

Ghanaian army kills nine “illegal” miners at AngloGold Ashanti’s goldmine

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Ghanaian soldiers shot and killed nine “illegal” miners and severely injured 14 more at the Obuasi goldmine on Monday.

The mine, Ghana’s largest, belongs to multinational mining corporation AngloGold Ashanti. It lies 60 kms south of Kumasi in the Ashanti region.

While the Ghanaian army claimed that 60 illegal miners carrying rifles and weapons had breached the security fence late at night and fired on the military patrol guarding the mine, leading to the shootout, Kofi Adams, the local chairman of the Ghana National Association of Small-Scale Miners, denied the men were armed. He described the killings as “unprecedented,” adding that it was “difficult to understand why it had happened”. He said that, in the past, the guards would fire warning shots to scare off trespassers.

That this was indeed the case is evidenced by the fact that the government has called on AngloGold Ashanti to cover the medical expenses of the injured and the burial costs of the dead, with President John Dramani Mahama ordering an immediate investigation into the killings.

The military’s murderous tactics in defence of the mining giant’s profits caused outrage, with people taking to the streets of Obuasi town in protest and setting fire to several buses. Angry residents poured onto AngloGold Ashanti’s grounds and set fire to vehicles and equipment. They accused the company of exploiting the country’s mineral resources while doing little or nothing to develop the area or create jobs.

The shooting has highlighted the social and environmental devastation that has engulfed workers in the world’s sixth largest gold exporter and second largest cocoa exporter, even as gold prices have soared. In 2018, Ghana overtook South Africa as the largest producer of gold in Africa, with artisanal and small-scale mining accounting for 40 percent of Ghana’s total gold production.

Years ago, illegal or artisanal mining, known as “galamsey”—gathering the alluvial deposits dispersed by the large-scale activity of the mining corporations—was carried out by young men searching for gold with picks and shovels,

or their bare hands. Ghana is so rich in the mineral—in colonial times Ghana was known as the Gold Coast—that even its topsoil has gold. Panning, the sieving and washing of sediment to catch the gold that settles at the bottom, was also common.

While Ghana legalised small-scale mining in 1989, introducing a licensing system, it was the Changfan—a new multipurpose machine developed by China that enables exploration in riverbeds—that vastly expanded the scale of artisanal mining. The rise in gold prices after the 2008 banking crisis, when gold went from \$600 an ounce in 2006 to \$1,922 per ounce in 2011, sparked a massive free-for-all, with Chinese and Ghanaian miners competing over access to gold.

Last October, gold reached an all-time high of \$2,790 per ounce, driven by fears of geopolitical and global economic turmoil—a reflection of the fragility of the world economy.

Ghana issued more than 2,000 artisanal mining licences between 2017 and 2021--95 percent of all the licences issued between 1989 and 2021--vastly enriching chiefs and local politicians in the process. But despite this, many miners are unlicensed and are not formally registered. It is estimated that fewer than 30 percent of small-scale miners are registered, with most remaining informal, illegal and “galamsey”.

In the ensuing gold rush, businessmen and local politicians bought out cocoa farms and forest land to turn them into mining sites. Artisanal mining now employs more than one million people and accounts for 40 percent of Ghana’s gold production as poverty-stricken workers have sought work with the illegal syndicates or taken up gold mining on their own, earning up to \$125 a week--as much as a teacher earns in a month.

It has led to an environmental disaster, with the destruction of 4,726 hectares of land in seven of the country’s 16 regions as forests have been felled and the topsoil and subsoil dug out and deposited at gold washing plants located in rivers. The mining has also led to the destruction of 19,000 hectares of farmland in key cocoa-growing areas,

leading to a fall in cocoa production.

The gold mining industry has polluted 60 percent of the country's waters, with its use of mercury and cyanide, along with other chemicals, to extract gold from the soil, and degraded the land. This has led to an alarming increase in turbidity levels. The Ghana Water Company Limited reporting turbidity levels at the Sekyere Hemang Water Treatment Plant of 14,000 Nephelometric Turbidity Units (NTU), blowing the roof off the World Health Organization's safe threshold of five NTUs for water processing.

The boom in gold mining has done nothing to alleviate the poverty of the broad mass of the population. Unemployment has worsened, the cost of living has soared and power outages are the norm. Rampant corruption and nepotism and government vanity projects, such as the controversial and yet to be completed \$400 million national cathedral project that could balloon to \$1 billion, have caused widespread anger.

More than 40 percent of Ghana's 34 million population live in "multidimensional" poverty, a measure that includes financial poverty, education, health, living standards and basic infrastructure services. Poverty and food insecurity are expected to rise for at least the next two years. This has forced many people to seek work where they can.

In 2022, the government defaulted on most of its foreign debt, causing its currency to plummet against the dollar and inflation to skyrocket. While Ghana has secured loans from the International Monetary Fund under a \$3 billion bailout programme, the 17th in the country's history, this has come with hard to fulfil conditions. President Mahama's government, elected last December on promises of growth and change, has already indicated its intention to seek additional funding and slash public spending as debt servicing takes a massive 30 percent of its budget.

These terrible conditions, in a country so rich in resources, demonstrate that despite gaining formal independence from Britain in 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana was no more able than any of the other colonial countries to break free from the economic exploitation of the giant banks and corporations that controlled the finance of and the trade in African commodities. Subject to continuing exploitation, indebted African countries are net exporters of capital although they are among the poorest in the world, while debt relief has done nothing to alleviate social conditions.

Their national bourgeois leaders accepted the arbitrary boundaries drawn up by the colonial powers that cut across traditional and tribal groups and were opposed to any movement that would have mobilised the workers and poor peasants on a continent-wide basis against imperialism. Their interests lay in maintaining a grip over their "own" national enclave and thus they ensured that Africa remained

in thrall to the international banks and corporations from which they in effect secured a commission.

Trotsky's analysis of the class dynamics of oppressed nations made at the beginning of the twentieth century is entirely relevant today. In his *Theory of Permanent Revolution*—the theory on which the 1917 Russian revolution was based and a workers' state established—he explained that the emerging bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development could not carry out the tasks of the national revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe.

They were incapable of carrying through their own bourgeois revolution because class relations had fundamentally changed during the nineteenth century. In Russia, the bourgeoisie faced a more powerful danger its interests--the working class--than the old feudal setup. This meant that the working class would now play the decisive role in the democratic revolution, which could only sustain itself as part of an immediately engaged socialist revolution, overthrowing capitalist property ownership.

Such a proletarian revolution could not be confined to a single country but would have a revolutionary impact on the rest of the world. Indeed, the construction of a socialist economy in backward Russia depended on the extension of the revolution into the more advanced countries of Europe.

It is this class analysis that explains the impotence of Nkrumah and his successors in Ghana in the face of imperialism.

Trotsky's conception—based upon the revolutionary potential of the working class—is the only viable strategy for Ghana and the African continent. The working class and poor masses can be emancipated politically, economically and culturally only by a socialist movement that takes production and finance out of the hands of private capital and repudiates the debt to the foreign banks. Such a working class movement must be an international one, part of a socialist revival in Europe, America and the advanced capitalist countries to overthrow the profit system.



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