A Jungle Heist: Shielding the Amazon from Organised Crime

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Principal Findings

What's new? Organised crime has become a major obstacle to preservation of the Amazon. While criminal organisations seamlessly expand and connect across the basin, infiltrating state bodies, companies and communities, national governments struggle to work with one another and with residents to battle illicit activity.

Why does it matter? Drug trafficking and gold mining are driving up levels of violence and causing irreversible environmental damage to territories populated largely by Indigenous communities. Curbing criminal threats is critical to preventing destruction of the rainforest, a vital ecosystem for global climate change mitigation, and to reducing harm to its inhabitants.

What should be done? Governments and Indigenous communities should seek to resist criminal expansion by combining local knowledge with effective law enforcement. Amazon states should improve cross-border cooperation and harmonise their environmental laws, while international gold and commodity buyers should ensure that their supply chains are free of products generated by crime.

Executive Summary

The Amazon, the world's largest tropical rainforest, is under assault from organised crime. Exploiting weak governance, such groups are pushing deep into protected jungle as they seek new routes for drug trafficking and sites for illegal mining, leaving a deep and, at times, irreparable imprint on the environment. Indigenous communities and state authorities share responsibility for protecting the forest, yet mutual distrust and enormous distances have made it hard for them to cooperate. Furthermore, the nine countries with territory in the Amazon struggle to pool resources and information across borders even as criminal groups operate transnationally. What was once primarily a conservation challenge has become a crisis of governance and security, making it far harder for states to honour their plans to protect the environment. To curb this criminal drift, national governments should step up their cooperation and work closely with Indigenous communities. International commodity buyers also have a major role in ensuring that global supply chains do not profit from the Amazon's destruction.

The drivers of this crisis are economic. Shifting global patterns of drug consumption, combined with surging demand for gold and other minerals, have transformed the Amazon into highly profitable terrain. Criminal organisations have moved swiftly to gain advantage. In particular, Brazilian groups are expanding across borders to organise supply chains and trafficking networks. These powerful illegal outfits sometimes compete with and on other occasions work in conjunction with ambitious Colombian armed groups, as well as Venezuelan, Ecuadorian and Peruvian criminal organisations. Their reach touches Bolivia and Guyana as well.

In their quest to dominate the Amazon basin, organised criminal groups have established control over swathes of the region, laying down rules on community conduct, establishing rudimentary justice systems and engaging in brutal violence. Latin America already has the world's highest homicide rates, with a mean of roughly twenty per 100,000 inhabitants, but Amazon areas often exceed these grim averages. Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, small-scale farmers and environmental defenders account for a disproportionate number of the deaths. In places like Tabatinga, on Brazil's border with Colombia, criminal groups such as Comando Vermelho circulate death lists of alleged rivals and their collaborators on social media, in a bid to silence opposition. These groups use their economic heft to corrupt and infiltrate state authorities meant to confront them. Locals are lured into participating in criminal rackets whose proceeds would be unobtainable through legal means, creating deep rifts within communities.

Profit-making activities like cattle ranching, monoculture farming or extractive industry have traditionally accounted for much of the damage to the rainforest. But as they grow, criminal outfits are exacerbating the scale of the harm inflicted. In addition to contaminating waterways and thinning out treelines with illegal mining and gold trafficking, criminal groups are reinvesting their profits into large-scale legal firms and industries that propel land clearance. Through a mix of coercion and corruption, moreover, they are undermining state efforts to halt or restrict environmental damage, in effect hollowing out the very governance systems meant to protect the ecosystem.

Two main forces push back against criminal expansion, though not without difficulty. Based in remote areas often days of travel away from the nearest state offices, Indigenous communities tend to find themselves on the front lines of criminal intrusion. Despite at times impressive efforts to combine their traditional knowledge with new monitoring technology to detect threats, these communities lack the resources and equipment to confront illicit activity safely. Lethal retaliation by criminal groups against environmental and community defenders are not uncommon: the Amazon accounted for one in every five killings of land and environmental defenders worldwide in 2022, the most recent year for which data is available. Meanwhile, state security agencies sporadically crack down on large criminal operations such as illegal mining, albeit without dismantling the financial apparatus that sustains these rackets or their ultimate bosses. Law enforcement operations are also rarely coordinated with the Indigenous groups.

Securing better cooperation between security forces and Indigenous guards is a core law enforcement challenge across the Amazon, but also the most promising mechanism for rolling back illegal groups. Many Indigenous guards – communal protection groups created to defend people, territory and lifeways – say they want to work with national authorities to safeguard their lands from criminals. Locals could detect illegal activity, warn state officials and coordinate a response with security forces. Where such collaborations have succeeded, for example in Yanomami Indigenous lands in northern Brazil, deforestation and criminal activity have fallen sharply. But in most cases, mutual distrust, fear of criminal collusion and a lack of resources inhibit collaboration. More cooperation between the two should be the bulwark of a campaign to protect the Amazon from organised crime.

Simultaneously, states with territory in the Amazon should strive to align their laws on environmental crime so that no one of them becomes a haven for opportunistic offenders. They also need to do more to share intelligence, mitigate corruption and tackle illicit financial flows. Foreign donors, for their part, should look to provide greater

support for sustainable livelihoods in Amazon communities, while companies that rely on Amazon products should be encouraged to take steps in the fields of compliance and due diligence to ensure that their supply chains are free of goods that are produced illicitly or bear the influence of criminal groups. As these companies make their money from the ecosystem, they should invest in safeguarding its permanence.

Criminal groups are for now moving much faster than law enforcement across the Amazon's vast reaches. Greater coordination among those who share authority in the jungle – states, security forces, communities and the private sector – is vital to stopping organised crime from hastening ecological and social disaster.

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I. Introduction

The state has historically been feeble across much of the Amazon. Even during bursts of economic growth, such as the late 19th-century rubber boom, the state's writ was largely limited to major river corridors. Today, governments station their officials only in the Amazon's scattered urban centres, if anywhere in the region, and much of the population lives without access to basic public services; in rural areas of the Amazon, for example, more than five million people live farther than 10km from the nearest health centre or hospital.[1] Only 20,000 of Brazil's 63,000km of rivers are navigable, meaning that many communities are days away from the reach of these facilities.[2] Even when they are close to hand, public institutions are often weak and underfunded.

Historically, private companies have been the main beneficiaries of patchy state control in the Amazon and the greatest sources of environmental harm.[3] Companies have been accused of complicity in razing the jungle for commercial agriculture, logging and cattle ranching, with the latter believed to be responsible for 84 per cent of the loss of 54.2 million hectares of forest in the Amazon between 2001 and 2020 – an area the size of France.[4]

[1] "Amazonia: A Journey toward Prosperity and Resilience", Inter-American Development Bank, January 2025; Liljana Sekerinska, Brock Rowberry, Ellin Ivarsson, Luciano Charlita Freitas and Felipe de Albuquerque Sgarbi, *A Place-Based Infrastructure Approach for Bioeconomies in the Amazon Region* (Washington, 2025).
[2] Ellin Ivarsson and Liljana Sekerinska, "Uncovering infrastructure gaps in the Amazon: How to leverage data for better transport, digital connectivity and sustainable development", Transport for Development (blog), World Bank, 22 January 2025. In addition, the World Bank found that some 60 per cent of the Amazon basin has poor infrastructure, defined as minimal transport connectivity, fragile energy systems and limited access to digital networks, while 26 per cent consists of pristine forest under threat from human activity.
[3] Philip Schleifer, *Global Shifts: Businesses, Politics and Deforestation in a Changing World Economy* (Cambridge, 2023). Starting in the mid-1960s, and for three decades thereafter, Chevron's subsidiary Texaco dumped over 16 billion gallons of toxic wastewater in Ecuador's Amazon. Courts ordered Chevron to pay $9.5 billion in 2011, though enforcement has been blocked. "Chevron's Environmental Crimes: 13 Years of Evasion and Escalation", Amazon Watch, February 2024; "International Tribunal Rules for Chevron in Ecuador Case", press release, Chevron, 7 September 2018.
[4] "Deforestation in the Amazon: Past, Present and Future", InfoAmazonia, 21 March 2023. See also "Caso de grilagem liga frigoríficos a rede de corrupção e lavagem de dinheiro", *Repórter Brasil*, 23 May 2024; "Financial Institutions are Funding De-

A new source of environmental destruction has emerged in recent years. Organised crime has spotted the opportunities presented by weak or absent states, and it is now active in at least 67 per cent of the Amazon municipalities in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.[5] Moving easily across unguarded borders, criminal networks traffic in commodities, people, wildlife and weapons. Cocaine trafficking from the Andes region through Brazil is on the upswing, driven by consumer demand and by traffickers' desire to avoid other, more intensively policed routes.[6] With global demand for gold kicking prices to record levels of $170 per gram in January (the price has subsequently fallen as a result of war in the Middle East), many residents are looking to illegal mining or drug trafficking as a lifeline enabling them to afford essential goods, which are often expensive given the high cost of transport along jungle roads and rivers.

These criminal activities harm the environment both directly and indirectly. The use of mercury or cyanide to extract gold, and hydrochloric acid and gasoline to refine coca crops into cocaine, contaminates waterways, soil and plant life for years to come.[7] To traffic their products, criminal groups carve out forest roads that make newly accessible areas vulnerable to timber extraction and deforestation for farming or raising cattle. The effect of these new roads is striking: more than 70 per cent of cleared jungle land sits within 50km of one.[8] The same criminal groups behind drug trafficking and mining often go on to reinvest their profits in ranching and other cash-heavy industries, thereby exacerbating the harm they cause to the rainforest.[9]

Globally, the annual revenue derived from environmental crimes is now estimated at $110-281 billion, and in Latin America, the Amazon jungle is a main source of the proceeds.[10] The money generated by

forestation in the Amazon", Greenpeace International, 2024; and "How Global Banks Profit from Rainforest Destruction", Global Witness, 21 October 2021.

[5] This estimate is based on numerous petitions for information, intelligence reports and interviews conducted by Amazon Underworld journalists. "Amazon under Attack", Amazon Underworld, 21 October 2025. Amazon Underworld's methodology note offers details.

[6] "Aterrizando na água: interdiçao aérea, tráfico de drogas e violencia na amazônia brasileira", Amazônia 2030, January 2025.

[7] Duberli Geomar Elera-Gonzales et al., "Deforestation Driven by Illegal and Informal Gold Mining in the Southern Peruvian Amazon: A Predictive Land Use Analysis Over the Next 50 Years", *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment*, vol. 197, no. 7 (July 2025), p. 791; Jaime A. García Díaz, *Estimating Deforestation Due to Coca Cultivation in the Peruvian Amazon (2011–2021)*, (Lima, 2024).

[8] Jeetendra Khadan and Kaltrina Temaj, "Gold shines amid uncertainty", Data Blog (blog), World Bank, 30 June 2025; "Deforestation in the Amazon: Past, Present and Future", op. cit.

