

# IN GOOD HANDS

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The Mina El Silencio in the Colombian department of Antioquia has been mining gold for 120 years. The owners, Gran Colombia Gold, offers its employees an attractive working environment with high safety standards. This is not a given in this rural region.

TEXT AND PHOTOS TOBIAS KÄUFER



## SWORN TEAM

The members of the rescue team listen carefully to the instructions prior to an exercise deep underground. In the event of an emergency, every maneuver must be right

**GRAN COLOMBIA GOLD**

An important employer in a structurally weak rural region – here: the site of the gold mine in Segovia, about a four-hour drive from Medellín



**T**he big sign is both a reminder and a motivation: “Accident-free: 41 days. Our record: 114 days.” It stands on the site of a gold mine in Segovia in the Colombian department of Antioquia. It is roughly a four-hour drive from the bustling city of Medellín, the department’s capital, to the small town – if a broken-down truck or landslide is not blocking the road. They are two completely different worlds: The economy is booming in Medellín; a growing number of international technology corporations are moving there. People in Segovia earn their living from the things the earth yields – from agriculture and mining. The Mina El Silencio owned by the company Gran Colombia Gold is as important to the people here as coal mining once was in the Ruhr region – in a structurally weak region, it is a driver of economic growth, an employer, and the center of people’s lives. On the site there is a swimming pool, soccer pitches, lounges, a fitness studio, and even a medical center. There

is also a school and a kindergarten. Anyone who works here should feel comfortable and also a little proud.

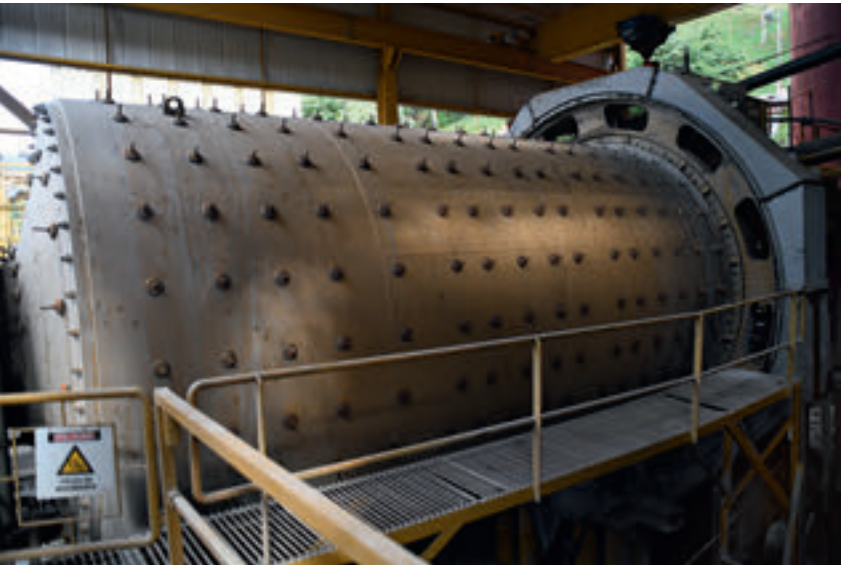
**MINING CREATES JOBS**

One of them is Monica Maria Gomez. She comes from Yolombó, a neighboring town, situated between Segovia and Medellín. Gomez is responsible for the electrical systems on the entire production site. “I make sure that everything works. If there is a problem somewhere, I investigate what has happened and rectify it,” says the Colombian. The above-ground part of the site – where everything that comes from deep below the ground is processed – is a huge complex of formidable machinery and state-of-the-art (yet tried-and-tested) technology. Gomez keeps her eye on all of this. If the electrical systems do not work, nothing can be produced. A great deal of responsibility rests on her shoulders. She was trained at SENA, an important part of the Colombian education system, which is available to the entire population. Then she seized her opportunity and successfully embarked on her career. Gomez

started out in the mine, before switching to production. For the past five years, she has been monitoring a labyrinth of cables, systems, computers, and machinery. Gomez is not the only woman from the region who has managed to work her way up to a management position through hard work and a good education. Jenny Palacio works as a shift manager, while Viviana Arismendi is responsible for occupational safety. For the women in the region, the mine provides the opportunity to determine their own career path. This is not a given in this rural region of the South American country. And it is one of the many and considerable differences between the legal and illegal mining industry in Colombia.

