

Commodity Report: Gold (2026)

Gold is reportedly produced with forced labor (FL) and/or child labor (CL) in the following countries

- Benin (CL)
- Bolivia (FL, CL)
- Brazil (FL)
- Burkina Faso (CL)
- Cameroon (FL, CL)
- Central African Republic (CL)
- Chad (FL, CL)
- China (FL)
- Colombia (FL)
- Congo, Democratic Republic of the (FL, CL)
- Côte d'Ivoire (FL, CL)
- Ecuador (CL)
- Ethiopia (CL)
- Gabon (CL)
- Ghana (CL)
- Guinea (CL)
- Indonesia (CL)
- Kenya (CL)
- Liberia (FL, CL)
- Mali (FL, CL)
- Mongolia (CL)
- Nicaragua (CL)
- Niger (FL)
- Nigeria (CL)
- North Korea (FL)
- Papua New Guinea (CL)
- Peru (FL, CL)
- Philippines (CL)
- Senegal (FL, CL)
- South Africa (FL, CL)
- Sudan (CL)
- Suriname (FL, CL)
- Tanzania (CL)
- Uganda (CL)
- Uzbekistan (FL)
- Venezuela (FL, CL)
- Zimbabwe (FL, CL)

Top ten countries that export gold worldwide:¹

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Switzerland | 6. Australia |
| 2. United Arab Emirates | 7. Canada |
| 3. United Kingdom | 8. Japan |
| 4. United States | 9. Singapore |
| 5. China | 10. Peru |

Where is gold reportedly produced with human trafficking, including forced labor, and/or child labor?

According to the U.S. Department of State's *2025 Trafficking in Persons Report*, gold is produced with forced labor or forced child labor in Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, China, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Suriname, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.²

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's *2024 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*, gold is produced with child labor in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, North Korea, Peru, the Philippines, Senegal, Sudan, Suriname, Tanzania, Uganda, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.³

The U.S. Department of State's *2025 Trafficking in Persons Report* lists the Philippines and Suriname as Tier 1 countries; Benin, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Mongolia, Nigeria, Peru, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, and

¹ [International Trade Center. Trade Map.](#) (ITC Calculations based on UNCOMTRADE Statistics). **Note:** The country list is ordered by value exported.

² [U.S. Department of State. 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report. 2025.](#)

³ [U.S. Department of Labor. List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor. 2024.](#)

Uzbekistan as Tier 2 countries; and Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Niger, South Africa, and Zimbabwe as Tier 2 Watch List countries. Chad, China, Nicaragua, North Korea, Papua New Guinea, Sudan, and Venezuela are listed as Tier 3 countries.⁴

What does human trafficking, including forced labor, and/or child labor in gold production look like?

This section includes countries with publicly available research and reporting on forced labor and child labor, in addition to the countries listed in the above-mentioned government reports.

Alongside the “Three Ts”—coltan, tungsten, and tin—gold is considered a “conflict mineral” because it is commonly mined or used to influence and finance armed conflict, human rights abuses, and violence. In some countries, victims of displacement, oppressed populations, illegal migrants, and other groups at heightened risk to trafficking have historically turned to illegal gold mining due to lack of alternative options to earn a living. The isolated nature of many mining regions as well as the “rush” nature of production can also create heightened risk to trafficking in mining camps and towns, including organized sex trafficking.⁵ To read about the forced labor and child labor risks associated with the extraction and production of coltan, tungsten, and tin, see the [Coltan, Tungsten, and Tin](#) commodity report.

Trafficking risk in illegal gold mining is linked with the presence of criminal groups and violence, which stems from the widespread informality of the sector. Gold’s high value makes illegal gold mining attractive for armed groups, who often recruit residents of mining towns to work in the mines they control in West African countries.⁶ In conflict areas of West Africa, armed groups are known to exploit gold miners and mining communities by “taxing mining and trade activities, demanding payment from

⁴ [U.S. Department of State. 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report. 2025.](#)

⁵ See, for example, [Byceson, Deborah Fahy, Jesper Bosse Jønsson, and Michael Clarke Shand. “Wealth and Poverty in Mining Africa: Migration, Settlement and Occupational Change in Tanzania During the Global Mineral Boom, 2002–2012.” Journal of Eastern African Studies 17, no. 3 \(2023\): 489–514 .](#)

⁶ [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Gold Trafficking in the Sahel. 2023.](#)

miners for providing security, or establishing checkpoints along roads to mine sites and trade hubs for payment collection.”⁷ These groups are also known to commit severe human rights violations.⁸

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, artisanal mining remains “informal, illicit, and strongly linked to both armed groups and the FARDC” (Congolese National Army).⁹ Forced labor and child labor are noted in mining activities in provinces including Haut Katanga, Haut Uele, Ituri, Kasai, Lualaba, North Kivu, and South Kivu. Traffickers may include “mining bosses, other miners, family members, government officials, and armed groups,” who force adults and children to work in artisanal mines, including through debt bondage.¹⁰