[9] "Deforestación en la Amazonía al 2025", Red Amazónica de Información Socioambiental Georreferenciada, September 2022.

[10] Environmental crimes are illegal acts that directly harm the environment, wildlife or natural resources. These activities, which are profit-driven and often linked to organised crime, include illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, pollution, hazardous

organised crime enables these groups to corrupt officials, capture state institutions and, in some areas, supplant government authority altogether, placing ever greater obstacles in the path of conservation efforts.

Crime has now become a major constraint on efforts to curb environmental destruction in the Amazon and save one of the planet's most important ecosystems. With approximately one fifth of the original Amazon already deforested, the region is reaching the critical 20-25 per cent threshold that could trigger ecological collapse. Beyond this limit, the forest's rainfall recycling system, through which trees create the precipitation necessary for their own survival, would break down, drying out large areas and obliterating their ability to regenerate as rainforest.[11] Indigenous territories and protected lands in the Amazon store approximately 34 billion tonnes of carbon. If deforested, the Amazon would transform from a global carbon sink into a carbon source, dramatically accelerating climate change.

This report examines organised crime in the Amazon and the campaign to push back against illegal businesses. Field research was conducted in the state of Roraima in Brazil and bordering areas in Guyana; the department of Caquetá in Colombia; and the regions of Amazonas and Ucayali in Peru, as well as national capitals. Crisis Group conducted more than 100 interviews including with law enforcement officials, Indigenous and *campesino* community leaders, diplomats, academics, activists and people involved in cattle ranching, illegal gold mining and drug trafficking. Thirty-one of the interviewees were women.

waste dumping and illicit fishing. These figures represent best estimates of the illicit economy's magnitude. "Money Laundering from Environmental Crime", Financial Action Task Force, July 2021.

[11] Thomas E. Lovejoy and Carlos Nobre, "Amazon Tipping Point: Last Chance for Action", *Science Advances*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2018); "Amazon Assessment Report 2021", Science Panel for the Amazon/UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2021.

II. The Main Criminal Powers

Criminal networks in the Amazon are volatile and alliances shift frequently. Larger crime syndicates have gained dominance over much of the mineral and narcotics supply chains. When it suits their business, they contract with smaller criminal groups or freelancers to carry out specific tasks, such as transport, production or management of local drug markets. Criminal organisations of all sizes deploy violence and coercion to assure their income streams, while also at times building amicable ties with sparse state authorities and legal businesses in order to expand operations and launder illicit gains.

A. *Brazilian Crime*

The expansion of Brazilian criminal groups Comando Vermelho and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) has transformed the Amazon's criminal landscape over the last fifteen years. Together, Comando Vermelho and PCC have an estimated 130,000 members nationwide, though it is not known how many are based in the Amazon.[12] Both groups maintain access routes to Brazil's two main ports for exporting drugs to Europe, Barcarena in Pará state and Santos in São Paulo state. The latter is Latin America's largest seaport. They have used their heft to build networked supply chains, involving dozens of local groups working together.

Born in the 1970s during Brazil's military dictatorship, Comando Vermelho has expanded into neighbouring countries over the past eight years, particularly in strategic frontier regions, where it has sought to control coca production and trafficking routes.[13] The group now dominates the tri-border area connecting Brazil, Colombia and Peru, which is a coca growing hub on the Peruvian side and offers access to the Solimões River corridor in Brazil for transport to the Atlantic coast.[14]

Comando Vermelho additionally traffics in cocaine purchased in Colombia via Rio Negro, which runs along the border between that country and Venezuela before entering Brazil.[15] To refine coca into cocaine, the group operates laboratories in Ucayalí department, Peru, close to Brazil and Bolivia. It also runs clandestine airstrips in Coronel Portillo, a Peruvian province.

[12] "Country Policy and Information Note Brazil: Organised Criminal Groups", UK FCDO, March 2025.
[13] "Amazon under Attack", op. cit.
[14] Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°51, *A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers*, 17 July 2024.
[15] These groups made a pact to coexist peacefully in the Brazilian Amazon, but the truce broke down in 2016. Tensions then escalated amid prison massacres in Manaus and Boa Vista in 2017. Crisis Group interview, law enforcement officer, Brasilia, March 2025. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers*, op. cit.

Comando Vermelho has been acquiring major stakes in the illegal gold mining that has long occurred in Peru's south-eastern Madre de Dios province, and it is deepening its interests in illegal timber extraction in nearby Loreto and Ucayalí. At first, the group worked with Peruvian criminal clans in these areas, but now it appears to be pushing out these smaller outfits.[16] It has also established a foothold in Peru's penitentiary system, including the prison in Pucallpa, Ucayalí's capital.[17]

Comando Vermelho has a loosely hierarchical structure, which allows its local partners a large degree of autonomy even as imprisoned senior leaders retain the power to take major decisions. The group fights rival outfits for control of drug transport and sales, and uses the threat of violence, often shared in warnings over social media, to quell local resistance. Law enforcement sources say its members systematically exploit women, especially Indigenous women, to transport drugs, money and contraband.[18]

The PCC, for its part, remains Brazil's largest criminal group and a major player in the Amazon. It has expanded rapidly in the Brazilian state of Roraima, which borders Venezuela and Guyana, while also running a trafficking corridor known as Rota Caipira.[19] Cocaine moves along this route from Peru and Bolivia via Paraguay toward Brazilian export hubs, such as Santos. From there, the drug heads toward Africa on its way to Europe.[20]

In contrast to Comando Vermelho, the PCC, which originated in São Paulo, maintains a rigid corporate-style structure and strict internal discipline. But there are fewer requirements for new members in areas where the group is expanding compared with bigger cities. Brazilian officials told Crisis Group they have even seen growing numbers of "baptisms" of new members in Guyana and Venezuela. While it is not entirely clear what activities these new satellite groups are pursuing, the PCC had an estimated 50 members in Guyana and a network of more than 650 members in Venezuela as of early 2025, according to these officials.[21]

[16] "Amazon under Attack", op. cit.
[17] Crisis Group interview, law enforcement officer, Ucayalí, May 2025.
[18] Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officers, Ucayalí, May 2025.
[19] The PCC generates an estimated $1 billion in revenues, with about $5 billion in property investments, but there is no clear estimate of the profits it makes in the Amazon. Terrence McCoy and Marina Dias, "South America's most dangerous gang invades the Amazon forest", *Washington Post*, 16 December 2024; "Roraima está entre os nove estados onde PCC e CV disputam hegemonia", *Folha de Boa Vista*, 22 August 2018; Isabela Leite and Rodrigo Rodrigues, "PCC controla ao menos 40 fundos de investimentos com patrimônio de mais de R$ 30 bilhões, diz Receita Federal", G1 Globo, 28 August 2025.
[20] "Tussle for the Amazon: New Frontiers in Brazil's Organized Crime Landscape", CSIS, October 2021.
[21] PCC recruits must adhere to rules that stress discipline and loyalty. Crisis Group interview, intelligence official, Brazil, March 2025; Brazilian intelligence documents seen by Crisis Group.

B. *Colombian and Ecuadorian Groups*

Colombian armed and criminal organisations are also at the heart of the Amazon's drug trafficking and gold rackets. The National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia's largest remaining leftist insurgency, has rear bases in southern Venezuela, where it was ideologically allied with the *chavista* regime of President Nicolás Maduro, before his capture by U.S. forces in January, and had been granted haven. In the Amazon, the ELN's footprint spans the Venezuelan states of Amazonas, Bolívar and Delta Amacuro, bordering Colombia, Brazil and Guyana, respectively. These territories, which are rich in gold and critical minerals, are home to important drug trafficking corridors to Brazil.[22] Until recently, the ELN had a non-aggression pact in parts of this area with a dissident faction of the defunct Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) known as Segunda Marquetalia, led by the rebel group's former chief peace negotiator, Iván Márquez. This partnership broke down in August 2025, leaving the ELN with the upper hand, while the Segunda Marquetalia is regrouping in remote areas of Amazonas state.[23]

The Comandos de la Frontera, an amalgam of former FARC members, ex-soldiers, former right-wing paramilitaries and fresh local recruits, controls coca plantations and illegal mines in the Putumayo, Caquetá and Amazonas departments in the Colombian Amazon.[24] As its ranks have swelled, Comandos de la Frontera has expanded its reach into Peru, where it pays farmers to raze forest for coca plantations just south of the Putumayo River, the natural border between Colombia and Peru. In Ecuador, the group has forged alliances with Los Lobos, a criminal organisation that purchases cocaine and base paste (semi-refined cocaine) for export from the Pacific coast. Los Lobos also provides protection for illegal gold mining conducted or financed by the Comandos de la Frontera in Ecuador.[25]

The chief competitor of Los Lobos, the Ecuadorian armed group Los Choneros, has waged a violent campaign of expansion into the Amazon over the last few years as it seeks to wrest control of cocaine corridors and gold mines away from its foe. Press reports indicate that clashes between these rivals have contributed to a sharp increase in homicides, including assassinations and campaigns of "social cleansing" (extrajudicial killings of people such as drug users, the homeless

[22] Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°53, *A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, 29 July 2025.
[23] Sinar Alvarado, "Everything for gold: Migration and violence on the Río Negro", Amazon Underworld, 6 August 2025.
[24] Julie Turkewitz, "Deep in Colombia, rebels and soldiers fight for the same prize: Drugs", *The New York Times*, 20 April 2022; "In the Shadows of the State: Illicit Economies and Armed Control along the Colombian-Ecuadorian-Peruvian Amazon Border", Amazon Underworld, 19 August 2025.
[25] "La sombra de los Comandos de la Frontera se expande desde Colombia a Ecuador y Perú", Código Vidrio, 27 April 2025.

or alleged collaborators of other crime groups). Murder rates in Ecuadorian Amazon provinces rose from 10 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021 to over 50 in 2024.[26]

Despite their diverse origins, all these criminal groups have learned that controlling an area's inhabitants makes them powerful. These groups have embedded themselves in communities, where they seek to eliminate or co-opt leaders and exploit civilians as human shields, sources of cheap, disposable labour or targets of predatory schemes like extortion.[27] Residents who push back often suffer violent retaliation. Between 2012 and 2022, the Amazon accounted for a large share of the nearly 2,000 environmental and land defenders killed worldwide, with Colombia and Brazil making up over 40 per cent of the total.[28]

[26] "In the Shadows of the State: Illicit Economies and Armed Control along the Colombian-Ecuadorian-Peruvian Amazon Border", op. cit.; "Comandos de la Frontera y Los Lobos: la alianza que atemoriza a Orellana y se enriquece con la minería ilegal", *Primicias*, 12 May 2025; "La violenta sombra de los Comandos de la Frontera de Colombia se expande en Ecuador y Perú", *Ojo Público*, 27 April 2025.
[27] Crisis Group interviews, campesino leaders and international observers, Colombia, May-June 2025; Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°52, *Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian Amazon*, 18 October 2024.
[28] "In Numbers: Lethal Attacks against Defenders since 2012", Global Witness, undated; "Land Markets and Illegalities: The Deep Roots of Deforestation in the Amazon", Science Panel for the Amazon, 2025.

