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People carry a casket of a miner during his funeral in La Paragua, Bolivar, Venezuela, Feb. 22, 2024, who died when an illegal gold mine collapsed. Miners are still being evacuated from Venezuelan gold mine that collapsed Feb. 20, as church leaders call for more support for Indigenous people. (OSV News screenshot/Reuters TV)

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Miners were still being evacuated over a week after a Venezuelan gold mine collapsed Feb. 20, killing at least 16 miners and leaving hundreds without work.

Local church leaders called for more support for Indigenous people, while the bishops of the country stayed silent over the tragedy at an illegal open-pit gold mine that left the local community devastated and angry.

Fr. Alexander Cranes, from the village of La Paragua, told OSV News Feb. 29 that around 700 people were still waiting to be evacuated on boats from the Bulla Loca gold mine located in a remote pocket of southern Venezuela, where illegal mining has grown rapidly since 2016.

However, Cranes noted that many villagers want the mine to be reopened again by the government, which shut it down after the tragic accident. He said some of those who were still at the site were resisting calls to evacuate.

"Mining is the main economic activity in this part of Venezuela," Cranes said. "And now people in the community are upset that the government has taken over the mine. They want to form groups to reclaim it."

Bulla Loca is an open-pit mine where hundreds of people worked without wages, selling whatever gold they could find at the mine each day.

"Do you know what forces us to get in there?" Margara Sanchez, whose brothers-in-law, uncles and cousins work at the mine, asked the reporter of The Associated Press. "The need that the people of La Paragua are experiencing. The only livelihood that the town has is mining. Help is needed!"

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On Feb. 20 one of the mine's walls disintegrated and slid down on dozens of miners working at the bottom of the pit.

Cranes said rescue workers were still searching for bodies that could be buried under several tons of rocks and sand.

He estimated that the death toll from the accident could be higher than what the government has reported so far.

"I know people who are providing security there and they have counted 22 dead," Cranes told OSV News.

The mine has no road access. It is located near a river, seven hours upstream from the village of La Paragua.

Lower than usual rainfall has made the river less navigable and complicated access to the mine.

"The government has helped with gasoline for boats," Cranes said. "But each boat can only carry about 30 people."

The collapse of Bulla Loca is the third fatal accident in Venezuela's gold mines since November. Sixty people were killed in 18 mining accidents in Venezuela last year, according to a report published in February by the nongovernmental organization SOS Orinoco, including an accident in December that caused 13 deaths.

It has prompted calls from NGOs and some church leaders for stricter regulation of these mines, which also have polluted rivers and led to deforestation.

At a conference Feb. 28, Fr. Arturo Peraza, the rector of Venezuela's largest Catholic University, the Universidad Catolica Andres Bello, said that mining has already polluted, or destroyed 38,610 square miles of land in Venezuela, including large tracts in Indigenous reservations.

Peraza, who is one of Venezuela's leading Jesuits, called on Catholic groups in the country to ramp up efforts to help Indigenous people protect their lands.

"Mining in the south (of Venezuela) is seriously threatening the rights of Indigenous people that have been recognized by the Constitution and other treaties" Peraza said in a message posted on X, formerly Twitter.

"We need to accompany Indigenous people in the defense of their rights," he added.

Bram Ebus, an expert on environmental crimes at the International Crisis Group, said that informal gold mining has been growing in Venezuela as the administration of President Nicolás Maduro looks for ways to replace oil revenues that have diminished greatly due to years of economic mismanagement and U.S. trade sanctions.

In 2016, Maduro issued a decree that opened a large swath of land around the Orinoco River to gold mining, hoping to attract international investors.

But few bought into the plan, due to the Venezuelan government's previous decisions to nationalize mining companies with little warning.

Meanwhile, rebel groups from neighboring Colombia and criminal syndicates started to "colonize" the south of Venezuela, Ebus said, and set up their own gold mines.

Today most of the gold mines south of the Orinoco River have been built without proper permits and without consultations with Indigenous people.

Ebus said they are run by criminal groups that "pay kickbacks in gold to state authorities to allow these illicit activities to continue."

"These informal gold mines are built by people who are not mining engineers, and they haven't been designed well," Ebus said. "So they are prone to collapse with the movements of the earth, or when the miners wash away the sides of the pits. That is what happened in Bulla Loca, and it is likely to happen again."