

Xavier Arbex, priest in Peru, advocates for victims of gold mining

Peru is among the world's top sources of precious metals. Mining is poisoning people and turning forests into wasteland.

by [Paula Dupraz-Dobias](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue



Xavier Arbex at the Señor de Qoyllority parish church in Puerto Maldonado, Peru. RNS photo by Paula Dupraz-Dobias.

For decades Xavier Arbex, a Catholic priest in a biodiverse region of Peru, has sought to bring attention to environmental and social devastation caused by illegal gold mining.

Peru is among the world's most important sources of gold, copper, and silver. Mercury used in mining—some 90 metric tons annually, according to the Canadian group Artisanal Gold Council—exposes local people to high levels of the heavy metal. And tens of thousands of hectares of jungle are turned into wasteland every year.

“Forests, rivers, and streams are exploited mercilessly, then left barren and unusable,” Pope Francis said when he visited Peru last year. People are “used until someone gets tired of them, then abandoned.”

The pope praised Arbex’s work with victims of mining at a children’s home called El Principito in Puerto Maldonado. Many of the 35 residents escaped abuse or were left by parents who work at the gold mines. In the region, illegal gold is estimated to be more profitable than the drug trade.

“This generation’s life is causing death for the following generation,” Arbex wrote in a biodiversity publication.

Arbex is still waiting to see the effects of the pope’s visit: “not even a single study group or environmental impact project was created here.” —Religion News Service