III. Illegal Businesses, Violence and the Environment

Drug trafficking and illegal mining are the two illicit businesses most responsible for causing violence across the Amazon. Both cocaine production and gold extraction also leave a deep mark on the forest in the form of chemical waste and new jungle roads that result in further forest clearing. Beyond direct environmental damage, the revenues from both activities are often laundered and reinvested in adjacent activities that exacerbate deforestation, such as land grabbing and cattle ranching.[29]

A. *Drug Trafficking*

New patterns in global drug consumption have helped place the Amazon on the front lines of narco-trafficking. Increased demand for cocaine in Europe means that Brazil is an attractive port of departure for the drug. Meanwhile, law enforcement operations on traditional routes, as well as the U.S. bombardment of alleged drug running boats since September 2025, has pushed traffickers onto more circuitous transhipment paths, including through the Amazon.[30] A major route largely controlled by the PCC, at times in alliance with Dutch and Balkan-based outfits, connects Brazil to West Africa and then on to Europe.[31] Another booming route links cocaine production sites in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru through the Amazon to Guayaquil – the largest port in Ecuador, which has emerged as a primary exit point for cocaine bound for Europe. In 2024, for example, Spain seized the largest single shipment it ever has, amounting to thirteen tonnes of cocaine, hidden in banana containers from Guayaquil.[32]

The entire cocaine production process can now be found in the Amazon.[33] Though Colombia produces more coca than any other country

[29] Crisis Group Briefing, *Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian Amazon*, op. cit.; "Tráfico e garimpo ilegal compartilham aviões e pilotos para lavar dinheiro na Amazônia", *Carta Capital*, 18 September 2023.
[30] Bram Ebus, Sinar Alvarado and Jeanneth Valdivieso, "U.S. attacks on boats in the Caribbean and Pacific intensify trafficking through Amazon routes", Amazon Underworld, 19 December 2025.
[31] Ione Wells, "Tracking the world's major cocaine route to Europe – and why it's growing", BBC, 8 April 2025; Portia Crowe and Jessica Donati, "Western Balkan smugglers pushing West Africa deeper into cocaine trade, report says", Reuters, 2 September 2025; "Cocaine – The Current Situation in Europe (European Drug Report 2025)", European Union Drugs Agency, June 2025.
[32] "Cocaine – The Current Situation in Europe (European Drug Report 2025)", op. cit.
[33] Colombia, Peru and Bolivia are the three main global producers of coca leaf, the primary ingredient of cocaine. Production has doubled in these three countries since 2010, with the total number of hectares under cultivation reaching 375,000. The most recent data for Colombia and Peru comes from 2023; in Bolivia's case, it comes from 2022. "Monitoring of Territories with Presence of Coca Crops 2023", UNODC, 2024; "World Drug Report 2024", UNODC, 2024.

in the world, Peru accounts for most coca cultivation in the Amazon basin.[34] Labs sprinkled across the jungles of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia convert the leaves into cocaine base paste, which is then taken to more specialised and protected facilities for processing into the final product, cocaine hydrochloride. From there, drug traffickers use the Amazon's thousands of rivers and tributaries to move their cargo from country to country toward ports. "The rivers are the roads", a senior law enforcement official observed.[35]

This supply chain offers ample opportunities for criminal groups across the region to join in. The business runs "like a transnational corporation", a Peruvian law enforcement official said.[36] Colombian groups such as the ELN and FARC dissident factions control and tax coca and cocaine base paste producers, while taking charge of local transport. Ecuadorian groups such as Los Lobos and Los Choneros are involved in both production and transport from the Amazon region to Guayaquil. Brazilian syndicates Comando Vermelho and the PCC buy from producers in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru, but in the case of Comando Vermelho, also control production areas. Smaller groups, such as Peruvian crime families, retail drugs locally and tax coca production.

The growth of narco-trafficking throughout the Amazon has brought with it higher levels of violence.[37] Rivalries between groups vying for supremacy in production areas and along transit routes spark flare-ups. Territorial disputes in Tabatinga, an important drug trafficking hub in Brazil next to the Colombian border, have caused a sharp uptick in murders. Gang wars between Comando Vermelho and a PCC-backed group called Os Crías between 2020 and 2023 sent homicide rates skyrocketing as high as 80 per 100,000 inhabitants, far higher than the homicide rate of 27.3 per 100,000 inhabitants in Brazil's Amazon in 2024, which was itself 31 per cent higher than the national average.[38] Comando Vermelho has since gained control of the area, causing homicide rates to fall.[39]

Revenues from drug trafficking enable criminal groups to corrupt law enforcement officers. "There is a policy of state capture by organised crime", said a Brazilian diplomat in reference to the Amazon.[40] Criminals can pay bribes far in excess of regular wages for security person-

[34] "World Drug Report 2023", UNODC, 2023.
[35] Crisis Group interview, senior law enforcement officer, Guianía, October 2025.
[36] Crisis Group interview, Peruvian law enforcement officer, Ucayalí, 29 May 2025.
[37] "Brazil: 'Cocaine rivers' in the Amazon plague the region", *Le Monde*, 18 February 2025; "Amazonía en disputa", FCDS, August 2025. Amazon fluvial routes connect to the port of Barcarena in Brazil, as well as to roads that take the product toward Santos or to Guayaquil in Ecuador.
[38] "Cartografias da Violência na Amazônia 2025", Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 21 November 2025.
[39] Crisis Group Briefing, *A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers*, op. cit.
[40] Crisis Group interview, Brazilian diplomat, November 2024.

nel. In Peru, 200 of the 250 elected local authorities (80 per cent) in five Amazon regions have faced or are now facing criminal investigations by state prosecutors.[41] In Venezuela, law enforcement officers, including in the upper ranks of the military, have played a part in drug trafficking, either through paid collusion with criminal groups or by assisting in the movement of cocaine shipments.[42]

A number of Amazon residents report that easy access to drugs along the supply chain has led to an increase of substance abuse.[43] Though there are no epidemiological studies of the phenomenon, Brazilian officials say dependency on drugs, particularly crack cocaine, is spreading among young Indigenous people in Brazil.[44] Elsewhere, payments in cocaine base paste to farmers for their coca crops have led to wider use of the drug. Cocaine use appears to be growing among labourers from the Ticuna Indigenous community of Colombia, who work in Peruvian coca plantations on the opposite bank of the Amazon.[45]

B. *Gold Mining*

International gold trafficking networks are today at the centre of human rights abuses, threats to state authority and environmental degradation across the Amazon basin. Though mining overtook the drug trade in sheer profitability over a decade ago, soaring international gold prices have been an even greater boon to criminal enterprises.[46] Com-

[41] The investigations encompass a total of 2,933 alleged crimes and 1,993 separate legal proceedings. Pamela Huerta, "Cuando el oro gobierna: políticos y criminales se disputan los recursos de la Amazonía peruana", *Al Margen*, 27 October 2025.
[42] Since the U.S. military began striking alleged drug boats in the Caribbean, routes through Venezuela have shifted from the sea to a corridor that connects Colombia to Brazil, the Guianas and ultimately Europe. Washington has accused a group of military officers in Venezuela of, in effect, leading a criminal cartel, but the available evidence points to more ad hoc sort of complicity among the armed forces. In January, the U.S. Department of Justice acknowledged there was no stable cartel in the military in its indictment of former President Maduro. Crisis Group interview, regional intelligence official, March 2026. Crisis Group interviews, foreign intelligence officers and community representatives in territories affected by drug trafficking, 2025. Charlie Savage, "Justice Dept. drops claim that Venezuela's 'Cartel de los Soles' is an actual group", *The New York Times*, 5 January 2026.
[43] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian agency official, Amazonas, March 2025.
[44] Crisis Group interview, state officials, Brasilia, April 2025; Crisis Group Briefing, *A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers*, op. cit.
[45] Crisis Group interview, international cooperation official, Colombia, March 2025.
[46] "The gold bull market has a dirty secret", *The Economist*, 26 June 2025. In Colombia and Peru, the two largest global coca producers in Latin America, illegal gold mining has generated more income than cocaine trafficking since at least 2016. See Dan Collyns, "Peru is paying a deadly price for its gold fever", Chatham House, September 2025; Marcello Rossi, "Illegal gold mining has supplanted cocaine trafficking as Latin America's criminal endeavor of choice", *Quartz*, 20 July 2022; and "Organized Crime and Illegally Mined Gold in Latin America", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 30 March 2016.

petition is also fierce. High-yield deposits attract migrant workers trying their luck, with Brazilian miners now working in Peru, Colombia, Venezuela and the Guianas. Criminal groups from these countries have also crossed borders to mine and traffic gold, exploiting jurisdictional gaps and state weakness in remote and frontier areas.[47]

The PCC, present in Roraima since 2013, began expanding into illegal gold operations in Yanomami territory around 2018, following a series of mass prison escapes, including one in January 2018 in which 92 inmates fled the Monte Cristo Agricultural Penitentiary in Boa Vista.[48] Colombian armed groups, for their part, have fanned out across the Amazon in search of gold mines and trafficking routes. The ELN and the Segunda Marquetalia are active in mining across Venezuela's Amazonas and Bolívar states.[49] Comandos de la Frontera has pushed south from its base in Colombia into Ecuador and Peru, forging alliances with local groups to operate mining sites and provide protection for equipment.[50] In Ecuador, Los Choneros reportedly earns some $1 million monthly from illegal gold, including in areas bordering the Peruvian Amazon.[51]

Gold trafficking relies on sophisticated international networks, first to transfer illegally mined gold into the legal supply chain, and then to launder funds through shell companies and other schemes. Both steps require systematic cooperation among criminal groups, corrupt officials and legitimate businesses, often from several countries.[52] Brazilian traders, for example, have smuggled gold illegally mined in that country to Venezuela for export to international markets, because the latter country's primary gold buyers tend to ask few questions about the minerals' origins.[53] Once "cleaned", the money from gold is often

[47] Crisis Group interviews, state officials and academics, Brasilia and Boa Vista, March-April 2025; miner and community representatives, Roraima, March 2025.
[48] Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement official and academic, Roraima, March 2025.
[49] Crisis Group Briefing, *A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, op. cit.; Bram Ebus and Alexandra Fuenmayor Starr, "U.S. Snaps Up Venezuela's Oil and Rare Minerals in Race for Supplies", Crisis Group Commentary, 6 March 2026. See also "The Price of Progress: The Dark Side of Amazon Critical Minerals", Amazon Underworld, November 2025.
[50] Comandos de la Frontera is primarily allied with Los Lobos in Ecuador. See "Criminal Economies in the World's Largest Rainforest", Amazon Underworld, August 2023; and Crisis Group Briefing, *A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, op. cit.
[51] Lorena Baires, "Ecuador: Organized crime increasingly turns to illegal gold mining", *Diálogo Americas*, 27 February 2024.
[52] Ibid. In an emblematic case, a 2022 Brazilian Federal Police investigation revealed how a Brazilian criminal group used cryptocurrency to launder illegal gold proceeds. Inci Sayki, "Brazil Dismantles Network That Used Crypto to Launder Illegally Extracted Gold", OCCRP, 14 July 2025.
[53] Fernanda Wenzel, "Amazon illegal miners bypass enforcement by smuggling gold into Venezuela", *Mongabay*, 22 April 2025; "Todo lo que brilla es de 'La Tata'", Armando.Info, 11 August 2025.

reinvested in Roraima in land grabbing and cattle ranching, two sectors dominated by cash transactions.[54] With Venezuela now primed to open its doors to foreign investment in mining, observers fear that lack of oversight could make for unbridled extraction. Venezuela's role as a hub for illegal gold entering the formal market, including through U.S. buyers, could be reinforced.[55]

Extreme violence blights mining hotspots, from Bolívar state in Venezuela, to Pará in Brazil and Madre de Dios in Peru. Criminals compete for control, at times meting out brutal penalties for miners accused of working for rival groups or disobeying rules handed down by these outfits.