Illegal mining is one of the biggest destroyers of the environment in the country. The reckless use of mercury in particular is a disaster for the ecosystem. The heavy metal poisons rivers and contaminates the groundwater, thereby ending up in the food chain. These illegal mines are often found in environmentally sensitive areas like the Amazon rain forest and its offshoots. And the precious





**HEAVY MACHINERY** Gold is not only mined, but also processed at the complex in the Colombian town of Segovia



**GIRL POWER** Monica Maria Gomez (center) and her colleagues also monitor the processing plant

## ECONOMIC FACTOR FOR AN ENTIRE REGION

tree population is simply cut down almost everywhere. A bird’s-eye view reveals how illegal mining is inflicting wounds on the rain forest. Dark forces are mainly behind the activity; illegal armed groups, whose motivation is purely profit, often closely linked to the drug trade, the country’s second scourge. No consideration is given here to the safety of the employees, human rights, environmental protection, social achievements, career opportunities, or life chances. There are also no environmental guidelines, no site security, and no training. “Illegal mining is a consequence of poverty,” says company boss Lombardo Paredes Arenas. “If we fail to tackle poverty, illegal mining will not go away.” Legal mining has the potential to give those regions of Colombia that are not among the privileged an

opportunity to grow. His company plays its part in driving economic growth, creates jobs, and does everything it can to invest in safety on the site. The jobs are secure because the demand for gold continues unabated worldwide. Incidentally, the workers involved in illegal mining also benefit from this certainty.

### HELP IN TIMES OF NEED

It is also not unusual for the rescue team from the Mina El Silencio to be called upon by desperate relatives of an illegal mine in the neighborhood, although Franck Blandon’s team is actually trained and equipped to deal with rescue missions following accidents in the mine itself. “We are a well-rehearsed team – in an emergency we have to be able to rely on one another,” he says. Exercises are performed outdoors and underground. “The modern equipment is a blessing for our job. When you consider the environment in which people used to have to work and how the conditions used to be for the rescue teams, then it is clear that we have a real advantage nowadays.”

The men move closer together on the way to the mine. There is room for two people in each of the carriages that transports them underground at high speed. Today they are carrying out an exercise 200 meters underground. A march leads the group, equipped with state-of-the-art Dräger breathing apparatus and rescue equipment, to a gallery. An “unconscious” casualty is waiting there for help. A plan of action is initiated that Blandon’s men execute perfectly: They stabilize the injured colleague, establish an oxygen supply, and bring him to safety. Everything goes so well because the team members can rely on each other and the technology. “We are in an uncontrolled situation here – gases have caused our colleague to lose consciousness. Now he is lying injured on the floor,” says Blandon, explaining the task. Now every maneuver counts – not to mention functioning gas detection equipment (Type: Dräger X-am 2500/5600), which analyzes the ambient air. The unconscious colleague has been stabilized on a stretcher within a matter of minutes, given an oxygen supply, and led past heavy machinery to a safe zone. →



**DRY RUN**

The crew initially practice rescuing a casualty outside before entering the mine. Unwritten rule: Everyone must be able to rely on one another underground







**TAKING A BREATHER** The workers gather for a brief break before heading underground

**PROTECTING** Carlos Blandón Ospina is head of the occupational health and safety division at Gran Colombia Gold

## TECHNOLOGY DRIVES GROWTH

“We trained for these kinds of incidents with colleagues from Canada and familiarized ourselves with the latest technology while we were there. The fact that we are now using it here in Colombia is a big step forward,” says Blandon.

“The mine has gone through a developmental process,” explains Carlos Blandón Ospina, head of the occupational health and safety division at Gran Colombia Gold. “There is a big tradition,” he says. “Gold has been mined here for 120 years and the safety concept has improved step by step over the course of time.” He says this is only possible with investment: “We have invested in the ventilation and lighting systems as well as in maintenance procedures, safety clothing, and breathing appara-

tus. All areas benefit from this and now have the latest technology.” The mine has thus prepared itself for the two most likely causes of accidents: falling rocks and a lack of ventilation. “It is essentially the same in every industry. Every investment made in the employees’ quality of life is repaid in the form of an increase in production. We also operate on this principle.” An investment in the technology for the rescue teams is thus not just an objective improvement in performance capability, but also a message to the workforce: “We will not let you down if something happens.”

### ACCIDENT PREVENTION

In terms of prevention, the medical center managed by Dr. Rafael Rodríguez performs the relevant tests. This is also where colleagues are checked to establish whether they have consumed alcohol or even illegal drugs within the past few hours. The drug test (Type: Dräger DrugTest 5000) shows whether substances such as cocaine or marijuana are still present in the saliva. “We have to prevent someone from entering the

mine once or twice a month, because it’s not just about their own safety, but also that of their colleagues,” says Rodríguez. Anyone who operates the machinery underground or controls the plant above ground in the production process, must be 100 percent fit for work. Those who are not fit must take a break – until their values have returned to normal. Preventing accidents before they happen is one of the key philosophies in Segovia. The medical concept is also part of the mine’s overall concept. The workforce should be confident that they are in good hands when it comes to health matters. This is a location factor for a company in a small town a four-hour drive away from the city of Medellín and its medical infrastructure. After all, a fair number of skilled workers come to Segovia from Medellín and expect to be looked after there. For safety chief Carlos Blandón Ospina, this is all part of the overall concept: “All the things that improve our employees’ quality of life ensure that they identify more with the company – and are motivated and productive every day.” ◀