

Large acres of land in the Ashanti and Central regions have been devastated by galamsey operators. The government may have succeeded in flushing out thousands of illegal small-scale miners, mostly foreigners, but a more daunting task of reclaiming the thousands of acres of degraded lands left behind by the 'galamsey' operators remains to be tackled.

A visit to the illegal small-scale mining areas in the Ashanti and Central regions recently revealed the unbelievable vastness of degraded lands and the pollution of rivers. In many parts of the two regions, particularly at Tontokrom in the Ashanti Region and Dunkwa in the Central Region, large acres of land are dotted with huge pits, while many water bodies like the Offin and Oda rivers have been heavily polluted.

The extent of degradation of the environment and pollution of rivers begs the question: What would have been the state of affairs if national security operatives, acting on the directives of the president, had not cracked down on the illegal small-scale miners?

"The situation would have been terrible and there would not have been any land available," was a unanimous response by national security operatives engaged in the anti-illegal small-scale mining exercise and many concerned citizens.

Environmental assessment

The Environmental Assessment Regulation, 1999 (LI 1652) requires individuals and organisations to submit an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) on their undertakings to the EPA, detailing the potential impact of their projects on the environment and mitigation measures to deal with such challenges. The EIA is reviewed and assessed by the EPA, and after ensuring that all requirements are satisfactorily met, the agency then issues an environmental permit to the applicants to begin their projects. Data from the EPA indicate that there are between 3,000 and 5,000 small-scale mining sites across the country that have been approved by the agency.

The number of illegal small-scale mining sites is unknown, but given the clandestine and indiscriminate nature of the 'galamsey' business, they could be more than the EPA-approved small-scale mining sites. By virtue of their illegal conduct, 'galamsey' operators do not go through the approval processes at the EPA and so they have little appreciation for good environmental practices and no regard for mitigation measures.

Reclamation challenges

There is nobody to hold directly responsible for the colossal mess created, as the illegal small-scale miners abandon the mine fields and water bodies after defiling them thrusting that responsibility on the government. What the government needs now, and what it seems to lack at the moment, is funds and logistics to reclaim the expansive degraded lands and restore polluted water bodies to their natural state and usefulness.

In the Upper Denkyira East District in the Central Region, there are more than 2000 acres of degraded lands begging for reclamation, while the course of River Offin has been blocked by the 'galamsey' operators, hampering the flow of water in the process. But the national security taskforce is totally helpless in dealing with the situation as of now.

"There is the need to dredge the Offin but we don't have the logistics and equipment to do that job," the acting Central Regional Liaison Officer of the National Security Taskforce on Illegal Small-Scale Mining, WO1 Anthony Ampong (retd) indicated.

New body required

Apart from the logistics and equipment needed to reclaim the degraded lands and dredge the polluted flyovers, members of the National Security Taskforce may not have the expertise to undertake the reclamation exercise. That is why WO1 Ampong suggests the need to engage the Field Engineers Regiment of the Ghana Army and the Ghana Navy for that job. The Upper Denkyira East District Mining Officer of the Minerals Commission, Mr Wilson Waanab Zoogah, had a similar idea on the task of reclamation.

He said the sheer magnitude of the damage caused to the environment required the setting up of a separate body from the National Security Task force to undertake the reclamation exercise. For his part, the President of the Ghana National Association of Small Scale Miners (GNASSM), Evangelist Collins Osei Kusi, said there was the need to include the GNASSM in the reclamation exercise because members of the association knew the terrain very well.

He said the involvement of the association would also help distinguish between the concessions of legal and illegal small-scale miners.

Foreigners still around

Even as the government is confronted with the task of reclaiming the degraded lands and polluted water bodies, and despite the national exercise to flush out foreigners from the small-scale mining business, there are some remnant foreigners still lurking around 'galamsey' sites in Parts of the Ashanti and Central regions, eager to cause more damage.

Some of the foreigners, according to security taskforce personnel, had returned to the country after they were arrested and repatriated to their countries earlier in the year. The illegal foreign miners are said to have changed their modus operandi by working in the night to outwit the national security taskforce. But the security personnel have been relentless in their operations, as they continued to take the 'battle' to the illegal small-scale miners and arrest them day and night.

The Head of Public Affairs of the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS), ACOI Francis Palmdeti, confirmed that more foreigners had been arrested after the mass repatriation of those arrested earlier. He said as of Wednesday, August 28, 2013, the GIS had 30 Chinese in its custody awaiting repatriation.

Security concerns

The alleged return of illegal foreign miners after their repatriation, and the recalcitrance of others to abandon the mine pits, has raised concerns about the sustainability of the government's anti-illegal small-scale mining campaign. The cost involved in the provision of logistics and equipment for the taskforce and the maintenance of security personnel on the field have not been established but sources close to the national security taskforce suggest it is very huge.

In the Central Region, for instance, the core of security personnel have to be moved from the regional capital in Cape Coast for operations in Dunkwa and other parts of the Upper Denkyira East District.

Some of the illegal foreign miners are well armed, and on a few occasions, they have boldly exchanged fire with national security personnel. One soldier recounted an instance when a Chinese 'galamsey' operator opened fire on members of the national security taskforce, missing a police officer narrowly. "It's a very risky operation and under such circumstances, we return fire for fire," he said. Walking through the rough terrain of a forest in the Amansie West District, and being escorted by a heavily armed soldier to one of the 'galamsey' operating sites was personally a very enduring experience, but for the military escort, it was only a 'comedy' of their task.

The impression that the law is not deterrent enough to discourage illegal small-scale mining, coupled with the risky nature of the exercise and the observation that some of the illegal foreign miners repatriated earlier are returning to base, is been a source of worry to the security operatives. The mood gauged from some of them suggested that staying on the mine fields might not be the ultimate solution; a permanent solution is surely required.

Local collaborators

But the search for a permanent solution may be elusive for now, given the role of local collaborators who encourage the foreigners to continue doing the illegal business. The recalcitrant foreigners are reported to have bought mobile phones for some people in the local communities for purposes of alerting them promptly to flee from advancing national security operatives. The list of local collaborators is very tall and includes powerful and influential people in society, such as traditional rulers, politicians, security officials and opinion leaders.

Traditional rulers are cited as the prime collaborators for releasing land to foreigners, even for a pittance. Sometimes, the traditional leaders allegedly collect reclamation bonds or what is locally termed 'cover money' from the foreigners, suggesting that they (foreigners) have the liberty to leave after destroying the environment and that they (chiefs) will do the reclamation. But the 'cover money' always remains covered in the pockets of the chiefs, leaving the land degraded and depriving the communities of its benefits.

Some government officials and Members of Parliament (MPs) allegedly own concessions on which they engage 'galamsey' operators, and they pull every string to protect their interests.

Source: Daily Graphic