Children and women are among the primary victims of exploitation around mines. Child labourers, often recruited from nearby communities, work in all of Venezuela's southern mining districts.[56] In Fortaleza, Peru, along the Santiago River, criminal groups use children as human shields against police operations, as a community leader explained: "To defend the machines when there are [law enforcement] interventions, they [illegal miners] have used children: they made them get on the machines so explosives wouldn't be placed [on the equipment]".[57] In the Brazilian state of Roraima, the PCC controls child prostitution rings serving miners.[58] Sexual violence is widespread, and local sources report that boatmen rape women travelling to work in brothels and impede transit for those who refuse.[59] Indigenous communities have reported numerous allegations of rape committed against girls and women in Roraima.[60]

Gold mining also causes grave harm to public health. Malaria is now common across Amazonian areas in Venezuela and Brazil, as the stagnant lagoons created by miners provide ideal mosquito breeding

[54] Crisis Group interviews, academic, community representatives and law enforcement sources, Brazil, March 2025.

[55] In April, at the urging of the U.S., the interim government of Delcy Rodríguez approved a new mining law opening Venezuela to foreign investment. U.S. mining executives had already visited Caracas ahead of the law's approval, and Washington issued licences allowing purchases of gold from the state mining company, Minerven. Despite these changes, the industry lacks meaningful oversight, particularly in terms of where gold is mined. See Luis Ferré-Sadurní, "Venezuela approves new law to open mining to foreign investors", *The New York Times*, 9 April 2026; "US issues a license that authorizes sales of Venezuelan gold", Associated Press, 6 March 2026; and "ONG denuncian que el Proyecto de Ley de Minas "institucionaliza el ecocidio" en la Amazonía", *Efecto Cucuyo*, 23 March 2026.

[56] Crisis Group Briefing, *A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, op. cit.

[57] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous community leader, Santiago River, April 2025.

[58] Crisis Group interviews, academic, Roraima, March 2025.

[59] Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officers, Roraima, March 2025; academic, Brazil, March 2025.

[60] Talita Bedinelli, "'¿Por qué los garimpeiros comen las vaginas de las mujeres Yanomami?'", *Sumaúma*, 13 September 2022.

grounds.[61] In Loreto and Madre de Dios, Peru, rates of HIV infection have risen among Indigenous populations, largely as a result of miners engaging in unprotected sex.[62] Contaminated water and soil affect food security for residents. In illegal mines in Roraima, conditions grew so dire in 2023 that Brazil declared a health emergency.[63] With approximately 20,000 illegal miners in territory that was home to just 30,000 Yanomami people, illegal gold mining had poisoned rivers with mercury, driven the incidence of malaria up by 233 per cent, destroyed traditional food sources and led to 570 preventable child deaths over four years.[64]

As with the drug market, gold trafficking provides criminal networks with the money they need to "manipulate the state apparatus", as a Brazilian official put it.[65] Criminal spending often exceeds the budgets of agencies tasked with combating them. Cases of state penetration by gold mining networks are rife across the Amazon. Illegal gold miners in Amazonas state, Brazil, reportedly hired former Paraná police officers to stand guard over their operations.[66] In 2023, a lieutenant colonel and the security secretary of Amazonas state were arrested for involvement with organised crime.[67] Military police officers in the same state reportedly collect kickbacks in gold from illegal mining dredge operators in the municipality of Japurá.[68] In Roraima, meanwhile, military police officers have reportedly worked night shifts as guards at illegal airstrips used for trafficking drugs and gold. Four-person crews earn a reported $6,000 for a single night's work, a sum that dwarfs their monthly police salaries of about $1,000.[69]

The extent of criminal control and state collusion has made law enforcement raids on illegal mines into perilous endeavours. Criminal groups often fight back with military-grade weapons. An Ecuadorian army mission in May 2025 to destroy illegal mining equipment, some 80km

[61] Malaria had been eradicated across much of Venezuela by the 1960s, but the disease has since resurged, with the epicentre in mining regions south of the Orinoco River. Juan Gabaldón-Figueira et al., "Malaria in Venezuela: Gabaldón's Legacy Scattered to the Winds", *The Lancet*, vol. 9, no. 5 (2011).
[62] Milagros Berríos, "Emergencia y desamparo: Amazonía peruana concentra al 40% de menores diagnosticados con VIH desde 2019", *Ojo Público*, 15 December 2024.
[63] "Brazil's Lula orders crackdown on supplies to illegal miners in Yanomami territory", Reuters, 30 January 2023.
[64] Jonathan Watts and Talita Bedinelli, "How Illegal Mining Caused a Humanitarian Crisis in the Amazon", *Yale Environment 360*, 2 February 2023; Marcia C. Castro et al., "Mining and Malaria in the Brazilian Amazon and in the Yanomami Indigenous Land", *Neglected Tropical Diseases*, vol. 19, no. 11 (November 2025), p. 1.
[65] Crisis Group interview, senior law enforcement officer, Roraima, March 2025.
[66] Crisis Group interview, law enforcement officer, Brasilia, March 2025.
[67] "Secretário de Segurança Pública do Amazonas é alvo de operação do MP e PF", G1 Globo, 29 August 2023.
[68] Bram Ebus and Rodrigo Pedroso, "Dredges: Gold mining spurs crime and corruption on Brazil-Colombia border", InfoAmazonía, 3 August 2023.
[69] Crisis Group interview, senior law enforcement official, March 2025.

from the border with Colombia, ended in the killing of eleven soldiers. A Colombian armed group allegedly set up an ambush to protect the perimeter around their zone of operations, though the exact details of the attack remain under investigation.[70]

C. *Environmental Impact*

Historically, legal industries, including industrial agriculture, cattle ranching, infrastructure development and extractive projects, have accounted for the lion's share of deforestation in the Amazon.[71] It is impossible to know with certainty how much environmental harm is currently being done by industries that otherwise work within the law and how much is wrought by organised crime.

The difficulty in pinning down the environmental damage caused by private firms as opposed to criminal networks is not merely due to a lack of comprehensive studies. Borders between licit and illicit businesses have grown increasingly porous, making it hard to distinguish the effects of each side. As Crisis Group has documented, gold mined in protected territories in Venezuela, for example, is brought across the border and sold in Colombia as if it originated from a legal mine there.[72] In Brazil, courts have accused meat packers of purchasing cattle from ranchers under investigation for money laundering, land grabbing and illegal occupation of protected areas.[73] First-hand testimony from Amazon residents underline that formal businesses often find themselves entangled with criminal groups as they engage in practices that harm the environment.[74] For example, if an agricultural company that clears forest purchased with laundered drug money to plant more crops, under the protection of a bribed official, is engaging in rogue business conduct. But it is also working in cahoots with organised crime while taking advantage of illegally attained impunity.

That said, direct destruction of the environment by organised crime is well documented.[75] Illegal gold mining and coca farming both depend

[70] "Ecuador afirma tener control total en zona de minería ilegal donde mataron a 11 militares", SwissInfo, 3 July 2025.
[71] "Amazonia under Pressure", Amazon Network of Georeferenced Socio Environmental Information, 2020; Chris West et al., "The Global Deforestation Footprint of Agriculture and Forestry", *Nature Reviews Earth and Environment*, vol. 6, no. 6 (April 2025); "The surprising driver of Amazon deforestation", *Nature*, 2 July 2024; Luke Taylor, "Cattle, not coca, drive deforestation of the Amazon in Colombia – report", *The Guardian*, 19 February 2023.
[72] Crisis Group Briefing, *A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, op. cit.
[73] "Caso de grilagem liga frigoríficos a rede de corrupção e lavagem de dinheiro", op. cit.
[74] Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Putumayo, 2023.
[75] The UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs approved a resolution on 14 March 2025 that formally recognises the environmental impact of illicit drug-related activities. The resolution encourages countries to integrate environmental protection into

on deforestation, and they have increasingly encroached upon protected areas across the Amazon basin.[76] Both cocaine production and illicit mining leave chemical residues that permanently degrade waterways and forests. Cocaine laboratories dump acetone, sulphuric acid and hydrochloric acid.[77] Gold mining causes deeper and more permanent damage, chopping down forest to leave permanent wastelands of waterlogged pits and exposed sediment. At least two million hectares of Amazon forest have suffered this fate as of 2024, a 52 per cent increase in six years.[78] With rivers contaminated, mercury levels in the blood of Yanomami and Munduruku people consistently exceed World Health Organisation thresholds, causing neurological damage and chronic illness in communities with little access to medical care.[79]

As noted above, organised crime contributes to environmental harm when revenues from drug trafficking and illegal mining are laundered through activities that destroy the forest, such as cattle ranching, land grabbing and industrial agriculture.[80] Criminal groups often use their illicit gains to finance the extensive land clearance required for these industries to operate at scale, resulting in cumulative forest loss.[81] Meanwhile, forest roads, for example built at the behest of criminal groups to move mining equipment, open new frontiers of expansion for cattle ranching and other industry.[82]

Finally, criminal groups erode governance across the Amazon, both by the state and traditional community leaders. Organised crime sys-

their anti-drug policies. "Comissão da ONU aprova resolução do Brasil que reconhece impacto do tráfico no meio ambiente", *Jornal de Brasília*, 14 March 2025.

[76] Ibid. More than one third of forest destruction has occurred inside protected areas and Indigenous territories.

[77] "Monitoring of Territories with Presence of Coca Crops 2023", op. cit.; "World Drug Report 2024", op. cit.

[78] "MAAP #226", Monitoring of the Andes Amazon Program, 4 May 2025.