Armed groups control or financially benefit from several types of mines in the DRC, including gold. Approximately 130 armed groups are active in eastern DRC, where they control the gold mines and generate revenue “through forced labor, smuggling, or by extorting payments from miners,” according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury.¹¹ Miners, including children, are reportedly forced to work under threat of violence, and many are required to pay “taxes” to armed groups.¹²

In **Sudan**, following the outbreak of civil war in 2023, the two rival military forces—the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces—seized control of the country’s extensive gold industry to fund their operations. Many people displaced by the civil war turned to artisanal and small-scale (ASM)

⁷ [Hunter, Marcena. “Beyond Blood: Gold, conflict and criminality in West Africa.” *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, Nov 2022.](#)

⁸ [U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Conflict Minerals: Overall Peace and Security in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo Has Not Improved Since 2014*. 14 Sep 2022.](#)

⁹ [U.S. Department of State. *2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: the Democratic Republic of Congo*. 2025.](#)

¹⁰ [U.S. Department of State. *2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: the Democratic Republic of Congo*. 2025.](#)

¹¹ [U.S. Department of the Treasury. “Treasury Sanctions Alain Goetz and a Network of Companies Involved in the Illicit Gold Trade.” 17 Mar 2022.](#)

¹² [Grace Harris, Ebonie Kibalya, and Lea Gruber. “Special Report: Conflict Minerals in the DR Congo.” *Genocide Watch*, 9 June 2025.](#)

gold mining, where they are exposed to toxic chemicals such as mercury and cyanide, especially due to improper handling.¹³

In the **Central African Republic**, the Kremlin-linked Russian Wagner Group was invited by the country's president in 2017 to help address the problem of rebel groups. In 2018, the Wagner Group reportedly carried out numerous attacks on civilians in small towns to seize control of artisanal gold mines in the central and eastern regions of the country.¹⁴ The U.S. Department of State reported that the government has continued permitting Wagner to operate gold mines, "including mines exploiting child labor."¹⁵ In addition to attacking villages and kidnapping children to work in the mines, Wagner has been accused of killing artisanal miners, sexual abuse, and other human rights violations.¹⁶

In **Burkina Faso**, families living in poverty commonly find work in gold mining to generate income, and parents often withdraw their children from school to work in the mines.¹⁷ In the combined Sahel regions of Burkina Faso and **Niger**, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that 30 to 50 percent of the gold mine workforce consists of children, and the majority are under 15 years old.¹⁸ Driven by poverty, children leave school and "are forced to work in hazardous conditions digging, breaking rocks, transporting, washing, and pounding the gold, including work underground in narrow shafts."¹⁹ The children reportedly earn little to no pay, and wages are commonly deducted to pay for lodging and food.²⁰

¹³ [U.S. Department of the Treasury. "Treasury Sanctions Alain Goetz and a Network of Companies Involved in the Illicit Gold Trade." 17 Mar 2022.](#)

¹⁴ [Philip Obaji Jr. "'We Now Face Guns': Small-Scale Miners Fear Wagner's Advances in CAR." *Al Jazeera*, 10 July 2024.](#)

¹⁵ [U.S. Department of States. *2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Central African Republic*. 2025.](#)

¹⁶ [ADF Staff. "Report: Wagner Kidnapping Children to Work in CAR Mines." *Africa Defense Forum*, September 20, 2022.](#)

¹⁷ [PBS, "Children in Burkina Faso Risk Life and Limb in Gold Mines." August 2023.](#)

¹⁸ [Siyobi, Busisipho. "The Daily Grind of Dangerous Work." *Good Governance Africa*, 30 Sept 2022.](#)

¹⁹ [U.S. Department of Labor. *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*. 2024.](#)

[Terre des hommes. "Children should be children, not minors." n.d.](#)

²⁰ [U.S. Department of Labor. *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*. 2024.](#)

According to *The Economist*, the decrease in the wholesale price of cocaine in South America has led to drug gangs moving into the illegal mining sector, including in **Peru**.²¹ In July 2025, the former foreign minister of Peru claimed that the illegal gold economy is seven times larger than the cocaine trade in the country and has become armed groups' preferred choice for accumulating wealth.²² In **Colombia's** border area with Peru, members of guerilla groups also control the production and distribution of gold.²³ In the Colombian region of Cauca, Antioquia, a New York Times investigation concluded that a U.S.-designated terrorist group, the Clan del Golfo, is operating a gold mine which is partly inside an active Colombian army base. The property has reportedly been functioning as an industrial-scale illegal mining operation, with up to 2,500 illegal miners on site. Miners work under the threat of violence and must regularly pay the group for access to the mine. Miners use high-pressure hoses to turn the hillside into mud and then use mercury to extract gold by hand.²⁴

