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Sergio Ferrari

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That gold that bleeds instead of shining

A large part of the gold imported by the Old World flows into the sophisticated refineries of Switzerland, the main turning point of world trade.



Object of desire for some, speculative refuge for others, parameter of reserves in most banks on the planet. Gold, however, remains a two-sided metal: the one that dazzles and the one of pain.



Every year, 3,300 tons of gold are mined worldwide. 49% of it is used to manufacture watches and jewelry, 29% as an investment, 15% is bought by central banks and the remaining 7% is destined for technical devices.

Its price explodes. The second week of November reached the record of the last six months. In recent days its price oscillated at 1,875 US dollars per ounce.

Between 50% and 70% of the global total is refined in Switzerland. Of the seven largest processors on an international scale, four reside in that Alpine country, not only the second largest importer in the world, but also the largest exporter of this precious metal, although it does not have a single deposit within its borders.



Es síntesis, la mayor parte del oro que circula por el mundo, pasa por Suiza. Llega sin refinarse y parte con deslumbrante “pureza”. Un negocio que le representa entre 70.000 y 90.000 millones de francos anuales (1 franco = 1,09 dólares estadounidenses). Si bien se extrae oro al menos en 90 países, prácticamente la mitad de todas las importaciones del metal procesado y refinado en Suiza provienen de Gran Bretaña, los Emiratos Árabes Unidos (EAU) y Hong Kong. Paradójicamente, ninguna de esas naciones cuenta con extracción nacional. Por otra parte, una cantidad significativa llega de países productores cuyas economías dependen, en gran medida, de su exportación, como Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali y Perú, entre otros.



According to an official report by the Swiss Federal Customs Office, in 2017 this country imported 2,404 metric tons of gold, with an approximate value of 70,000 million Swiss francs. That same year it exported gold worth 67 billion Swiss francs. In other words, in 2017 gold trafficking accounted for a not inconsiderable 24% of exports and 31% of Swiss imports. To contextualize these figures, in that same period, the Swiss watch industry exported for 20,000 million francs, which would be equivalent to about 24 million watches.

Tax advantages also influence the importation of the precious metal, because in this country no taxes are levied on gold acquired as an investment or on imported gold coins or processed gold. Alloys with other metals can also be declared as gold and consequently exempted from taxation. Such is the case with silver, which, although it only contains 2% of the precious metal, can be imported free of fees.



Inhumane conditions of workers who extract gold in countries of the South. Photo Le Courrier.

Although all these figures are public, the report [The Impact of Gold](#), published the second week of November by WWF Switzerland (World Wide Fund for Nature) gives them new relevance.



The path of gold from the mine to our country, says the report, "is especially problematic. It's often opaque and difficult to track because intermediaries mix that mineral from different sources." Without traceability, the report concludes, "it cannot be ruled out that the metal used was produced under unacceptable social and ecological conditions." https://www.wwf.ch/sites/default/files/doc-2021-11/2021_11_WWF_The%20Impact%20of%20Gold.pdf

WWF Switzerland's publication systematizes concepts and findings.

Gold is often mined under deplorable social and ecological conditions, with dire consequences for the environment and local populations.



La Pampa, Madre de Dios, Peru.

Opening new mines and building the necessary infrastructure requires large areas. Where veins are discovered, huge tracts of forest are cut down, often illegally. In Brazil alone, its extraction involves the annual destruction of a natural area the size of 14,000 football fields.

On the other hand, their extraction almost systematically requires highly toxic chemicals, such as mercury and cyanide. These substances expand into air, soil and water. Consequently, biodiversity suffers, as well as the health of the local population. Among other diseases, such poisons can cause blindness, brain damage, tumors and fetal malformations.

Gold recovery also has a direct impact on water quality and availability in the affected regions. Finally, the harmful effects on the climate are evident, due to the high energy consumption since the production of one kilo of gold generates about 12 tons of CO₂ emissions.

The environmental organization WWF Switzerland stresses that, along with the enormous environmental impact, extraction is often associated with deplorable working conditions, slavery, human trafficking, child labour and forced prostitution. Indigenous peoples or indigenous communities are often expelled from their lands, now converted into open-air deposits.

By mid-2019, Peru was exporting some 60 tons of illegally produced gold on its soil, much of which went directly to Swiss refineries. The madre de Dios region (with Puerto

Maldonado as its capital), in the Peruvian Amazon, is historically one of the main gold extraction centers of the South American country.



Environmental wear and tear from a gold mine in Peru. Photo swissinfo

A recent report by the Spanish news agency EFE points out that "from the air, the landscape is desolate: where before there was Amazonian forest, now overflowing craters of mud, felled trees and sandy yermos upholstered in mercury and backpack. A wasteland preyed upon by the alluvial *gold rush*, which at ground level created a clandestine and lawless hell in the Peruvian jungle. This is La Pampa –between kilometers 98 and 115 of the interoceanic highway–, a territory within the protective shield of the Tambopata national reserve that for years has been the epicenter of illegal mining in the Peruvian region of Madre de Dios, and where this succulent business, more profitable than cocaine, in recent decades, it has snatched 25,000 hectares of one of the most biological forests on the planet."

