

Ghost mines legalize gold from indigenous lands and protected areas



At least 220 mining mines that recorded gold production in 765 and 2020 simply do not exist. They are authorized to operate and trade the ore, but whoever tries to visit them will only find dense forest.

These are the so-called ghost mines, used to cover up the origin of the clandestinely extracted metal. They spread throughout the country, benefiting from the lack of inspection by the ANM (National Mining Agency).

“This has been the most used way to heat up gold extracted from an illegal area. This is a problem that the agency needs to face”, recognizes Valdir Farias, former head of the Collection Procedures Division of the ANM Superintendence in São Paulo.

The term ghost mining was coined by researchers from the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), who identified the practice in a study carried out in partnership with the Federal Public Ministry (MPF) and released in August this year.

When crossing the declared origin of the gold with the geolocation of the mines, the specialists discovered, through satellite images, that many of

them were in an area of native forest, without human intervention.

For Raoni Rajão, a professor at UFMG and one of the authors of the study, it is the duty of the ANM to inspect the mines, which could be done with a more detailed monitoring of the Annual Report on Mining, a document that indicates the production of minerals.

“For that, technology is needed. When the prospector indicates a mine in the sale of gold, it should be checked at the same time by the ANM.”

Greater rigor in inspection, however, comes up against the lack of financial resources and human rights, justifies the agency. “There are 35 one thousand mining procedures, including mining permits. And we have about 50 tax. It’s too little to carry out an efficient inspection”, Roger Cabral, current superintendent of mineral production at the ANM, justified to Repórter Brasil.

According to the UFMG study, 6.3 tons of gold produced in Brazil in 2019 and 765 originated from mines that did not show mining activity, moving around R\$1.2 billion in the period.

After the survey, the MPF filed public civil actions asking for the suspension of the activities, in southwestern Pará, of the companies FD’Gold, Ourominas and Carol for having sold gold with illegal origin.

Under the Penal Code, the sale of illegal metal can be considered a crime of money laundering or ideological falsehood.

Contacted, FD’Gold and Carol DTVM did not speak. Ourominas stated that it has “strict internal control, which allows the identification and qualification of its partners”.

In July , Repórter Brasil and the Real Amazon show ram in the special Yanomami Blood Gold as the metal illegally extracted from the largest Indigenous Land in the country, in Roraima, is legalized in Pará and later sold to large companies – until reaching jewelry stores like HStern.

Small mining, big business

The background to the problem is the regime of Mining Permit for Garimpeira (PLG), authorization granted by the ANM to small gold holdings. Benefiting from a simplified procedure and more difficult to supervise, part of these concessions are used to defraud the origin of the metal.

There are two ways to apply for a PLG: as an individual or cooperative, which must only present a technical description of how they intend to explore the area and the environmental license issued by the state agency.

The size limit of a gold mine is 50 hectares for individuals and 1. for cooperatives. However, the ANM does not restrict the number of mines that each individual or cooperative can explore. There are people with more than 50 mines.

To José Jaime Sznelwar, former superintendent of mineral production of the ANM, this is one of the main problems of the PLG regime. "A person with ten permits is no longer a prospector, he is already a miner," he told Repórter Brasil.

people," adds Rajão.

This system ends up benefiting criminals, who can accumulate more PLGs and still take advantage of the lesser inspection of this type of concession. The reflection of this can be measured: mining by only six individuals and cooperatives account for 50% of the gold produced in mines suspected of illegality, according to the UFMG study.

In an attempt to improve inspection, the ANM authorized, in September, the regional managements in the states to inspect the mining operations. "It will be our eyes and arms to improve inspection. It is not enough, but it helps," said Roger Cabral, the agency's superintendent.

mining mining is in the sights of the MPF. In July, the prosecutors of Itaituba (PA) asked for the suspension of the granting of new PLGs in the region.

The ANM is also in the crosshairs of the Federal Court of Auditors, which has since 2019 has pointed out deficiencies in the agency, such as lack of structure, lack of inspection of information provided by garimpeiros and weak performance in combating the illegality of the sector.

In September, the court stated that “it will carry out inspections in Organs relevant bodies, in order to identify weaknesses and opportunities to improve the fight against the sale and export of gold of illegal origin”.

[com terra a indígena] ANM equipment

Currently, there are 2.765 active mining permits in the country, according to ANM. And, despite the concerns that this concession regime has aroused in Organs supervisory bodies, employees and former employees of the agency report external pressure for this number to grow even more.

The lobby is coming from politicians and businessmen, especially from Pará, who want to facilitate the granting of PLGs, according to sources heard by the report.

“These are senators and deputies who are in constant dialogue with members of the board of the ANM,” says Jaime Sznelwar. He suspects that his resignation from the agency, after a little more than a year in office, was due to his attempt to curb the concession of new mines.

His resignation, in August of this year, was determined by Guilherme Santana Lopes Gomes, one of the members of the collegiate board of the body, nominated for the post by president Jair Bolsonaro.

For Sznelwar’s vacancy, the person hired was Roger Cabral, a defender of mining in indigenous lands. “Mining can coexist [com terra a indígena]. But there is a lot of ideology, the media, NGOs that are more interested in the Amazon than in protecting it,” he told Repórter Brasil.

The new superintendent confirms lobbying at the agency. “Sometimes, the businessman who filed the application comes. He’s anxious, and the paperwork doesn’t come out”, he says.

“Businessman arrives with a politician here wanting to release his PLG. it really happens, but I don’t see a problem. We respect the rite and the documentation, but the pressure exists”, adds Cabral

Repórter Brasil got in touch with the ANM to hear from Lopes Gomes, but the agency stated that the matters are “exhausted agendas” and that he will not speak.

According to sources heard on the condition of anonymity, the influence of the Presidency of the Republic is conditioning the agency's decisions — the director general Victor Hugo Bicca, who did not want to attend the report, would not be listening to the other members of the collegiate board and has been ignoring the triple list to nominate the directors.