Armed groups also control gold mines in **Venezuela**, particularly in the southern states of Bolívar and Amazonas.²⁵ As the criminal groups expand their control of the area commonly known as the Orinoco Mining Arc, illicit gold mining has grown rapidly over the last decade, per 2025 reporting.²⁶ Venezuelans who travel to the mining sites in search of work face violence and forced labor by armed groups. Mass killings and sex trafficking are reportedly widespread in mining districts. Locals, including indigenous people, are forced to transport people, weapons, and goods for armed groups under threat of harm to

²¹ ["Illegal Gold Is Booming in South America," *The Economist*, 9 Nov 2023.](#)

²² [Lister, Tim and Claudia Rebeza. "Why Illegal Gold Mining Is Overtaking Cocaine as the Drug of Choice for Traffickers in Latin America." *CNN*, 22 Nov 2025.](#)

²³ [Lister, Tim and Claudia Rebeza. "Why Illegal Gold Mining Is Overtaking Cocaine as the Drug of Choice for Traffickers in Latin America." *CNN*, 22 Nov 2025.](#)

²⁴ [Rios, Federico. "See What Happened After We Found a Cartel Mine on a Military Base." *The New York Times*. April 26, 2026.](#)
[Scheck, Justin. "How We Traced U.S. Government Gold to a Drug Cartel." *The New York Times*. April 28, 2026.](#)

²⁵ [International Crisis Group, "A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South," 29 July 2025.](#)

²⁶ [International Crisis Group, "A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South," 29 July 2025.](#)

themselves or their families.²⁷ Interviewed miners described torture, withholding of food and water, corporal punishment, and executions for failure to follow rules or stealing.²⁸

Child labor is reportedly found in Venezuela's gold mines, mainly located in the Orinoco Mining Arc. In this mining development zone in the middle of the country, gold and critical minerals are often illegally mined and smuggled. According to the U.S. Department of State, "the living conditions of miners are dire – many lack basic services such as sanitation, water, or electricity and sleep under wooden boards and plastic as makeshift shelters. Violent crimes, including homicides, have become increasingly prevalent in these mining communities."²⁹ In open-cast mines, where excavation is done relatively close to the surface to create large pits,³⁰ children are small enough to enter naturally occurring, narrow vein deposits to dig out the muddy earth. They also carry heavy bags of earth and then sift the earth using water puddles to reveal any gold stuck to mercury. Some children begin mining as young as six years old.³¹

In La Paragua, Bolívar state, the illegal "Bulla Loca" gold mine collapsed in 2024, killing at least 16 people and injuring others. A video recorded a wall of earth collapsing on a group of miners in a deep pit at the mine, where around 200 people were working that day. An interviewed local highlighted the unsafe working conditions of the mine and stated that miners work there out of necessity.³²

In **Brazil**, 2023 research on ASM gold mining found that workers were exploited by intermediaries resulting in debt bondage. Workers in rural areas in need of income during seasons of low agricultural activity were recruited and transported to gold mining sites for a fee. They were then charged for tools,

²⁷ [Venezuela Investigative Unit, "Human Trafficking Accompanies Illegal Mining in Venezuela's Orinoco," InSight Crime, 9 Feb 2021.](#)

[Amazon Underworld. "Invasion, Violence and Plunder in Southern Venezuela: The Price of Global Defense and 'Clean Technology.'" Nov 6, 2025.](#)

²⁸ [Amazon Underworld. "Invasion, Violence and Plunder in Southern Venezuela: The Price of Global Defense and 'Clean Technology.'" Nov 6, 2025.](#)

²⁹ [U.S. Department of State. "Report to Congress on The State-Sponsored Extraction and Sale of Gold from Venezuela's Orinoco Mining Arc, and from National Reserves in Venezuela such as Canaima National Park." 5 June 2025.](#)

³⁰ ["What Is Open Cast Mining?" The Institute for Environmental Research and Education. 18 June 2025.](#)

³¹ ["Gold and mercury, not books, for Venezuela's child miners." Al Jazeera, 20 Sept 2023.](#)

³² ["Collapse of illegal open pit gold mine in Venezuelan jungle leaves multiple people dead." CBS News, 22 Feb 2024.](#)

protective gear, food, and housing, resulting in debt.³³ Their movements were reportedly controlled by armed guards until they could pay off the debt, with their identify documents confiscated.³⁴ According to a Department of State-funded project with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Brazil, up to 40 percent of gold miners in the Tapajós river basin in Pará, Brazil are estimated to be victims of human trafficking. Living and working conditions documented include makeshift housing with no bathrooms, lack of protective gear, contaminated drinking water, and sexual exploitation.³⁵

