima—held a

meeting to organize a general strike for May 14. The strike aims to address rising crime in working class neighborhoods in Lima and El Callao and other Peruvian cities.

However, the meeting centered on the mine massacre in Pataz. While leaders insisted on a non-political strike, a participant noted that only lower-income sectors are targeted by criminal gangs. Another attendee blamed the president for the murders of the 13 miners, referencing her "shoot to kill" orders against demonstrators following her taking the presidency in what amounted to a parliamentary coup in December 2022.

Attendees criticized corrupt members of Congress for their complicity with criminal organizations that terrorize districts inhabited by working class families and immigrants from rural areas, while leaving affluent neighborhoods like San Isidro and La Molina untouched. They expressed outrage at the government's failure to rescue the kidnapped miners. Chants of "Dina, murderer! / Corrupt Congress!" were followed by a minute of silence for the Pataz victims.

The May 14 strike is expected to call for the resignation of Boluarte and corrupt lawmakers.

The working class, outside of transport workers who have faced violence and killings by extortionist gangs, has been noticeably absent from a recent wave of 24-hour strikes in Peru. To effectively lead the oppressed masses in Peru, the working class must sever all ties with the discredited Stalinist, Maoist, and bureaucratic trade union leaders. They must look beyond the national borders, establishing rank-and-file committees and forging a united struggle with workers throughout the Americas and beyond. The International Committee of the Fourth International is leading the initiative to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This is the way forward.



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