[79] Leonardo Barcellos de Bakker et al., "Economic Impacts on Human Health Resulting from the Use of Mercury in Illegal Gold Mining in the Brazilian Amazon", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 18, no. 22 (2021); "Toxic Tons", Environmental Investigation Agency, July 2025.

[80] Beth Tellman et al., "Illicit Drivers of Land Use Change: Narcotrafficking and Forest Loss in Central America", *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 63 (July 2020); Crisis Group Latin America Report N°91, *A Broken Canopy: Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia*, 4 November 2021; "World Drug Report 2023", op. cit.; Anastasia Moloney, "Can Colombia's green businesses beat drugs and deforestation?", *Context*, 15 February 2023; "Brazil Cattle Linked to Accused Drug Trafficker Sold to Major Companies", Agência Pública, 14 June 2021.

[81] See, for example, the executive summary of "World Drug Report 2023", op. cit., p. 26; Natalia Katixa Escobar, Kelly Giraldo Viana, Daniela Cardona Arciniegas and Laura Santacoloma, "Ganadería deforestadora: Vacíos y limitantes en el control y enfoque de derechos humanos", Dejusticia, 2024; and "Análisis económico y político de la desforestación en regiones afectadas por el conflicto en Colombia", KPMG, 2020.

[82] Sarah Schmidt, "Las carreteras asociadas a la minería provocan grandes daños ambientales en la Amazonia", Revista Pesquisa, Fundación de Apoyo a la Investigación Científica del Estado de São Paulo, November 2022.

tematically dismantles the barriers that would otherwise constrain environmental harm by corrupting local officials, environmental authorities, security forces and community guards (see Sections IV.C and D).[83] Lethal violence and intimidation against environmental defenders silences the voices that register the most immediate local resistance to destructive activity.

[83] "Tackling Police Corruption in the Brazilian Amazon is a Path to Addressing Illegal Logging and Mining", Christian Michelsen Institute, January 2024. On the Rio Puruê, members of the Brazilian Military Police accept kickbacks in gold from miners to look the other way. Ebus and Pedroso, "Dredges: Gold mining spurs crime and corruption on Brazil-Colombia border", op. cit.

IV. State and Community Responses to Crime

Roughly half the Amazon biome falls within some type of protected area, whether a national park, an Indigenous territory or another. All nine Amazon countries have ratified international environmental conventions committing them to the region's conservation.[84] In practice, however, legal protection has proven a flimsy shield against the forces driving ecological destruction. Criminal networks, armed groups and extractive industries have penetrated even the most remote and ostensibly protected corners of the rainforest. States and communities have responded with a range of efforts, from law enforcement operations and multilateral cooperation to Indigenous guard systems and community monitoring programs. None has so far been strong enough to reverse the trend toward clearing the land.

A. *Law Enforcement*

Law enforcement efforts to crack down on illicit businesses in the Amazon have largely focused on destroying the physical tools of environmental crime, such as mining equipment and cocaine laboratories, as well as on capturing perpetrators caught red-handed. These operations are costly and logistically challenging, and they rarely disrupt illicit activity for long. Many of those arrested are day labourers, not the bosses. Moreover, criminal groups have deep pockets and can easily replace destroyed or confiscated equipment. A single mining dredge might cost about $500,000, an amount that can be recouped in under two months of work.[85]

The Amazon region has seen numerous crackdowns fail to disrupt environmental crime. Between 2018 and 2022, President Iván Duque's administration in Colombia led a campaign against forest razing, yet neither deforestation nor illegal mining saw a major decline.[86] In Brazil, Operation Taurus Aureus had some success in closing down illegal gold mines in the Yanomami Indigenous reserve, but miners soon relocated across borders into Venezuela, Guyana and Suriname.[87] Though such state efforts can send a powerful anti-organised crime message, they have not measurably reduced ecolo-

[84] "Protected Natural Areas, Indigenous Territories", Red Amazónica de Información Socioambiental Georreferenciada, 2023.
[85] Ebus and Pedroso, "Dredges: Gold mining spurs crime and corruption on Brazil-Colombia border", op. cit.
[86] David Tarazona and Julián Parra De Moya, "Operation Artemis: Colombia's failed military operation to stop deforestation", *Mongabay*, 27 April 2023.
[87] Crisis Group interviews, Brazilian state officials and community sources in Venezuela and Guyana, 2024 and 2025. See also "Federal Police Launch Operation against Illegal Mining Finances at Yanomami Indigenous Land", press release, Presidency of Brazil, 5 September 2024.

gical harm. "We can't bomb climate change", lamented a Brazilian law enforcement officer.[88]

A major shortcoming of these approaches, law enforcement officials point out, is that they are largely one-off operations. "You have to keep people in the territory", argued a Brazilian officer, stressing the need for permanent deployments. Some initiatives are starting to address this problem. Federal and state forces at a floating base on Brazil's Rio Solimões go on round-the-clock patrols to counter drug trafficking and environmental crime.[89] Officers say higher salaries, as well as better conditions to allow for frequent rotation, could make remote Amazon postings more attractive.[90]

Cross-border cooperation is also an increasingly common component of work to disrupt criminal networks. Since 2023, Colombia and Brazil have conducted large joint anti-mining raids in the Amazon, along the Puré River (known as the Puruê River on the Brazilian side), going after industrial-scale operations capable of extracting up to 600g of gold daily.[91] Another effort, staffed by officers from Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru and funded by the United Arab Emirates, has targeted illegal mining, wildlife trafficking, logging and fuel smuggling. Besides arrests, this campaign resulted in the seizure of over $64 million in assets from criminal networks and the rescue of over 2,100 live animals.[92]

B. *Multilateral and Corporate Efforts*

The Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) is the primary multilateral mechanism for cooperation in the region. Founded in 1995, the body is meant to coordinate policies among the eight member countries aimed at balancing economic development with environmental conservation.[93] Historically, ACTO has lacked money, faced numerous bureaucratic hurdles and failed to build lasting political

[88] Crisis Group interviews, Brazilian diplomats, November 2024.
[89] Crisis Group interview, intelligence official, Brazil, March 2025.
[90] Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officers, Brazil, March 2025.
[91] Crisis Group interview, senior law enforcement officer, June 2025. See also Jesús Antonio Blanquicet, "Las antenas Starlink y la megaoperación del Ejército y la FAC con Brasil contra la minería ilegal en Amazonas", *El Tiempo*, 1 June 2025.
[92] The International Initiative of Law Enforcement for Climate Change, a joint global platform launched in February 2023 by the UAE Ministry of Interior and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, has coordinated the effort to strengthen global law enforcement responses to environmental crimes and climate-related threats. See Mie Hoejris Dahl, "Cross-border operation cracks down on environmental crimes in the Amazon", *Mongabay*, 6 August 2025; Steven Grattan, "Over 90 arrests made in global crackdown on environmental crime in the Amazon basin", Associated Press, 10 July 2025; and "Joint Pledge to Support and Enhance the Role of Law Enforcement Agencies in the Context of Global Climate Change Scenarios", UNODC, May 2023.
[93] ACTO's member countries are Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela.

consensus. The organisation gained new momentum, however, following a 2023 summit in Belém, Brazil at which eight Amazon countries adopted an ambitious joint declaration recognising the need to address organised crime and illicit businesses.[94] The appointment of Martín von Hildebrand as secretary general in 2024 and the creation a year later of a new financing mechanism for conservation projects breathed new life into regional cooperation.[95]

Led by Colombia's defence ministry, a new ACTO subcommittee on public security held its inaugural session in June 2025. Its aims are to establish a regional observatory, bolster information and intelligence sharing, and develop joint operations to combat illicit businesses and cross-border crime.[96] Meanwhile, the Amazon International Police Cooperation Centre opened in Manaus, Brazil on 17 June 2025, with the goal of coordinating action of law enforcement agencies and sharing police intelligence.[97] Brazil covers expenses and salaries for other countries' delegates.[98] Colombia has said it will establish another such centre in Leticia, at the tri-border point with Brazil and Peru, though little progress has been made so far.[99]

Few international private-sector initiatives have had a durable impact on protection of the forest and its people, but more consideration could be given to this way forward. Perhaps the best-known campaign is the soy moratorium launched by global soy traders, Brazilian companies and NGOs including Greenpeace, which committed private companies not to buy soybeans grown on land deforested after 2008. This initiative, which was monitored by satellite and enforced by the market, resulted in a dramatic reduction of land cleared for soybean cultivation: before the agreement, around 30 per cent of soy expansion came from deforested areas, while that amount fell to near-zero after

[94] "Belém Declaration", ACTO, 9 August 2023. French Guiana is absent from ACTO because it is not a sovereign state but an overseas department and region of France, which makes it legally part of the European Union. As a French territory, it cannot independently sign or join international treaties.
[95] "La OTCA lanza un mecanismo de financiación regional con el apoyo de bancos multilaterals", Swissinfo, 19 November 2025.
[96] Crisis Group interview, international observer, Bogotá, May 2025.
[97] The initiative was financed with $6.9 million from the Amazon Fund to combat transnational crimes through coordination between officers from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, Venezuela and France (French Guiana), alongside representatives from Interpol, Europol and Ameripol. "Com investimentos do Fundo Amazônia, governo federal inaugura Centro de Cooperação Policial Internacional da Amazônia", press release, Federal Government Brazil, 9 September 2025.
[98] As Brazilian Justice Minister Ricardo Lewandowski said during the inauguration: "Fighting organised crime in the Amazon is only possible through integration and cooperation between institutions and countries. There is no longer space for isolated actions". See "Governo federal inaugura centro de cooperação policial internacional da Amazônia", TVT News, 17 June 2025.
[99] Crisis Group interviews, international observers and diplomats, Bogotá, May and June 2025.

the agreement.[100] The moratorium, however, is voluntary, and Brazilian farmers argue that the agreement oversteps the reach of the law. In early 2026, some of the largest soy traders began moving to withdraw from the program, primarily to maintain tax incentives that will be threatened if they remain part of it. The pact's future is now in question.[101]

C. *Communities and Guards*

The Amazon is home to over two million Indigenous people belonging to around 400 ethnic groups, who find themselves on the front line of booming illicit businesses. Long dismissed by national elites as irrelevant to modernity, in effect, a collective anachronism, Latin America's Indigenous peoples embarked on a wave of mobilisation in the late 1980s and 1990s, demanding, in the words of one scholar, "territorial autonomy, respect for customary law, new forms of political representation and bicultural education".[102] Taking advantage of the spread of democracy throughout the region as well as a series of constitutional assemblies in various countries, Indigenous groups gained greater control of their ancestral lands, though their degree of administrative independence varied from case to case.[103]

Many Indigenous communities acquired new powers, but they remained unprepared for the security threats emerging in the Amazon. Responsibility for these often falls to the Indigenous guards, often unarmed groups including young people and elders, men and women, that aim to monitor and protect Indigenous territories.[104] These guards