In **China**, gold mining companies reportedly use Uyghur workers subject to the CCP's state-sponsored labor transfer program. In 2020, the Hatu and Hami gold mines in the Western region reportedly received transferred workers from the **Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)**. The labor transfer programs, according to the Chinese government, provide intensive education and training to the transferred people, including language, military, and ideological training through "re-education camps."³⁶ As described in the Uyghur Human Rights Protection Act, the U.S. government regards these programs as violating the human rights of ethnic minorities in XUAR internment camps per evidence of arbitrary detention, forced labor, physical abuse, food deprivation, lack of medical care, and overall denial of religious and cultural freedoms.³⁷ Xinjiang Nonferrous Group and its subsidiaries, including Western Region Gold, have reportedly engaged in a program in which government officials are sent to Uyghur villages to monitor them, give ideological teachings, and identify surplus laborers for transfer.³⁸ Xinjiang Nonferrous Group and Western Region Gold are among the gold mining and processing entities based in the XUAR which were added to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List in 2024.³⁹

³³ [Bansal, Vaiddehi et al., "An Intervention-Focused Review of Modern Slave Labor in Brazil's Mining Sector," World Development 171 \(November 2023\): 106362.](#)

³⁴ [Bansal, Vaiddehi et al., "An Intervention-Focused Review of Modern Slave Labor in Brazil's Mining Sector," World Development 171 \(November 2023\): 106362.](#)

³⁵ [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *A dream that's always out of reach: trafficked gold miners in the Brazilian Amazon*. 15 May 2024.](#)

[Angelo, Maurício. "Persistence of slave labor exposes lawlessness of Amazon gold mines." MONGABAY. Mar 4, 2021.](#)

³⁶ ["Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?" BBC News. May 2022.](#)

³⁷ [Text - H.R.2349 - 119th Congress \(2025-2026\): Uyghur Human Rights Protection Act. Congress.gov. March 2025.](#)

³⁸ [C4ADS. *Fractured Veins*. 11 Oct 2023.](#)

³⁹ [Federal Register. *Notice Regarding the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List*. 25 Nov 2024.](#)

The Kédougou region of **Senegal** has seen large-scale migration of people who come from other West African countries—such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea—to make a living in gold mining, making Kédougou home to over 20 nationalities.⁴⁰ Kédougou locals reported losing their farmland and access to gold mines to companies' semi-mechanized mining operations. These companies offered inadequate compensation for the land, or jobs to locals, and many locals turned to ASM gold mining to make a living. The mining companies reportedly also dump “thousands of liters of wastewater,” including mercury, into the Faleme River, making it undrinkable and unsafe for growing crops.⁴¹

Children from Senegal and neighboring countries are exploited in forced labor in gold mining or in sex trafficking in Senegal's Kédougou's gold mining region, according to the U.S. Department of State.⁴² Additionally, women and men in Kédougou were reportedly trapped in forced labor or sex trafficking after paying smugglers to help them cross the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa to Europe, in some cases to “flee war, persecution, natural disasters,” or “search for a better future in another country,” according to a UNODC expert.⁴³ “Criminal networks take advantage of migrants' vulnerable conditions to extort money and exploit them sexually or for forced labour, particularly in gold mines in North Africa, West Africa and the Sahel,” a UNODC Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer stated.⁴⁴

Health, Safety, and Environmental Hazards

Although not a trafficking risk in itself, artisanal gold mining is highly hazardous and presents serious health hazards to all workers, especially children. Workers in mining shafts face risks of death or severe injury from burns, rock falls, and tunnel collapses.⁴⁵ The air underground may be filled with dust or toxic

⁴⁰ [Gerth-Niculescu, Maria & Simoncelli, Marco. “Senegal's gold rush: More wealth, but at what cost?” *Deutsche Welle*, 17 Jan 2024.](#)

⁴¹ [Gerth-Niculescu, Maria & Simoncelli, Marco. “Senegal's gold rush: More wealth, but at what cost?” *Deutsche Welle*, 17 Jan 2024.](#)

⁴² [U.S. Department of State. “2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Senegal.” 2025.](#)

⁴³ [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “A Gold Rush Trap: How Smuggled Migrants End up Exploited in African Mines on Their Way to the Mediterranean,” January 2024.](#)

⁴⁴ [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “A Gold Rush Trap: How Smuggled Migrants End up Exploited in African Mines on Their Way to the Mediterranean,” January 2024.](#)

⁴⁵ [Allan-Blitz, Lao-Tzu et al. “Environmental and health risks posed to children by artisanal gold mining: A systematic review.” *SAGE Open Med*, 9 Feb 2022.](#)

gases, which can lead to lung damage and silicosis. Children also dig and process ore after it has been removed from the mine. Working in the mining industry may lead young children to develop musculoskeletal injuries.⁴⁶

