

ILLEGAL mining activities, sometimes called 'galamsey', seem to be becoming brisk rather than waning in the Western Region, 20 years after the legalisation of small scale mining in Ghana. In 1989, the government, worried by the illegal mining activities, passed the PDNC Law 218 to legalise the small scale mining in a bid to check 'galamsey'. However, that appears to be yielding no results as illegal mining activities were at a record high going by the Ghana by the 2008 Ghana Chamber of Mines report.

'Galamsey' is a practice of long standing. Under the law, small-scale miners need to be registered in order to work on land to which they have legal access, and are subject to regulation by either the Environmental Protection Agency or the Ghana Minerals Commission, or both.

Surprisingly, a field trip undertaken by Times at the weekend to some mining communities such as Bogoso, Prestea, Mpohor, Benso and Damang, where some of the country's gold is embedded, revealed how the precious metal is being illegally mined with impunity.

Spread all over in the communities are open pits besieged by unskilled youth confidently digging for gold to sell to prospective buyers, without a care about the dangers being created for themselves, the inhabitants and the environment as a result of their unregulated activities.

With the several mining companies, including -Golden Star Bogoso/Prestea Limited (GSBPL), Gold Fields Limited and Golden Star (Wassa) Limited, in the area being the largest employers, it is feared that if the fast-spreading illegal mining was not brought to a halt, the companies' continued existence would be threatened with grave consequences for the people in the communities.

"Mining without such registration and regulation is illegal but unfortunately 'galamsey' is widespread in this part of the country and the earlier the authorities did something about it the better, because of the adverse effect on the health and safety of the inhabitants in the communities and the environment," Nigel Tamlyn, General Manager of GSBPL, said in an interview with the Times. He said because they are unregulated and operate outside the law, the 'galamsey' operators, and even some licensed small scale miners, often cause major environmental damage, use mercury for processing, de-vegetate indiscriminately and do not conduct reclamation of trenches and pits as the mining companies do.

Nigel Tamlyn said indiscriminate blasting by the 'galamsey' operators caused the collapse of one of the company's shafts and GSBPL had to spend millions of dollars to repair it. The GSBPL General Manager said his company does not condone any mining activity that is not carried out in pursuant to the Minerals and Mining Act, 2006 (or prior law) and other relevant laws of Ghana because it is illegal and because it may adversely affect the communities and the environment.

Nigel Tamlyn said GSBPL has signed on to ISO 14001 and the International Cyanide Management Code and therefore complies with good environmental management practices. ISO 14001 is an international code of practice for environmental management. The voluntary cyanide code was developed with, among others, the United Nations Environmental Programme and is focused on the safe management of cyanide in gold mine production. Though the communities highly appreciate the cash flow that illegal mining can bring, it is evident that the activity also bring increased levels of social and medical ills, and disrespect for the rule of law.

Views gathered from the 'galamsey' operators in the area are that their activities have guaranteed jobs for the youth and reduced crime rate, among others, in the mining communities.

Incredibly, they seem to care less about the danger their activities pose to the inhabitants and the environment, even though they are not unaware of that.

Additionally, some of the inhabitants in the communities have the perception that the mining companies are exploitative and contributing little in real terms to the national economy In general and the local mining communities in particular.

However, Isaac Quarn, Manager of Golden Star Oil Palm Plantation (GSOPP) Limited, a company established three years ago as a subsidiary of Golden Star Resources (GSR) in pursuance of GSR's corporate social responsibility, debunked the allegations and set the records straight.

The manager said GSOPP is mandated to promote the development of oil palm plantations in the mining communities using the small holder concept. This is done in partnership with the traditional authorities and farmers whose lands were affected by the company's mines.

"The objective is to develop a sustainable alternative livelihood scheme for the mining communities where GSR mines are located, says Mr. Quarn.

He said, "under the partnership, the traditional authorities offer their land to, become partners of the scheme, GSOPP provides funds .for the development of the plantations through the GSR foundation and other development partners and in collaboration with the chiefs, small holder farmers are selected to participate as beneficiaries to the scheme", The GSOPP boss said 5,800 hectares of land has been released far for project with 310 inhabitants engaged to plant and nurse the oil palm seedlings, adding "each worker earns an average wage of GH¢5.20 a day".

He said GSOPP has sunk about \$1.8 million into the plantation whilst farmers, totalling 69 are each given four hectare plots, free seedlings and a soft loan to commence the agri-business. The project "he said" has generated employment for the communities reduced poverty and created wealth through sustainable agri business," adding "GSOPP has also won Netbank Capital Award, a global honour for doing zero burning and environmental conservation practices".

At Damang where Golden Star Wassa Limited (GSWL) is located Mike Mracek, General Manager of the company, disclose to Times that GSWL negotiated and paid \$8 million to 5,000 'galamse' operators before having access to their company's own, concession.

He said GSWL and GSBPP have set up separate foundations to fund alternative livelihood schemes as well as health, education, capacity building, water and sanitation and general infrastructure projects.

Source: Ghanaian Times