[100] Robert Hellmayr et al., "Brazil's Amazon Soy Moratorium Reduced Deforestation", *Nature Food*, vol. 1, no. 12 (December 2020).
[101] Tim Schauenberg, "Brazil's soy giants clear way for deforestation", Deutsche Welle, 19 February 2026; Fernanda Wenzel, "Amazon deforestation may rise 30% as major traders exit historic soy pact", *Mongabay*, 2 February 2026; "Companies abandon the Soy Moratorium and put the Brazil's environmental, climate and economic gains at risk, warns WWF-Brazil", World Wildlife Fund Brazil, 5 January 2026.
[102] Deborah J. Yashar, "Contesting Citizenship: Indigenous Movements and Democracy in Latin America", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1998); "Amazon Assessment Report 2025", Science Panel for the Amazon, 2025. Many of these rights are anchored in the International Labour Organisation's Convention 169, adopted in 1989, which established Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination. The convention requires ratifying countries to consult with these peoples on matters affecting them and protect their lands, natural resources and right to self-determination. "Convention 169", ILO, 1989. In addition, the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognises Indigenous peoples' right to maintain their own legal systems and dispute resolution mechanisms. "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples", UN, 13 September 2007; Crisis Group telephone interview, lawyer and expert on Indigenous rights, August 2025.
[103] Dona Lee Van Cott, *The Friendly Liquidation of the Past* (Pittsburgh, 2000).
[104] Though all Amazon countries besides Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana are signatories of ILO's Convention 169, local legislation governing guards varies. Colombia offers Indigenous communities autonomy and the right to "collaborate

oversee vast areas with very limited state presence, and have proliferated in the last two decades, making big strides in their abilities to combine traditional knowledge with modern approaches to territorial protection. In Ecuador, for example, the A'i Cofán use patrols and drones to keep tabs on illegal gold miners, while other communities use GPS devices and trap cameras to monitor intruders.[105] Guards in Colombia, Peru, Brazil and Ecuador have developed coordination mechanisms, training programs and communication systems for rapid responses to threats across swathes of the Amazon. They can monitor and document immediate security concerns as well as illegal mining, logging and other criminal activities in a way that could be used in legal proceedings.

Even so, the risks are rising as guards face the possibility of lethal retaliation for their work.[106] "I am being hunted [across] cities to eliminate me", said an Indigenous leader in Peru, who received threats for his campaign of resistance to illegal gold mining.[107] As the main obstacles to armed group expansion, scores of guard members across the Amazon basin have been intimidated, displaced or attacked. In Colombia alone, at least 70 Indigenous guard members were assassinated between 2014 and 2024, including in non-Amazon regions.[108]

Working with the state can exacerbate the dangers facing guards. Any perceived association with security forces increases the risk of being attacked, Indigenous leaders say.[109] In Colombia, the military is meant to coordinate its deployments in Indigenous areas with ethnic authorities. But communities have repeatedly complained that, in the after-

in maintaining public order" with the national government. Meanwhile, Brazil recognises Indigenous peoples' rights to their lands, but a complex land demarcation process is required for full legal protection. In Ecuador, Indigenous communities have the right to "the generation and exercise of authority", while Peru's constitution recognises Indigenous collective lands only for agricultural use, leaving the state to retain ownership of forests and subsoil resources. The nature of the guards also varies: while Colombia's Indigenous guards emphasise their pacific approach, in Brazil and Peru guards often carry shotguns or hunting rifles. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community representatives, Amazonas, Peru, 2024; lawyer specialised in Indigenous rights, 31 January 2026. "The Role of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples in Fighting the Climate Crisis", Science Panel for the Amazon, 2025; Dimitri Selibas, "Indigenous communities in Colombia's Amazon move closer to self-governance", *Mongabay*, 29 June 2022.

[105] Dan Collyns, "'Leave the gold in the ground': Ecuador's forest guardians mobilise against illegal mining in Amazon", *The Guardian*, 13 November 2023.

[106] Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community representatives Brazil, Peru and Colombia, 2025.

[107] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous guard, Peru, March 2025.

[108] Daniela Quintero Díaz, "Indigenous guards: The shield of Colombia's Amazon", *Mongabay*, 26 June 2025.

[109] Crisis Group interviews, community leaders and guard group members, Brazil, Colombia and Peru, 2023-2025.

math of unannounced operations, armed groups falsely accuse guards of collaborating with state forces, turning them into targets.[110]

Faced with such threats, guards have at times engaged in abuses of power and even extrajudicial violence. Some have taken up arms. In other cases, they resort to practices that are culturally acceptable within Indigenous communities, such as corporal punishment, but clash with state law and human rights norms. On the Santiago River, for example, Indigenous authorities allow the guard, which runs river checkpoints, to burn mining equipment or throw miners' supplies into the water. "They [the miners] have no right to complain, because it is an illegal activity", they say.[111] Much more dramatically, Peruvian Indigenous guards punish offenders by whipping them with plants or tying them to trees to be attacked by stinging ants.[112]

As crime expands across the Amazon, it also complicates the guards' mission by drawing into its ranks increasing numbers of residents tempted by the promise of higher earnings. Criminal groups try to convince adolescents to leave school and sway adults into abandoning traditional practices such as hunting, gathering and ancestral forms of sustainable agriculture.[113] The money their recruits make divides communities between those who support the criminal presence and others who oppose it. In some cases, criminal outfits seek to deepen the split in communities through payments to certain leaders over others, for example to gain access to land or resources.[114]

Under coercive pressure from criminal groups, and at times from members of the community, guards may also switch sides to protect illicit interests themselves. Criminal groups have sometimes created new guards or co-opted existing organisations in pursuit of their goals. Knowing that state security forces are less likely to fire on unarmed

[110] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°95, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, 27 September 2022.
[111] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous leader, Peru, March 2025.
[112] Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community members, Santiago River, March 2025.
[113] Crisis Group Briefing, *A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, op. cit.
[114] These tensions can turn violent. Indigenous authorities in the Wampis nation in Peru decided to ban mining on the Santiago River, but some members of the community objected, seeing a rare chance for economic development. In July 2025, supporters and critics of mining clashed, with shots being fired. The dispute escalated further when organised crime groups and drug traffickers from Ecuador moved into the area. In December 2025, an Indigenous guard post was set on fire by unidentified assailants. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community leaders and guards, Peru, March 2025. See also Steven Grattan, "Indigenous Wampis are ambushed in Peru after government backs out of anti-mining joint patrol", Associated Press, 16 July 2025; Yvette Sierra Praeli, "Un sobrevuelo en la Amazonía peruana muestra los impactos de la minería ilegal en los ríos Marañón y Santiago", *Mongabay*, 2 November 2025; and "Amazonas: Mafia de minería ilegal ataca e incendia puesto de control socioambiental", *La República*, 26 December 2025.

civilians, criminal outfits have used these guards as human shields to protect their mines, equipment and personnel from law enforcement. In the Venezuelan Amazon, new Indigenous guards with alleged allegiance to armed groups control certain mining areas in return for financial benefits. These armed Indigenous groups also patrol rivers, extorting gold mine workers in transit.[115]

Colombia offers another alarming example. In its Amazon regions, including Meta, Guaviare and Caquetá, FARC dissident factions have established or co-opted existing rural guards. While these do not have the same legal protections as Indigenous groups, they operate in a similar way and offer a cautionary tale. Communities under armed group control have been forced to volunteer three to five people to join these factions. "Either you provide guards, you leave the territory or they sanction you", said a local leader.[116] Once in place, guards can be called upon to expel military patrols or prevent operations. The guards act as "an unarmed [branch] of these armed groups" that "forces the population to confront the security forces", a law enforcement officer said.[117]

D. *State-Community Collaboration*

Many guards say they want to work in coordination with state security forces, recognising that they need support when confronting extremely violent or heavily armed groups.[118] This cooperation, however, is often undermined by distrust and competing interests. Representatives of various guards say they lack confidence in state officials and worry that inviting security forces into their territory could erode their autonomy and control.[119] They may also view local police as ineffective. In Roraima, Brazil, members of the 300-strong Indigenous Guardians of the Territory in the municipality of Uiramutã told Crisis Group that drug and gold traffickers were crossing Indigenous lands en route to Guyana, but they were unable to persuade local law enforcement to help. The Indigenous force "ends up doing the work of the police", said a guard.[120]

Other guard forces fear that local state forces could be corrupt and colluding with criminal groups. Indigenous leaders say they are concerned that law enforcement will relay sensitive information to illegal groups.[121] These worries are often grounded in experience. In an early 2024 incident recounted to Crisis Group, uniformed police on the

[115] Crisis Group telephone interview, Indigenous leader, 2025; Crisis Group Briefing, *A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, op. cit.
[116] Crisis Group interview, community leader, Colombia, July 2025.
[117] Crisis Group interview, senior law enforcement officer, Colombia, July 2025.
[118] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous leader, Peru, March 2025.
[119] Crisis Group interviews, NGO analysts, May and July 2025. See also "Amazonas: Defensores ambientales criminalizados y economías ilegales siguen contaminando", Rede Amazônica de Informação Socioambiental, 23 September 2021.
[120] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous guard, Brazil, March 2025.
[121] "Illicit economies and armed control in the tri-border region of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru", Amazon Underworld and Amazon Watch, 19 August 2025.

Santiago River, where the Peruvian Amazon connects with Ecuador, were transporting illegal mining equipment into Indigenous territory. When confronted by Indigenous guards, the police fired warning shots into the water. The Indigenous managed to disarm and detain the police officers, who had apparently been involved in illicit mining.[122]

Distrust runs in both directions, with some security officers also wary of cooperating with local people. As noted above, guards are also susceptible to corruption and intimidation by criminals.[123] Moreover, some guards have a community mandate to protect local livelihoods, at times including illegal activities such as river gold mining.[124] Finally, budgets and logistics complicate effective coordination. Groups engaged in illegal activity, for instance logging, move quickly compared to police who must await official orders. Even once a mission has been approved, it can take several days for security forces to navigate interconnected rivers to reach the affected area. By that time, the loggers have often disappeared.[125] Unreliable state support or lapsed commitments can be risky, as in July 2025, when Peruvian police withdrew from a joint patrol with the Wampis guard. Insistent on launching their own patrol with or without state support, the Indigenous guards found themselves under ambush along the Santiago River, in an area used by illegal gold miners. Though shots were fired, no one was reported hurt.[126]

Despite the obstacles to cooperation between Indigenous guards and state forces, some efforts are showing promise. The most notable success has been Brazil's Casa do Governo program. In 2019, the Yanomami tribe in Brazil set up monitoring and surveillance systems to detect mining and prevent new machinery from being brought in.[127] The administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva beefed up this effort with public funds, creating the Casa do Governo, an initiative including state agencies and intelligence teams that trains Indigenous members in the use of drones and provides them with phones.