To extract gold, artisanal miners separate gold from rocks by adding liquid mercury, which results in an amalgam of both elements. Miners then evaporate the mercury with a blowtorch or other means, leaving the gold behind, and inhale the toxic mercury gas in the process.⁴⁷ Prolonged inhalation of mercury, a neurotoxin, can result in tremors, damage to the nervous system, muscle weakness and nerve damage, respiratory failure, and death.⁴⁸ When ingested by people (accidentally during work or through contact with contaminated water), mercury easily penetrates the bloodstream, enters the brain, and can cause severe neurological disorders.⁴⁹ For pregnant women, mercury exposure has been identified as a leading cause of birth defects.⁵⁰

Mercury used in the gold panning process often lingers in the environment, polluting underground water reserves, entering the food chain, and causing loss of vegetation due to soil pollution. During gold refinement, toxins including lead, nitrogen, sulfur, mercury, sulfur dioxide, zinc, cadmium, uranium, and greenhouse gases are released when high temperatures are applied to ore to release the gold.⁵¹

⁴⁶ [Allan-Blitz, Lao-Tzu et al. "Environmental and health risks posed to children by artisanal gold mining: A systematic review." *SAGE Open Med*, 9 Feb 2022.](#)

⁴⁷ [Omnia Saed and Fred Pearce, "In War-Torn Sudan, a Gold Mining Boom Takes a Human Toll," *Yale Environment* 360, 26 Mar 2025.](#)

⁴⁸ [Health Effects of Exposures to Mercury. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.](#)

⁴⁹ [Omnia Saed and Fred Pearce, "In War-Torn Sudan, a Gold Mining Boom Takes a Human Toll," *Yale Environment* 360, 26 Mar 2025.](#)

⁵⁰ [Gonzalez, David. "Mercury Exposure and Risk Among Women of Childbearing Age in Madre de Dios, Peru." *Tropical Resources* 34, 16–24, 2015.](#)

⁵¹ [EARTHWORKS. *Air Impacts*.](#)

Gold Production and Global Supply Chains

Most of the world's gold—80 percent in 2023—is produced by large companies with capital-intensive methods to extract gold in large-scale mines.⁵² The remaining 20 percent is produced by artisanal mines.⁵³

Gold is mined either through open-pit mining, underground mining, or alluvial mining. In open-pit mining, explosives are placed in pits to obtain ore chunks. In underground mining, access shafts are created and then, in some cases, side tunnels are created; then, ore is removed from the tunnels.⁵⁴ Alluvial mining occurs when mining for gold in water. Stream bed deposits are created when minerals separate from rocks and then settle in a new location; then, miners sift through the mud looking for these deposits. The difficulty of removing the gold from these deposits depends on the concentration of gold in the deposit. If there is a smaller concentration of gold, it is easier to sift through the gravel to obtain the gold. Higher gold concentrations are often more consolidated and require drilling or blasting for separation.⁵⁵

There are several ways to separate gold from the material it is attached to. One method is crushing the gold-bearing rock to dust and then mixing it with sodium cyanide solution. This solution moves the gold to the “acid seepage fluid in a chemically bound form.”⁵⁶ Then zinc dust is added to separate it from the fluid. Lastly, the gold is “washed out of the muddy substrate and finally dried.”⁵⁷ The hydrogen cyanide acid is very flammable and poisonous and, therefore, is a risk for workers and the environment. The amalgam process is another way to extract gold. In this process, the gold-bearing rock is crushed into dust and then mixed with mercury. The gold sticks to the mercury to form an amalgam. Then, the amalgam is heated, vaporizing the mercury to collect the gold. In artisanal and small-scale mining,

⁵² [Rodríguez-Novoa, Felipe & Holley, Elizabeth. “Coexistence between large-scale mining \(LSM\) and artisanal and small-scale mining \(ASM\) in Perú and Colombia.” *Resources Policy*, Jan 2023.](#)

⁵³ [Rodríguez-Novoa, Felipe & Holley, Elizabeth. “Coexistence between large-scale mining \(LSM\) and artisanal and small-scale mining \(ASM\) in Perú and Colombia.” *Resources Policy*, Jan 2023.](#)

⁵⁴ [KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives. *Mining Science* 101. 26 Jan 2021.](#)

⁵⁵ [Pistilli, Melissa. “Alluvial Mining: Gold, Diamonds and Platinum.” *Investing News Network*, 6 Sep 2023.](#)

⁵⁶ [Gold.info. *Gold Extraction/Mining*.](#)

⁵⁷ [Gold.info. *Gold Extraction/Mining*.](#)

mercury is used, and this dangerous process can lead to mercury exposure and health risks to the environment and surrounding community.⁵⁸ The electrowinning process collects gold on an anode along with other precious metals. In the borax process, the gold-bearing rock is melted and mixed with sodium borate (borax). The borax makes the melting point lower, causing the gold to sink to the bottom while other materials rise to the top.⁵⁹

