



Commentary

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Troubled Waters along the Guyana-Venezuela Border

Gold and migrants stream across the stretch of the Cuyuní river that marks the Guyana-Venezuela border. Guerrillas and criminal organisations control much of the flow. Their turf wars are already spilling over and could intensify if foreign powers intervene to topple Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

Just outside Ethingbang, a tiny Guyanese outpost in the jungle on the Venezuelan border, the Cuyuní river that separates Guyana from Venezuela winds through banks thick with undergrowth. On the northern side, locals tell me, lies a camp for Colombian guerrillas living some 700km away from their homes, while other armed groups also operate nearby. From my vantage point by the water I cannot discern the camp, but I do see three men dressed in black – one carrying a large-calibre firearm – standing in a small clearing. I keep a safe distance and watch as a passenger boat putters by and the men in black demand that the captain stop. It is the first of a series of checkpoints – this one manned by the guerrillas, another by criminal gang members and a third by Venezuelan security forces – where passing boats submit to extortion before reaching the gold mines further along the river.

Ethingbang sits on the western edge of the Essequibo region, 160,000 square kilometres of nearly impenetrable rainforest. Along with an

offshore oil field, Essequibo is the subject of a territorial dispute between Guyana and Venezuela, predating the former country's independence from Britain in 1966 and now pending before the International Court of Justice in The Hague. But to the Guyanese authorities, that legal battle is a less immediate concern than their frequent skirmishes with the illicit profit seekers who work along the Cuyuní.

The river snakes through landscapes filled with lush vegetation but overrun by criminal enterprises, primarily in illegal gold mining and human trafficking. The latter business is fuelled by the crisis in Venezuela, where government and opposition are slugging it out amid an economic catastrophe that is producing mass emigration, including to Guyana.

Even though Washington has seemingly dialed back its bellicosity toward Caracas, senior military officers in the Guyanan capital Georgetown worry about the possibility of a foreign military intervention to topple the government of President Nicolás Maduro in Caracas. An army major tells me about his concern that intervention could push various non-state armed actors now sheltering in Venezuela into Guyana. These actors would likely include members of the Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN), guerilla opponents of the government in Bogotá who have long been in Venezuela, but have expanded their presence in the past three years and aligned with Maduro in the face of the international pressure upon him to step down. They would also include organised crime groups known as *sindicatos* that feed off

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the explosion of the illicit economy in Venezuela's mining regions.

On his smartphone the major flips through pictures of armed men he says are now active on the border, taken from social media accounts. Foreign intervention, in the major's words, could spark the "synchronisation of all Venezuelan criminal elements" as they push into Guyana. Even absent an intervention, the complex and violent dynamics among the groups sparring to control Venezuela's mineral wealth are already pushing armed actors over the border into this small Caribbean state with only 3,500 men under arms.

Streets of Gold

It is hard to overstate the remoteness of Ethingbang or how far it seems from the authorities in Georgetown. The town doesn't appear on many maps. The small aircraft that I take to the outpost carries four other people – a Guyanese miner and two Venezuelan women accompanied by a man. The other seven seats are stacked with vegetables and mining equipment.

Throughout the 90-minute flight from Georgetown, our plane never climbs above the clouds, giving us an unrivalled view of the rainforest. Some distance to the right of our flight path is the site of Jonestown, where an infamous mass suicide by a fanatical U.S. sect claimed over 900 lives in 1978. Every few minutes, a patch of brown appears in the green vastness, pitted with pools of stagnant water, sometimes stretching along a dried-out riverbed or creek. These are the scars of gold mining, a major driver of environmental degradation in the Amazon basin.

After making a sharp turn above Venezuela, our plane heads for an unpaved airstrip, an ochre scratch in the verdant carpet below. Next to our landing spot is an office of Guyana's Geology and Mines Commission and another building shared by the local police and a single migration officer.

Ethingbang has no mayor. The town is not much more than one unpaved street along the Cuyuní, lined with nightclubs, brothels

and restaurants as well as humble convenience stores and a few palm trees. Around 8pm, reggaeton starts blasting through the wooden dance palaces' speakers, drowning out the generators growling along the riverbank.

The main currency in Ethingbang is gold. At the convenience stores, the prices are even denominated in it – 0.2g for a big jar of Nescafé, 0.3g for peanut butter. The town is far from any bank dispensing Guyanese dollars; the more readily available Venezuelan bolívar is nearly worthless, given the hyperinflation across the river.

Twice a day, in the morning and at the end of the afternoon, a few police officers take a tour of town. They walk down the main street in shorts and flip-flops, sporting machine guns. On my second day in town, as I browse a convenience store's wares, I meet the police chief, who wears dark sunglasses after twilight, a thick gold necklace, watch and wristband, and a ring with a big Mercedes-Benz logo. He greets me suspiciously, and his body language tells me that he has no interest in conversation.

Tied up outside the store, dozens of motorised canoes cluttered with empty plastic oil barrels float on the Cuyuní's calm waters. The men who operate these improvised riverine fuel trucks are temporarily out of work because fuel supplies from Venezuela have been paralysed. The collapse of the Venezuelan oil industry due to the country's political and economic implosion, exacerbated by U.S. oil sanctions imposed in January, halted the flow of both oil and gasoline across the border. Deprived of Venezuelan fuel, a main prop of the local economy, Ethingbang's people are left with just a few means of survival: gold mining, work in the music-blaring bars and the sex industry.

