

From Ghana

Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye¹

The Gimmick of the Fight against Environmental Degradation and the Pollution of Water Bodies in Ghana

It is a truism that the very survival and sustainable development of any community is dependent on the availability of fresh water. Brauer (2002) captures this thus: 'The availability of freshwater is a key to sustainable development and an essential element in health, food production, and poverty reduction. Without an adequate supply of safe water, all other development efforts are doomed to fail' (Brauer 2002:15). One hopes Ghanaians are listening because if the current trend does not abate, where activities of illegal miners (popularly known in Ghana as *galamsey*) are causing so much destruction to rivers in the country, the country will have to be importing portable water for her people in the very near future.

In a recent interview granted by Mr Michael Agyeman, the Chief Manager in charge of Public Relations at the Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL), to Mr. Isaac Yeboah a *Daily Graphic* reporter [03 October, 2013], he lamented that the company has begun drilling bore holes for its clients because of the high cost of chemicals for the treatment of water due to the heavy pollution of rivers and water bodies through illegal mining activities. He indicated that treatment plants at Odaso, which supplies water to parts of Obuasi (a town in the Ashanti Region of Ghana) and its surrounding areas, and another at Kyebi (a town in the Eastern region of Ghana,) which draws water from the Oda and the Birim rivers, have been shut down because of the high cost of water treatment chemicals. And this is as a result of the activities of miners on rivers that the company relies on to serve the needs of its clients. Today it is said that Ghana loses over five million gallons of water daily.



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The irony, however, is that most of the very people who claim to be concerned about this serious situation of our rivers, and the dangers illegal mining and logging pose to the environment, are the same people involved in such practices, either directly or indirectly. It is common knowledge in Ghana that people in responsible positions, particularly politicians and traditional rulers, are those sponsoring these illegal miners and loggers. It is also known that when a foreign mining company wants land, politicians and other well-placed people push those enquiries forward.

One often hears of arrests of illegal miners but no prosecutions take place. The reason is that the so-called 'big men' tend to influence the police who make the arrests, so the cases do not reach the courts. As for the police, the problem may not be theirs; they act to keep their jobs.

As for the involvement of traditional leaders in this illegal mining saga, this is unfortunate; because they are supposed to be the custodians of the lands in their traditional areas. That is why it is sad to hear that a prominent chief in the country, who is purported to be an environmentalist, is said to be involved in illegal logging, destroying our forests. I first heard of his clandestine activities in 2008 in the USA from a gentleman from his area. We were discussing the causes of the rapid environmental degradation in Ghana, when he told me about the activities of this chief. He sold trees in the sacred groves in the area to timber contractors. If it is so, then, it is a serious case because in traditional religion such actions are considered sacrilegious. I told this story to my students back home in Ghana and to my surprise, it was confirmed by one of the students, whose wife hails from the area. One then understands why occasionally we hear of youths in some of these traditional areas protesting against their chiefs, claiming they are selling their lands to illegal loggers and mining companies.



Mining on a cocoa farm in Ghana

A disturbing part of this deplorable behaviour is its extension to cocoa growing areas in the country. It is known that cocoa farmers are being induced with large sums of money to sell their cocoa plantations. Even those who initially resist eventually must sometimes capitulate, if they are unfortunate enough to share boundaries with farmers who have sold their farms to these miners; because the miners then dig trenches dug around the neighbouring farms, making it impossible for workers to get there. This extension of illegal mining to the cocoa growing area has economic implications. It reduces cocoa production and so the country loses its major source of foreign exchange, since cocoa is a major product of Ghana. Unfortunately, most of those engaged in this activity are Chinese and China is one of those countries on whom Ghana relies for her foreign earnings. In the past three months, pressure has been mounting on the government to act decisively against environmental degradation, particularly *galamsey*. This pressure is being championed by the Ghanaian media but many believe that it will not yield any positive result since the political will is just not there, due to the perceived view that high placed people are behind the operation of the illegal mining in the country.

Notes

1. Faculty of Arts, Department of Religion and Human Values, College of Humanities and Legal Studies (CHLS) University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana.
E-mail: kwasi.nyamekye@yahoo.com / awuah.nyamekye@ucc.edu.gh