After gold reaches refineries in the United States, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates (UAE), or other countries, it becomes challenging to differentiate between gold from different origins, including which may have been extracted from illegal mines with a high risk of forced labor. Although gold products purchased around the world may be labelled as responsibly sourced, there is risk that the gold is misclassified and not accurately traced due to systemic failures in policing and certifying gold in the supply chain.⁶⁰ Gold is often smuggled by armed groups in countries embroiled in conflict because it is easy to do so in high volumes. Armed groups then melt down the gold, making it hard to trace and enabling gold mined illegally to enter legitimate supply chains.⁶¹ For example, most gold from the DRC was smuggled into Uganda, Rwanda, and, to a lesser extent, Burundi.⁶² The UAE receives a significant portion of gold smuggled from Africa. Gold mined by armed groups in the DRC, South Sudan, Sudan, and the Central African Republic all go through neighboring countries and then are exported to the UAE. There are large discrepancies between reported exports of gold from the main regional producing countries and the UAE's imports of gold from the region.⁶³ In 2019, for example, the Malian government

⁵⁸ [UN Environmental Program \(UNEP\). Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining Without Mercury. 7 January 2026.](#)

⁵⁹ [Gold.info. Gold Extraction/Mining.](#)

⁶⁰ [Federl, Fabian. "Investigating How Illegal Gold Gets Into the Legitimate Supply Chain." *Global Investigative Journalism Network*. 25 April 2025.](#)

⁶¹ [Lezhnev, Sasha & Swamy, Megha. "Understanding Money Laundering Risks in the Conflict Gold Trade From East and Central Africa to Dubai and Onward." *The Sentry*, Nov 2020.](#)

⁶² [The Independent, "REPORT: Most Gold from the DRC Is Smuggled through Uganda and Rwanda," December 20, 2024.](#)

⁶³ [Lezhnev, Sasha & Swamy, Megha. "Understanding Money Laundering Risks in the Conflict Gold Trade From East and Central Africa to Dubai and Onward." *The Sentry*, Nov 2020.](#)

reported exporting half a ton of gold to the UAE whereas the UN Comtrade Database reported that the UAE imported 81 tons of gold from Mali.⁶⁴

Gold from unclear origins can also be classified as “recycled” by the London Bullion Market Association (LBMA), which is responsible for enforcing ethical sourcing of precious metal. Recycled metal could be defined as anything gold-bearing which did not come directly from a mine in its first gold life cycle.⁶⁵ For example, in French Guiana, a 2025 investigation found that gold from unclear origins enters the small-scale gold mining supply in the region and is crafted into rudimentary gold jewelry, such as bangles, which is then shipped to a gold hub as “scrap” gold. The gold-processing country then melts the scrap gold into recycled bars of gold, which enter the world gold market. Within the standards set by the LBMA, the recycled gold “loses the need for documentation of origin” and becomes untraceable.⁶⁶

How consumers are linked to human trafficking, including forced labor, and/or child labor in gold production:

Top ten countries that import gold worldwide.⁶⁷

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Switzerland | 6. United States |
| 2. United Kingdom | 7. Turkey |
| 3. China | 8. Thailand |
| 4. India | 9. Singapore |
| 5. United Arab Emirates | 10. Canada |

⁶⁴ [Whitehouse, Bruce. “Illicit Flows to the UAE Take the Shine off African Gold.” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 18 Jan 2023.](#)

⁶⁵ [Federl, Fabian. “Investigating How Illegal Gold Gets Into the Legitimate Supply Chain.” *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, 25 April 2025.](#)

⁶⁶ [Federl, Fabian. “Investigating How Illegal Gold Gets Into the Legitimate Supply Chain.” *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, 25 April 2025.](#)

⁶⁷ [International Trade Center. Trade Map.](#) (ITC Calculations based on UNCOMTRADE Statistics). **Note:** The country list is ordered by value imported.

Jewelry accounts for about half of the total gold demand globally. India and China are the largest jewelry markets in the world, together accounting for over half of the global market.⁶⁸ Due to its high conductivity, gold is also used in electronics such as cell phones and laptops.⁶⁹ Eighty percent of gold used in technology is within the electronics sector. Small amounts of gold are also used in dentistry and medicine.⁷⁰ At the end of 2024, the World Gold Council (WGC) estimated that there were 216,265 tons of gold in above ground stock (the total amount of gold that has ever been mined, globally), with approximately 97,149 tons in jewelry.⁷¹ As of 2024, WGC estimated that current recoverable reserves (known, mineable gold reserves which have not been mined) worldwide hold 59,000 tons of gold.⁷²

In addition to using a large amount of gold in its banking sector, Switzerland is a global clearinghouse for gold, with much of the gold it imports eventually making its way into jewelry and watches that end up in the hands of consumers in countries around the world. About two-thirds of the world's gold is refined in Switzerland.⁷³

Examples of what governments, corporations, and others are doing:

Across the European Union (EU), the Conflict Minerals Regulation came into effect in 2021, imposing due diligence reporting requirements for companies that import raw conflict minerals, as well as for non-financial matters in the areas of the environment, social responsibility, and human rights.⁷⁴ The due

