



Gold's Lethal Toll in Indonesia

2015 • Running time 6.5 minutes • Photography and videography by Larry C. Price provided courtesy Price + Price Creative • Produced and narrated by P.J. Tobia • Funded by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting • Broadcast by *PBS NewsHour*

Miners and their families on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi suffer from the devastating effects of mercury poisoning as they search for gold in a village in Indonesia. Small-scale gold mining, widespread throughout the developing world, is one of the biggest sources of mercury pollution of the air, water, and soil.

Viewer discretion advised – This program includes images of children and adults severely affected by mercury poisoning.

As originally broadcast on PBS – This report can be viewed in its original format on [PBS NewsHour](https://www.pbs.org/newshour).

TEACHER'S GUIDE



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Small-scale gold mining using liquid mercury can be found throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas. According to the U.N., it's one of the biggest contributors to global mercury pollution.
—P.J. Tobia, PBS

WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

Although this film lacks religious studies content, I chose it because it explores the effects of a growing global industry on ecological and public health. It offers religious studies students an opportunity to do independent research into whether or how religious groups are responding to this industry's effects, which occur primarily in poor communities.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Activism	Development
Agriculture	Economics
Asian Studies	Environmental Policy
Capitalism	Ethics
Consumerism	

SYNOPSIS

This film spotlights the alarming global rise of mercury pollution of the air, water, and soil as well as severe disabilities, diseases, and death attributed to mercury poisoning in developing communities involved in small-scale gold mining, one of the major sources of mercury pollution worldwide. Through a case study of one community on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, this film examines the negative ecological and public health impacts of this industry, including neurological and child developmental problems.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

"In Indonesia, the use of mercury in small-scale gold mining has huge health consequences for those living near mining operations. Toxic plumes and other forms of exposure cause neurological problems, bone deformities, vision loss, deafness, and even death."

—Excerpted from the [Pulitzer Center website](#) about the film

BACKGROUND

Larry C. Price, the film's videographer and award-winning photographer, studied gold mining in the Philippines and produced an Emmy-winning piece on compressor mining: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/tag/larry-c-price>

See his work on the Philippines and Indonesia:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6Fv6zs46A8>

and on Burkina Faso:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwT4DQT1DBs>

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KEY PEOPLE

Puasi and Nyimas – the wife and daughter, respectively, of a millworker

Dita – the daughter of millworkers

Tahoonda – a 45-year-old farmer and miner

Pahir – a former miner in his mid-60s

Dr. Stephan Bose-O'Reilly – a doctor with BaliFokus, an NGO

Dr. Muchtarudin Mansyur – a director at the Indonesian Ministry of Health in Sulawesi, Indonesia

FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES

This brief documentary examines the mercury-based methods of small-scale gold mining in Sulawesi's village mills. Narratives and scenes about the mills alternate with personal stories about the health effects on workers and their families, along with the ecological impact on water, fishing, and rice farming and the local farmers.

About midway through the film, a map of Sulawesi in the Indonesian archipelago helps pinpoint this environmental and social crisis, but the map then zooms out to reinforce the fact that mercury-based gold mining also takes place throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Scenes of family caregiving and medical testing of both children and adults by BaliFokus, Dr. Stephan Bose-O'Reilly, and other doctors are shown throughout the film. They serve to emphasize the multiple neurological and other health effects, including death, that result from mercury poisoning. In Sulawesi, mercury levels are 50 times higher than what the U.N. deems safe.

The film concludes with an interview with Dr. Muchtarudin Mansyur, a director at the Indonesian Ministry of Health, who states that in Indonesia there are 800 mining hot spots that affect 250,000 workers. Dr. Mansyur also discusses the Indonesian government's limited legal ban on mercury for small-scale gold mining. And in the film's final scenes, villagers like Puasi, wife of a millworker and mother of Nyimas, a daughter stricken with hydrocephalus, state that they maintain their silence about these dangerous jobs.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Ask students to take notes relating to the following questions, which will serve as the basis for subsequent class discussion, while viewing this 6.5-minute film (which contains graphic content that might be disturbing to some viewers).

1. Describe the process of small-scale gold mining and the role of liquid mercury in it. How does the mercury end up in the air, water, soil, and, eventually, the people of Sulawesi?
2. How do Indonesian government departments, such as the Ministry of Health; NGO doctors, such as those with BaliFokus; and everyday Indonesian workers respond (or not) to the mercury pollution and poisoning from this industry?

ACTIVITIES

For more resources on the ecological and public health impacts of gold mining in Southeast Asia, see

<http://www.pulitzercenter.org/projects/philippines-gold-mines-child-labor-economy-poverty-compressor-mining>.

1. Compare mining methods used in Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as their ecological and public health implications.
2. The majority of Indonesians identify as Muslim, whereas the largest population of Catholics in Asia lives in the Philippines. Research how these religious groups in the two countries respond (or not) to this environmental and social justice issue.
3. Ask students to work in groups to:
 - Research how gold is used in a variety of commodities.
 - Discuss other “negative externalities,” for humans and ecosystems, of the gold industry, especially this kind of “artisanal” gold mining.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

More information about Larry C. Price can be found on the Pulitzer Center website: <https://pulitzercenter.org/people/larry-c-price>.