

Tucari Mine Robbery, Peru

By Mark Smith &
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On July 21st, at least 12 armed men attacked the Tucari mine in Southern Peru. They shot dead two people, wounded others and held several, including the superintendent and head of security, captive for a time. They stole about 130 kg of doré consisting of 70% gold, valued at more than \$1,500,000.

What makes this robbery important isn't that the haul exceed \$1.5 million, or even that two people were killed in this increasing violent part of the Andes. What makes it important is the boldness of the robbery and the complete failure of the public security systems both in preventing the attack and in apprehending the criminals. Until now, coordinated attacks such as this have been virtually unheard of and experts fear this could affect foreign investment in Peru and in turn, the country's economy, which relies so heavily on the rising price of metals and the related foreign investment and inflow of hard currency.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, rebels of the Maoist-inspired Shining Path group

interrupted supply routes to mines. This civil war took an estimated 69,000 lives and destroyed the economy of much of rural Peru. During these years mines either cooperated with the terrorists (the case of most small mines) or engaged aggressive private security forces (most international mines). These security forces were sometimes called private armies because of the size and weaponry employed. During the first term of ex-president Fujimori, from 1990 to 1995, the Shining Path were subdued, the leaders jailed or killed, and most of the country was pacified and reopened to commerce. However, in the past few years mining companies have voiced concern over rising levels of insecurity, an issue that they say is not helped by Peru's current weak government.

Many believe the rising violence is a result of perceived weaknesses in the economy, corruption and lack of political will and won't stop unless and until the government takes decisive action.

The Tucari mine is located near Puno, one of the poorest and most politically volatile areas of Peru and has seen a wave of

social unrest in recent years. When local citizens were unhappy with the mayor, just over a year ago, they dragged him from his office and lynched him. Last year when a disco mistreated a patron, Juliaca residents burned down 7 of the town's discos.

The kidnapping two years ago of 74 workers on the Camisea gas pipeline is just one of the more newsworthy examples of the degrading security situation. Parts of the country, such as Ayabaca province northeast of Piura, are essentially off limits to any external intrusion because of the threat of kidnapping, assault or worse.

The government seems completely unable to turn the tide, something not helped by President Toledo's phenomenally low popularity rating (which has reached single digits on several occasions) and the fall of three presidencies in neighboring countries, two in Bolivia and one in Ecuador, in just one year.

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