⁶⁸ [Gold Demand Sectors. World Gold Council.](#)

⁶⁹ [American Bullion Inc. Why Gold is Used in Electronics. 6 June 2024.](#)

⁷⁰ [Touyz, Louis. "Gold in Medicine and Dentistry." *Dentistry and Oral Health Care*, Oct 2023.](#)

⁷¹ [World Gold Council. Above-ground stock. 1 Feb 2024.](#)

⁷² [How Much Gold Is in the World 2025 — Global Stock, Reserves & Implications - ORO Mineral. 11 Nov 2025.](#)

⁷³ [Vanderbilt, Donovan. "Precious Metals Refining in Switzerland: Industry Structure and Global Significance." *Zug Commodities*, 28 Feb 2026.](#)

⁷⁴ [Regulation \(EU\) 2017/821 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 May 2017. *Laying down supply chain due diligence obligations for Union importers of tin, tantalum and tungsten, their ores, and gold originating from conflict-affected and high-risk areas.*](#)

diligence reporting obligations expand to any company in the EU that may come into contact with conflict minerals or minerals mined with child labor by importing coltan, tungsten, tin, or gold from high-risk areas, or by offering products and services where there is reasonable suspicion that child labor is involved.⁷⁵ The EU maintains a list of conflict or high-risk areas around the world under the regulation.⁷⁶ As of June 2026, there are 28 countries and 268 regions identified.⁷⁷ Despite the ambitions of this regulation, 2024 reports indicated shortcomings in its overall impact primarily due to “insufficient engagement with stakeholders in producing countries, a lack of transparency in supply chains, and inconsistent enforcement across Member States.”⁷⁸

In July 2010, the U.S. Congress passed Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act (Section 1502), which “requires persons to disclose whether any conflict minerals necessary to the functionality or production of a product originated in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or an adjoining country.” If the minerals do originate from this area, then a Conflict Minerals Report must be completed to describe any due-diligence measures taken.⁷⁹ Multiple companies have committed to sourcing minerals ethically from the DRC by working with NGOs to create tracking systems with enhanced traceability.⁸⁰

In 2024, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security added three companies which mine and process gold to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List: Western Gold Co., Ltd.; Western Gold Hami Gold Mine Co., Ltd.; and Western Gold Karamay Hatu Gold Mine Co., Ltd.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Kühni, Beat, et al. “Switzerland: New ESG Regulations Enter into Force as of January 1, 2022.” Mondaq. 3 January 2022.

⁷⁶ Sinclair, Brendan. “Conflict Minerals and the Challenge of Not Funding Human Rights Abuses.” GamesIndustry.biz. 13 July 2021.

⁷⁷ *Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas*. European Union. 2026.

⁷⁸ Walschot, Maureen and Guillaume de Brier. “EU acknowledges shortcomings of Conflict Minerals Regulation: What Next?” IPIS. 4 December 2024.

⁷⁹ The International Energy Agency. *Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act*. 30 January 2025.

⁸⁰ Impact: Transforming natural resource management and empowering communities. “Beyond the Label: Rethinking Traceability in Critical Minerals.” 29 April 2025.

⁸¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. *UFLPA Entity List*. 2025.

Effective in May 2020, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) modified a 2019 withhold release order which originally prevented gold imported by the Chambers Federation from artisanal and small-scale mines in the DRC from entering the United States. Meanwhile, CBP evaluated whether the gold was mined using forced labor. Ultimately, CBP found sufficient evidence to support that the ASM mines from which the Chambers Federation imports gold do not use forced labor, and the modification allowed the gold to enter all U.S. ports of entry.⁸²

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched a high-level initiative in 2011 to develop a due diligence policy for coltan, tungsten, tin, and gold mining in conflict and high-risk contexts, particularly in the DRC.⁸³ Named the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas (DDG), it aimed to assist the private sector in making informed decisions, thereby avoiding severe human rights abuses, reducing funding to armed groups and organized crime, and reducing links to financial crimes. In 2022, the OECD published a report covering 2016 to 2020 showing that, similar to most policy interventions, the results of the due diligence process have been mixed, with improvements, shortcomings, and ambiguities. The OECD also developed the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (M&E Framework) to better understand how the DDG is being implemented and to more clearly assess its outcomes.⁸⁴ According to a 2025 OECD publication, the OECD Responsible Minerals Implementation Programme continues to promote alignment with the Guidance described above: “Under the Implementation Programme, the OECD Secretariat conducts a wide range of activities including outreach and training for private sector and government, research and analysis, peer-learning and knowledge sharing and market-oriented actions.”⁸⁵

⁸² [U.S. Customs and Border Protection. “CBP Modifies Withhold Release Order on Gold Imports from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.” 28 May 2020.](#)

⁸³ [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. *OECD Due Diligence Guidelines for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas*. 2016.](#)