Once informed of a threat, the Casa do Governo coordinates a response involving security agencies, police forces, regulatory bodies and the

[122] Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous guards and community representatives, Santiago River, Peru, April 2025.
[123] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Indigenous community leaders in Venezuela, 2025.
[124] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Indigenous guard members and community representatives in Colombia and Venezuela, 2024-2025.
[125] Crisis Group interviews, community representatives and state officials, Brazil and Peru, 2025.
[126] Grattan, "Indigenous Wampis are ambushed in Peru after government backs out of anti-mining joint patrol", op. cit.
[127] This model was inspired by practices developed by Indigenous groups in the Javari valley, located in Brazil's Amazonas state. Crisis Group interview, academic, Roraima, March 2025. See also Jill Langois, "After Two Murders, a Brazilian Indigenous Leader Steps Up the Fight", *Yale Environment 360*, 1 September 2022.

army. It can, for example, initiate raids on clandestine ports and airstrips, inspect infrastructure that could be used for illicit activity or direct field operations in Yanomami territory to curb illegal gold mining. According to community groups and local law enforcement, the Casa de Governo has brought about a notable decline in illegal mining.[128] By early 2026, according to government satellite data, active mining in Yanomami territory had nearly been eliminated, but consolidating these gains will require sustained state presence.[129]

Other, more decentralised approaches also offer hope. One study found that when Indigenous communities were equipped with satellite-based deforestation alerts and smart phone technology, forest clearance fell by 52 per cent in the first year and 21 per cent in the second, in comparison to places without such programs.[130] Crucially, these programs included legal assistance, enabling Indigenous guards to bring cases immediately to the attention of prosecutors.[131]

[128] Crisis Group interviews, academics, law enforcement officers and community representatives, Roraima, March 2025.
[129] Crisis Group telephone interview, academic, April 2026. See also "Governo do Brasil alcança 9 mil operações e garimpo ilegal tem queda de 98,77% na Terra Yanomami", press release, Presidency of the Republic Brazil, 13 January 2026.
[130] "Indigenous Communities in the Peruvian Amazon Equipped with Remote Sensing Technology Can Reduce Deforestation, Study Finds", Rainforest Foundation, 12 July 2021; Sheryl Lee Tian Tong, "Armed with data and smartphones, Amazon communities boost fight against deforestation", *Mongabay*, 12 July 2021.
[131] "Transferring Tech, Empowering Guardians: How Indigenous Communities are Monitoring Their Territories", Amazon Conservation, 1 August 2025; "Amazon deforestation cut by 83% in places protected by Indigenous communities – new research", The Conversation, 15 July 2024.

V. Toward an Amazon Security Strategy

Organised criminal groups now exert varying degrees of control in large swathes of the Amazon, where states have either never established a meaningful presence or have lost it.[132] Criminal groups generate illicit economic opportunities that outstrip the earnings from legal livelihoods, at times winning them local support. States and communities face strong headwinds that disrupt their efforts to cooperate, though joint initiatives to push back against organised crime are among the most promising paths forward. Besides law enforcement, an effective Amazon security strategy should seek to generate viable alternative employment and fine-tune legal frameworks to better fight environmental crime. It will not be easy, as officials admit. Nor will it be a panacea. "You have to accept that part of it has been lost", said a Brazilian intelligence official of the Amazon. "I don't believe in solutions; I believe in making things a little less bad".[133]

A. *Strengthening State-Indigenous Relations*

Indigenous groups and state authorities have a shared responsibility to protect the Amazon. As the first responders to threats inside their territory, Indigenous guards could be responsible for detecting illegal activity involving organised criminal groups and requesting the deployment of state forces. While strategies should vary from one country to the next, they should all seek to build trust, establish a clear division of labour, ensure that resources are available and guarantee mutual accountability.

Distrust between guards and police is regrettably common, as noted above. As a result, effective cooperation will need to be built around mutual assurances of honesty by both guards and state forces. If there is concern about criminal penetration of state forces, sending federal or specially vetted officers could be an effective response. Guards and state forces should also work together to allocate clear responsibilities.[134] Ideally, Amazon populations would monitor their lands to identify specific threats. When warranted, guards could then issue an alert, sharing information with law enforcement agencies through real-time platforms. State authorities could consider providing salaries or other forms of compensation to guards that perform this monitoring

[132] For example, in parts of the Colombian Amazon such as Caquetá and Guaviare, armed groups have restricted the access government agencies and their officials previously enjoyed. Crisis Group interviews, state officials and community representatives, Colombia, 2025.
[133] Crisis Group interview, intelligence official, Brazil, March 2025. According to another Brazilian state official, "Our ambitions are much larger than our capacity to act". Crisis Group interview, Brazil, 2025.
[134] Crisis Group interview, state official, Brazil, 2025.

regularly and reliably, as they are essentially acting on the state's behalf.[135]

Government could also offer training so that Indigenous communities are able to collect evidence, such as photos or water samples, that could be used in judicial proceedings against anyone engaged in illicit economic activities. In 2023, for example, civil society groups in Ecuador pointed authorities to satellite data indicating illicit activity, resulting in an army raid on an illegal mining site in San José de Guayusa, Orellana province.[136]

Though Indigenous communities have access to local information, it is the state that has the muscle and legal authority to intervene against heavily armed traffickers, miners and loggers who are often willing to kill to protect their operations. Robust law enforcement campaigns against illegal activity can send an important message that there will be consequences for infringing on Indigenous areas. In January, an Interpol-coordinated operation in Brazil, French Guiana, Guyana and Suriname targeting illegal gold mining resulted in nearly 200 arrests.[137]

Because of the risks of corruption, overzealous use of force or human rights violations, the actions of state officials and security personnel will require means of accountability. Indigenous communities need access to safe channels to report alleged criminal infiltration of security forces to these officers' oversight bodies in state capitals. The parameters of acceptable use of force should also be agreed upon before operations begin. In keeping with other types of policing, security officers could use body cameras to document their actions. In the aftermath of operations, guards and police forces could also use metrics to assess whether their operations protected or endangered local people. These could include, for example, tracking assassinations, threats or persistent illegal economic activity after an operation concludes.

Accountability should run in both directions. Just as Indigenous communities need channels to report misconduct by state forces, whistleblowers should be able to bring cases of possible corruption and criminal infiltration of guards before Indigenous governance bodies for examination. Ideally, the cases could be reviewed by national or regional Indigenous organisations, such as the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia, the Coordination of Indigenous Organisations of the Brazilian Amazon, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon or the Interethnic

[135] Indigenous leaders argue that they are performing functions that, under other circumstances, would be performed by paid state officials. Crisis Group interview, Indigenous leaders, Río de Janeiro, March 2026.
[136] David Tarazona, "Ecuador: defensores ambientales e indígenas cuestionan operativo militar contra la minería ilegal en la Amazonía", *Mongabay*, 26 May 2023.
[137] Steven Grattan, "Interpol-backed police make nearly 200 arrests in Amazon region gold mining sweep", Associated Press, 22 January 2026.

Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest. These customary leaders should spearhead investigations, as state-led vetting would be at risk of becoming a tool to discredit or remove community leaders who push back against national authorities.

Resources are a major obstacle to this sort of intensive cooperation. Given the Amazon's vast scale and limited infrastructure, security forces are often several days' journey away from at-risk areas. Many tribes lack reliable internet connectivity or mobile coverage needed for real-time information sharing. They often struggle to purchase monitoring equipment and lack access to training. Foreign donors could provide support in this regard, based on the growing evidence that coordination is an effective tool to safeguard forests. The more important goal, however, should be to expand state presence beyond security to include improvements to public services and infrastructure.

B. *Harmonising and Enforcing National Laws*

Laws covering environmental crimes vary dramatically across borders, enabling criminals to take advantage of the gaps between different jurisdictions. Standardising rules could help close some of these loopholes and spur greater cross-border collaboration. Uneven regulations for wildlife trafficking, for example, allow criminals to exploit weaker jurisdictions to launder illicitly obtained goods.[138] Guyana and Suriname allow for wildlife trade, which is prohibited by most other countries, inciting criminal groups to capture animals elsewhere and bring them to one of these countries for what seems to be legal sale.[139] Furthermore, environmental crimes across the Amazon should be treated with the same gravity as other offences, including drug and human trafficking.[140]

Even more important is enforcement across borders to ensure that criminals cannot find haven in areas where impunity reigns. The smuggling of mercury, a toxic substance used to extract gold, illustrates the challenges. All the Amazon countries signed the 2013 Minamata Convention, calling for strict restrictions on the sale, trade and use of the element.[141] Peru banned the import of mercury outright in 2015, pushing mining interests to look at next-door Bolivia, where border controls are weak and poorly enforced. In the years since, Bolivia has become a hub for the mercury trade in South America.[142] Imports now far exceed Bolivia's own assessed need for mining, with the country becoming

[138] Melissa Blue Sky, "Tackling the Trade in Illegal Timber: A Comparative Study of Legal Frameworks", Center for International Environmental Law, 2022.
[139] "Wildlife of the Guyanas", World Wildlife Foundation, February 2023.
[140] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and state officials, Brasilia, March 2025.
[141] "Minamata Convention on Mercury: Text and Annexes", UN Environment Programme, 2024.
[142] "Opening the Black Box: Local Insights into the Formal and Informal Global Mercury Trade Revealed", International Union for Conservation of Nature-NL, 2021.

the second largest global importer as recently as 2022.[143] From there, the element is trafficked illegally to mining districts in neighbouring countries, where it contaminates rivers, soil and food sources.[144] A similar pattern applies to uneven policing of illegal logging in Peru, where criminals exploit weaker law enforcement.[145]

The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, also known as the Palermo Convention, offers a path forward.[146] A resolution adopted under its auspices provides guidance on how to prevent criminal groups from shopping for the most permissive jurisdictions to carry out environmental crimes.[147] In its most ambitious rendition, countries would take steps to harmonise their legal frameworks around what constitutes such a crime and how these cases should be punished. A more politically feasible first step would be for states to share information about existing laws and their enforcement, with the aim of bolstering joint efforts to track dirty money. Latin American states such as Colombia have already experimented with expedited asset seizure, taking control of land or equipment that is demonstrably linked to the illicit economy without the need to prove any particular individual's guilt.[148]

As a space in which all Amazon states can gather, ACTO could support conversations about these issues with the aim of standardising judicial norms. In cases when that task proves impossible, the organisation could lead work aimed at aligning legal definitions, protocols and policy implementation. It could also be helpful to make punishments roughly the same across Indigenous justice systems, both within and among states.[149] Ideally, ACTO should become a platform for effective coordination among governments, as a first step toward building joint planning, intelligence, inspection and investigation mechanisms. Such mechanisms could follow the Manaus model for joint coordination centres, adapting it to other geographic areas.