This report, prepared in situ, points out that "today despite the millionaire efforts aimed at kicking illegal miners out of the area, the scourge is still in embers, the environmental disaster intact, and human trafficking, assassination and labor and sexual exploitation continue to proliferate as collateral effects of this tragedy. There is a kind of nameless village, where today live some 40,000 people dedicated to activities linked to illegal mining. In this improvised city, luxuries are scarce, but there are plenty of hotels, restaurants, bars and, above all, prostitution, in the purest style of the 'salon' of cowboy movies."

Madre Dios produces 70% of Peru's artisanal gold, which is the leading gold producer in Latin America and the 5th in the world. In Madre de Dios, 70% of the economy has to do with mining, but only 10% is legal.



Madre de Dios, minería ilegal, La pampa, Perú. Foto Andina.

A comienzos del 2019, el Gobierno peruano puso en marcha la Operación Mercurio en la región de La Pampa, un mega operativo para tratar de erradicar las actividades no legales. Según la publicación digital peruana Actualidad Ambiental, si bien se ha logrado reducir la minería ilegal en un 98%, existe evidencia de que la misma ha migrado a áreas circundantes.

A pesar de más de 700 operativos policiales en menos de dos años y de la expulsión de 25.000 mineros ilegales, un informe de Monitoreo de Deforestación en la Amazonía indica que, tras el inicio de la Operación Mercurio, 1.100 nuevas hectáreas quedaron deforestadas debido a la actividad aurífera, y se constató la aparición de seis nuevos puntos de extracción no autorizada: Pariamanu, La Pampa (en dos zonas ubicadas al norte de dicha región), Camanti, Chaspa (Puno) y Apaylon. En síntesis, toda política represiva de estas actividades cuando no van acompañadas de propuestas productivas y de reinserción laboral parecen estar condenadas al fracaso.

Autocrítica helvética

El Consejo Federal suizo (poder ejecutivo colegiado) “es consciente de que existe el riesgo de que se importe en Suiza oro extraído ilegalmente, con las posibles violaciones de los derechos humanos que esto representa”.

Así lo afirman las autoridades federales en el informe “Comercio de oro producido en violación de derechos humanos”, presentado ante el parlamento a fines de 2019, como respuesta a una interpelación que cuatro años antes presentó el senador nacional ecologista Luc Recordon. <https://www.news.admin.ch/news/message/attachments/54475.pdf>

El Gobierno le encargó a un grupo independiente que realizara un análisis del sector del oro en Suiza, sus principales actores y los posibles riesgos y desafíos. Como parte de este proceso, el grupo se puso en contacto con representantes del sector privado y de las Organizaciones No Gubernamentales (ONG) activas en derechos humanos, medio ambiente y cooperación al desarrollo.



El oro que llega a Suiza también procede de Africa. Foto Public Eye

El informe acepta como probable que las actividades de las empresas en toda la actividad aurífera tengan repercusiones negativas en una amplia gama de derechos humanos, como: maltrato de los trabajadores y violaciones de la legislación laboral, en particular en lo que se refiere a condiciones de trabajo seguras y saludables y a una remuneración que proporcione una vida digna. También reconoce posibles violaciones del modo de vida tradicional de los pueblos indígenas, su autodeterminación y sus tierras. Así como impactos negativos en las comunidades locales: reasentamiento y desplazamiento forzado, violación de los derechos de propiedad, de la libertad de asociación y de opinión y expresión.



The Max Havelaar organization instituted a seal to certify the equitable gold trade. Photo Max Havelaar.

The report talks about possible damage to the environment and does not exclude the possibility that gold companies commit violations against the rule of law. Finally, the Government recommends ensuring greater transparency in all activities related to gold arriving in Switzerland. It also recommends encouraging associations involved in the metal industry and trade (e.g. the Swiss Association of Precious Metals Manufacturers and Traders and Swiss Better Gold) to improve the way they operate and to engage in dialogue with NGOs interested in the remaining challenges in this sensitive sector of the Swiss economy.

Among the recommendations of its November report, WWF calls for laws that force Swiss-based companies that buy and process gold to meet minimum social and ecological standards and make their behavior public. And it calls on consumers to take more responsible attitudes when purchasing products that contain gold. Existing quality seals such as FairTrade and FairMined help promote more responsible and transparent extraction and minimise the potential for future environmental destruction. 500 years later, the caravels full of precious metals from the New World are replaced by ships or cargo planes that arrive at European destinations. Others are added to them, coming from Africa and Asia. A large part of the gold imported by the Old World flows into the sophisticated refineries of Switzerland, the main turning point of world trade. Almost all legal, although not always fair and, for that reason, not ethical.

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