⁸⁴ [OECD. *Monitoring and Evaluation Framework: OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas \(2022 Edition\)*. OECD Publishing, 2022.](#)

⁸⁵ [Recommendation of the Council on Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas. OECD. 2025.](#)

In March 2010, the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO) and the Alliance for Responsible Mining (ARM) launched the Fairmined Standard for Gold and Associated Precious Metals. “Fairmined” gold certified under the standard must meet social, environmental, labor, and economic requirements in artisanal mining communities.⁸⁶ In 2022, “six Fairmined mines successfully sold their Fairmined gold and silver within responsible markets, receiving both the international market price and the Fairmined premium.” Furthermore, a 2022 report stated that “over 1,194 artisanal and small-scale miners across 7 certified mines committed to carrying out their mining operation responsibly, which involved the implementation of best practices in various categories.”⁸⁷ Fairmined is working across South America, Asia, and Africa to improve mining practices, with over 430 businesses across 40 countries working with Fairmined gold, according to their website. As of 2026, the website lists 10 ASM organizations from two countries, Colombia and Peru, as being Fairmined certified.⁸⁸

The Responsible Jewelry Council (RJC) is a membership organization which aims to improve conditions in gold and diamond supply chains. The RJC previously initiated a certification program for its members’ gold and diamond supply chains requiring obligatory third-party auditing, launched a Chain-of-Custody (CoC) certification,⁸⁹ and partnered with the Alliance for Responsible Mining (ARM) to pilot a combined Fairmined and CoC audit of metals refiner Metalor Technologies SA “with the objective of reducing audit burden, without compromising the quality and rigour of the audit process.”⁹⁰ In 2023, the RJC launched the ESG Toolkit, which reportedly serves as a practical blueprint for RJC members to conduct due diligence and apply Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria to their businesses globally. Criteria include biodiversity, pollution, human rights and forced labor, health and safety, risk management, and corporate ethics and corruption, including in the sourcing of gold, diamonds, and

⁸⁶ [Human Rights Watch. *The Hidden Cost of Jewelry: Human Rights in Supply Chains and the Responsibility of Jewelry Companies*. February 2018.](#)

⁸⁷ [Fairmined. *Transforming Artisanal and Small-scale Mining: Fairmined Premium Report 2022*. 2022.](#)

⁸⁸ [Fairmined. *Our Impact*.](#)

⁸⁹ [Responsible Jewellery Council. *RJC Impacts Report*. June 2014.](#)

⁹⁰ [Alliance for Responsible Mining & Responsible Jewellery Council. *RJC and Fairmined combined audit pilot project: Reducing the burden of audits*. June 2017.](#)

other precious minerals.⁹¹ In 2024, the RJC published its new Code of Practices and Chain of Custody standards to improve legal and regulatory compliance in the gold and jewelry sector.⁹²

In response to the hazards mercury poses to the environment and human health, whether used in gold mining or elsewhere, the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) drafted a convention on mercury, called the Minamata Convention.⁹³ The convention, which entered into force in 2017, has 128 signatories,⁹⁴ who agree to measures limiting and controlling the mining, manufacture, storage, and trade of mercury. This includes a ban on the creation of new mercury mines and an agreement to cease operations of already operating mercury mines within 15 years.⁹⁵ The convention requires State parties with significant ASM gold mining to implement a National Action Plan (NAP), which sets clear “mercury reduction targets, actions to eliminate worst practices, and steps to facilitate the formalization or regulation of the sector to ensure compliance with environmental and health standards.”⁹⁶ The Conference of the Parties to the Minamata Convention’s sixth occurrence took place in November 2025, which stressed the need to strengthen NAP implementation through expanding training programs, mobilizing financial and technical resources, establishing monitoring systems, and conducting health surveillance.⁹⁷

⁹¹ [Responsible Jewellery Council. *ESG TOOLKIT: The Future of Business*. 2023.](#)

⁹² [Responsible Jewellery Council. *Chain of Custody: Standard*. 2024.](#)

⁹³ [United Nations Environment Programme. “About the Minamata Convention.” *Minamata Convention on Mercury*.](#)

⁹⁴ [Minamata Convention on Mercury. *List of Signatories and Future Parties*.](#)

⁹⁵ [UN Environmental Program \(UNEP\). *Minamata Convention on Mercury: Text and Annexes – 2023 Edition*. Sept 2023.](#)

⁹⁶ [Minamata Convention on Mercury. *2025 Fact Sheet on Mercury Use in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining \(ASGM\)*. 23 Oct 2025.](#)

⁹⁷ [Minamata Convention on Mercury. *2025 Fact Sheet on Mercury Use in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining \(ASGM\)*. 23 Oct 2025.](#)

How can I learn more?

[Read](#) about the gold rush in Senegal and its impact on local communities.

[Learn more](#) about responsible mining of gold at “No Dirty Gold.”

[Read](#) about the money laundering risks in the conflict gold trade.