

Colombia: Gold rush in Antioquia department as FARC and criminal gangs “invest” in mining

By ESISC team

The abduction of 23 oil workers in the eastern Vichada department earlier this week proves once more that criminal groups - both right-wing paramilitaries and leftist rebel groups - are taking advantage of the opportunities they see as they are constantly exploring sources of additional revenues. Moreover, the successful anti-narcotics and eradication efforts of the government are among the factors that pushed the rivalling armed groups into other businesses, such as illegal mining and cattle ranching. As they turn to more legal products – unlike their financial lifeblood cocaine – in a way to remain “alive”, they are ready to reap the profits.

Intelligence sources have pointed out that both leftist rebel groups and right-wing paramilitary groups have set their eyes on the gold mines in the vicinity of Cauca, in the north-eastern Antioquia department. Local reports indicate that this has caused a “gold rush” as FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) and criminal syndicates – such as the Urabenos and the “Los Rastrojos” - that emerged after the disbanding of right-wing paramilitary groups.

Reportedly, newer mines – operated by people working for the armed groups, both left and right, active in the area – emerge almost on a weekly basis. The fact that the gold price climbed this week to 1420 USD/ounce is supporting this “gold rush”, which is part of a broader mining boom in the country. Some sources speak of an increase of gold production of 30 percent in 2010, as the industry attracts over 30,000 fortune seekers – according to U.N. researchers – on a yearly basis.

Separately, this has turned Antioquia into one of the most dangerous areas in the country with several armed groups operating in the department. Additionally, the increase in illegally dug mineshafts and the use of liquid mercury – used to separate the gold from river sediments - in the artisanal gold mining has brought ecological devastation to the region.

Considering the successful government efforts in curtailing the rebel movements in the country's four decade-long struggle, this "pacification" also attracted multinational mining and oil companies to the country's resource rich regions. Paradoxically, this has caused these companies to become targets of the rebel groups operating in mining or oil exploration areas, as the latter want to keep foreign investors at bay. Moreover, violence flared up last year as over 60 grenade attacks were reported in Caucasia, most of which were linked to the Urabenos and the "Los Rastrojos", competing for control over the gold mines. Reportedly, both groups field some 1,200 fighters as they emerged out of the ashes from the paramilitary groups, enrolled in government-supported demobilisation programs. It is worthwhile indicating that the FARC has established a strategic alliance with the "Los Rastrojos", despite some reports of infighting.

In this regard, the mining boom feeds off the lingering conflict and additionally keeps it alive. This reflects the many difficulties the government is facing in curtailing the insurgency, despite major victories in bombing top rebel commanders and eradicating vast tracts of coca.

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