[143] Vinicius Madureira, "Report: Mercury from Bolivia supplying illegal mining in Peru", Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 1 December 2022.
[144] "Opening the Black Box: Local Insights into the Formal and Informal Global Mercury Trade Revealed", op. cit.
[145] Blue Sky, "Tackling the Trade in Illegal Timber: A Comparative Study of Legal Frameworks", op. cit.
[146] "A New Protocol for the UNTOC?", Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 27 June 2025.
[147] "Resolution 12/4: Enhancing measures to prevent and combat crimes that affect the environment falling within the scope of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime", UNODC, December 2021
[148] Crisis Group Briefing, *Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian Amazon*, op. cit.
[149] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous community leader, Bogotá, June 2025.

C. *Alternatives to Crime*

Criminal groups thrive in the Amazon in part because they offer communities alluring opportunities in areas where few others exist. These communities would benefit from support for legal economic activities, particularly for young people, including eco-tourism, sustainable extraction of forest products and the use of carbon credit schemes to protect the forests. Amazon communities also need help learning farming techniques and commercialisation, particularly in shipping products to distant markets.

Developing a sustainable Amazon economy requires support at every stage: helping communities plan sustainable livelihoods, connecting local producers with buyers and processors, and ensuring long-term forest protection. Governments could redirect subsidies and investments away from activities that destroy forests, like industrial agriculture and cattle ranching, toward sustainable alternatives such as harvesting forest products, agroforestry and community-led eco-tourism. It will be a difficult political sell, and it may happen only gradually, but encouraging conservation rather than deforestation should remain a goal. Ecosystem-sensitive investments in critical infrastructure would also boost local livelihoods and improve state access to remote places. Areas of focus should include transportation, electricity, storage facilities, food processing and digital connectivity.[150]

States can also work to clarify land tenure. More than 400 ethnic groups live on over 170 million hectares of lands recognised as Indigenous territories throughout the Amazon basin. Deforestation rates remain lowest in these areas, despite almost half of these territories facing pressure from invasive cattle ranchers, miners or loggers.[151] In contrast, environmental destruction peaks in unprotected areas with unclear land ownership.[152] This correlation points to the potential benefit of titling lands that are inhabited by Indigenous communities but lack state recognition, as part of broader efforts to construct up-to-date and transparent land registries. At COP30, the UN climate change conference in 2025, Brazil took a welcome step in recognising ten new Indigenous territories.[153]

[150] "Supporting Socio-bioeconomies of Healthy Standing Forests and Flowing Rivers in the Amazon", Science Panel for the Amazon, 2025.
[151] "The Role of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples in Fighting the Climate Crisis", op. cit.
[152] Ibid.
[153] "Government of Brazil advances in the demarcation of ten Indigenous lands", press release, COP30 Brazil, 17 November 2025; Sara Baptista, "With COP30, Indigenous Brazilians strive for new resources to protect nature", *Mongabay*, 20 November 2025.

D. *Corporate Responsibility and International Support*

The distinction between legal and criminal enterprise in the Amazon has become increasingly hard to draw, with legitimate supply chains being used to move illegal commodities and launder ill-gotten gains. Companies obtaining goods from the Amazon cannot credibly claim ignorance of these practices. International buyers have both the leverage and, in many jurisdictions, the legal obligation to demand chain-of-custody documentation, but enforcement has been weak. The European Union's Deforestation Regulation, which requires companies to conduct due diligence to ensure that certain commodities on the EU market, such as coffee and soy, have not contributed to deforestation, is the most serious attempt yet to impose market-based accountability on these supply chains.[154] Drafters of the policy hope that Amazon states will either adopt similar regulations or that producer standards in the region will shift as businesses seek to ensure their continued access to the European market.[155]

Criminal proceeds must eventually pass through the financial system. Many of those responsible for environmental crimes in the Amazon shield their assets behind shell companies in jurisdictions with weak disclosure requirements. The U.S. Treasury's March 2025 decision to exempt domestic entities and U.S. citizens from the Corporate Transparency Act — which had required disclosure of beneficial ownership information (meaning the individuals who own or control a company) to combat money laundering — has weakened some of the controls that could be used to staunch criminal activity.[156] Amazon states could respond by establishing their own beneficial ownership registries. The Financial Action Task Force – the G7-backed body for anti-money laundering cooperation – offers a platform through which to press for consistent global standards.[157]

[154] "Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 31 May 2023 on the making available on the Union market and the export from the Union of certain commodities and products associated with deforestation and forest degradation and repealing Regulation (EU) No 995/2010", 31 May 2023. See also Juan Ghersinich Eckers, "EU Deforestation Regulation and Its External Effects: Compliance and Adaptation in Producer Countries", Development Aid, 26 February 2026.

[155] A.F. Trevizan, A.M.M. Leal and V.E.N. Valle, "Forest Trade on the Amazon Frontier and Its Interaction with the EUDR", *International Journal of the Semiotics of Law*, vol. 38 (2025).

[156] The act now applies only to foreign companies registered in the U.S. Maureen Leddy, "Groups sound alarm after Treasury backtracks on beneficial ownership reporting", Thomson Reuters, 10 March 2025; Maureen Leddy, "Corporate Transparency Act won't be enforced against US citizens, domestic entities", Thomson Reuters, 4 March 2025.

[157] See, for example, Marcus Pleyer, "Message to the G7 on tackling environmental crime", Financial Action Task Force.

Major banks and financial institutions with exposure to Amazon commodity sectors might also consider enhanced due diligence on clients whose supply chains touch high-risk areas. A March study found that more than 80 per cent are involved in business that carries a risk of exposure to illegal mining, yet nearly half have no system in place to screen for and mitigate that risk.[158] Furthermore, both the U.S. and the European Union have legislation that allows them to sanction those responsible for environmental crimes, measures that can impose heavy costs on offenders.[159] At the very least, they should enforce existing sanctions as a way of locking out criminal money laundering in key banking jurisdictions.

Keeping the goal of saving the Amazon and its forest people high on the international agenda despite adverse political conditions will be essential if these compliance initiatives are to be strengthened. The companies involved in making the soy moratorium in Brazil successful (see Section IV.B) were likely motivated to do so by a spreading global movement aimed at curbing harm to the environment. As some governments walk away from that goal, the private sector should step in rather than follow them in abandoning the effort, as has been the case with the soy moratorium. Multinationals getting materials from the Amazon would do well to go further than voluntary pledges and adopt legally binding supply chain transparency requirements, including independent auditing rather than self-certification. Illegal gold represents a reputational and legal liability for large international buyers, who should have strong incentives to demand that their supply chains are crime-free. Countries in the Middle East and Asia, as well as the U.S. and Canada, could exert pressure on suppliers and intermediaries by declining to purchase gold from certain countries, regions or companies.[160]

Private capital also has a constructive role to play in building the licit economy that can make crime less attractive to Amazon communities. The Cali Fund, launched at the 2024 COP16 biodiversity conference, collects contributions from private corporations that use genetic data from biological organisms to create pharmaceutical, biotechnology, cosmetics or other products, channelling them toward conservation. The Fund hopes to raise and then invest an estimated $1 billion annually, 50 per cent of which would be designated for Indigenous com-

[158] "Beneath the Surface", Themis/World Wildlife Fund, March 2026; "84% of Financial Institutions Exposed to Illegal Mining Risks, New WWF and Themis Report Reveals", press release, Themis, 11 March 2026.
[159] "Environmental Crimes: Deal on New Offences and Reinforced Sanctions", press release, European Parliament, 16 November 2023.
[160] "The Middle East's strategic ascent: UAE and Saudi Arabia bolster global minerals supply chains", *Steel Radar*, 17 February 2025. For more on how gold buyers could exercise due diligence, see Crisis Group Briefing, *A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, op. cit.

munities to fund projects they devise.[161] Voluntary efforts of this kind are a beginning. States in the Amazon might also consider making corporate contributions to conservation funds a condition of market access for companies trading in high-risk commodities. The licit private sector has extracted value from the Amazon for decades; ensuring that a share of those returns is reinvested in environmental protection would represent a major recognition of the need to preserve the sources of these firms' profits.

Many interventions to protect the Amazon jungle are expensive, meaning that international funds earmarked for biodiversity conservation and climate action could provide vital help. During the 2024 COP16 conference on biodiversity, countries agreed to raise $200 billion annually for protecting nature by 2030, including $30 billion intended to flow from wealthy to poorer nations.[162] Though not all this money is likely to arrive, the fund has set a goal of protecting 30 per cent of land and seas globally, restoring degraded ecosystems and supporting implementation of national biodiversity strategies in developing countries. Governments are meant to establish a permanent fund by 2028 to channel these resources.

[161] Justin Catanoso, "Indigenous leaders optimistic after resumed UN biodiversity conference in Rome", *Mongabay*, 5 March 2025; Sebastían Rodríguez, "UN biodiversity talks agree finance roadmap, postponing decision on a new fund", Climate Home News, 28 February 2025.
[162] "Global biodiversity agreement mobilises $200 billion boost for nature", UN News, 28 February 2025.

VI. Conclusion

Over the last decade, organised crime has become a major obstacle to preserving the world's largest tropical rainforest. Criminal networks are building a web of connections across borders, at times involving political and business elites, to deliver coveted commodities to global consumers. Amazon communities bear the scars of the violence that has followed the arrival of illegal miners and drug traffickers, as well as the land clearance and cattle ranching that they finance. The environment is another victim of criminal networks, which both cause direct destruction and do collateral damage via state corruption and private-sector impunity.

Governments have been caught on the back foot, reluctant or unable to support residents who seek to resist criminal expansion. States also find themselves hemmed into their own national jurisdictions, preventing them from coordinating law enforcement, criminal investigations and social, development and environmental agendas with their neighbours.

At the current rate of global economic growth, not all the Amazon can be saved. The rainforest will likely transform into a fundamentally different ecosystem in the coming decades. But despite the looming threat of an ecological tipping point toward savannah, there is still time to mitigate much of the fallout for both the forest and its people. Stronger support for Indigenous communities, greater cooperation between states and a more intensive focus on crime as an existential threat to the Amazon's people and forest by foreign governments and the private sector can all go some way to reversing the harm. As the Amazon transforms, it is incumbent upon all those who seek to protect it to adapt and react to the new threats at hand.

Bogotá/Brussels, 13 May 2026

Appendix A: Map of the Amazon

The Amazon, the world's largest rainforest, spans nine countries in South America.

Sources: Global Forest Watch; Natural Earth. CRISIS GROUP

Appendix B: Presence of Organised Crime and Armed Groups across the Amazon in 2025

Armed and criminal groups from various countries operate in at least 67% of Amazon municipalities across Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, according to research covering 987 municipalities.

Brazilian criminal groups

Colombian criminal and armed groups

Ecuadorian criminal groups

Sources: Amazon Underworld; Natural Earth; May 2026. CRISIS GROUP

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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May 2026

Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2023

Special Reports and Briefings

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023 (also available in French).

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2024-2025, Special Briefing N°12, 10 September 2024 (also available in French).

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025-2026, Special Briefing N°13, 9 September 2025 (also available in French).

Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace", Latin America Report N°98, 24 February 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime, Latin America Report N°99, 23 June 2023 (also available in Spanish).

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