Migration and Exploitation

There are more than 36,000 Venezuelans in Guyana, a country of 780,000. Some are refugees who have come themselves; others are victims of human trafficking. The Cuyuní is one of three major migration routes from Venezuela into Guyana. From San Martín de Turumbán,

the Venezuelan town nearest to Ethingbang, migrants and refugees cross the river, which demarcates the border for a 100km stretch before curving inland. They can reach Guyanese cities after three days by boat.

The second route goes through Brazil, traversing Roraima state and its capital Boa Vista, and entering Guyana through a village called Lethem. A bus then takes the migrants and refugees on an eighteen-hour drive through the jungle to Georgetown. Guyanese media warn of corrupt police officers “shaking down” foreigners on this route and demanding cash or gold payments at checkpoints. I ask a local NGO employee working with refugees if the shakedowns are frequent. “It is the rule”, she answers. A representative of the International Organization of Migration confirms that extortion is common at checkpoints.

The third means of entry is by sea. In one of the places where the boats arrive, the town of Mabaruma near the border, hundreds of Venezuelan refugees sleep on the streets, as the Guyanese police have barred them from travelling further. Since a ferry bearing some 140 Venezuelans arrived in Georgetown in May 2019, the authorities have tried to halt the influx of migrants into the capital.

On any given day, Ethingbang itself hosts over 500 people who mostly do not live in town, according to a local doctor’s estimate. Most of them are Venezuelans, of whom many are female sex workers. The other temporary residents come to town to rest, buy supplies or look for entertainment after weeks or even months of hard labour in the mining pits scattered nearby.

Juliette (not her real name) is a 22-year-old mother of two from Caracas. Five months have passed since she arrived in Ethingbang. Before then, she worked in the illegal gold mines of Bolívar state, Venezuela, which she left after contracting malaria. She then spent time as a migrant in Colombia before she returned to Venezuela and eventually crossed into Guyana.

“Survival sex” is the term that local sex workers give their occupation. Each client used

to pay her about one gram of gold, but because of the fuel shortages clients now tend to pay 0.5g or less. “It barely covers room and board”, Juliette complains. She is three days late with her rent, and may be unable to send money home to her kids.

“This Constant Threat”

The roots of this border outpost’s burdens and challenges – the population influx, the sublimation of legal currency to gold, the police venality, the prostitution – lie in the southern Venezuelan states of Bolívar and Amazonas, which border Brazil and Colombia, as well as Guyana. In 2016, President Maduro’s government, seeking to compensate for the country’s severe economic contraction, designated a massive area in these states for extraction of gold, coltan, diamonds, rare earths and other valuable minerals, branding it the Orinoco Mining Arc. Foreign investors have generally steered clear of the initiative, but non-state armed groups, often in cahoots with local security forces, have expanded their reach across these territories and captured much of the mineral wealth. In so doing, they have exploited the stream of migrant workers fleeing the desperate lack of economic opportunity elsewhere in Venezuela.

In Venezuela’s mines, Colombian guerrillas, above all the ELN, and, to a lesser extent, dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (whose main body demobilised in 2016) clash for control with Venezuelan sindicatos. Their firefights have pushed the latter – as well as many ordinary Venezuelans looking to make a living – toward the disputed border with Guyana.

To ward off intruders, Guyanese soldiers are deployed deep in the jungle, but they tend to avoid actions that might lead to escalation with any potential foe. “They do not want to rock the boat”, explains a Guyanese entrepreneur, who owns a mine close to Venezuela. He crosses the Cuyuní with drums of fuel, equipment and food for his workers, navigating the three checkpoints along the way. All are armed with rifles while the guerrillas also carry grenades, he says.

“We have this constant threat”, he adds, referring to the various armed actors situated along the border.

The expanding violence in southern Venezuela has already spilled across the river. In November 2018, a Guyanese policeman in a boat was shot from the Venezuelan bank of the Cuyuní. Sindicatos attacked Guyanese mining camps in January, and one of their members was killed in the shoot-out.

Containing the Risks of Violence

Authorities in Guyana are hard-pressed to contain the risks lurking in the beautiful rainforest that surrounds Ethingbang. The border with Venezuela is distant from the capital and hard for state institutions to reach. Guyanans tend to agree that the solution for Ethingbang’s problems lies not in Georgetown but in Caracas – and in hopes for a political settlement

that could end Venezuela’s economic freefall and allow the state to wrest control back from armed actors that prey on the region’s population. Conversely, any attempt to end Venezuela’s political showdown by force, whether a coup attempt or foreign intervention, could have disastrous consequences for Guyana’s security.

In the meantime, life along the Cuyuní ebbs and flows according to the state of the criminal economy. Back in Georgetown, I swap messages with a mine owner I met in Ethingbang. Without fuel to run his operations his business is languishing. But a few weeks later, word arrives that fuel is coming in to the outpost again. Straight away, he boards a plane back to the jungle. The wheels of Ethingbang are spinning once more – the mines are up and running, gold is moving along the river and parties are raging at night on the southern bank.