Ghana: Government Puts The Last Nail In the Coffin of Ghana's Forest

Two million acres of forest land is lost annually to mining in Ghana, with mining concessions taking over 70% of the total land area, consequently decreasing considerably food production. The World Bank and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) --the private lending arm of the World Bank-- have provided start-up capital and cajoled African countries to deregulate, liberalize and privatise their extractive sectors to attract foreign direct investment.

Now, five multinational mining companies operating in Ghana --Chirano Goldmines Limited, Satellite Goldfields Limited, Nevsun/AGC, Birim/AGC, Newmont Ghana limited-- will soon tear apart several thousand hectares of forest of the Subri River Forest Reserve, Cape Three Points reserve, the Supuma Shelterbelt, Opon Mansi, Tano Suraw and Suraw Extension in the Western region, and the Atewa Range forest and Ajenjua Bepo in the Eastern region. The companies invested millions of dollars and found staggering volumes of gold deposits beneath the lush green forests when the previous National Democratic Council (NDC) government gave them free rein to scavenge the forest reserves for gold. Now the NDC is no more in power and they want the present New Patriotic Party (NPP) government to enable them to move into actual mining.

Environmentalists and human rights activists say granting permits for surface mining in these ecologically fragile reserves will aggravate the already alarming rate of deforestation and forest degradation in the country and wreak havoc on freshwater systems and watersheds. Also, concerns about surface mining and heap leaching have been triggered by the lethal impact of cyanide, which is widely believed that even at low levels could have serious health effects in long term chronic exposures.

The reserves contain the only significant blocks of forest remaining in the country; they hold back fires, maintain local rainfall and humidity levels, and provide sanctuary for a stunning array of species listed as internationally threatened with extinction. If the present government grants the mining companies their wish, they will blast roads deep into the heart of the forest reserves, build camps and excavate vast stretches of top soil together with the age old trees. Tonnes of earth and rock debris avalanching down hill in some cases will also blanket rivers and streams and smother the spawning beds of fish. The heavy influx of mine workers and roads that are etched into previously inaccessible areas may also bring boomtown conditions and attract more squatters, loggers, galamsey boys [traditional miners who pan for gold on a small scale], Lotto kiosks and container shops into the reserves. The expatriate staff of the mining companies will likely chase the bush meat for their dinner tables.

A key argument of the hard-line proponents of mining in the forest reserves is that "the country needs money". At the heart of this argument lies the economic theory that suggests that developing countries should exploit their natural resources to develop, and that pollution, displacement of communities, etc., are necessary and inevitable side-effects.

Huge fortunes have been made by all kinds of foreign firms operating in Ghana but the returns do not remain in the country. Institute of Cultural Affairs' Lambert Okrah says: "It is not a case of whether we

should go hungry while the gold sits beneath the trees. Gold Mining has been going on in Tarkwa, Prestea and Obuasi for so many years; now, are the people there not hungry? These places are so desolate that you will never believe they have gold."

In terms of employment generation, the sector has a relatively limited capacity to generate employment because surface mining operations are technology intensive, relying on a small number of highly-skilled workers who in many cases are expatriates. Valuable historical and archaeological sites in some of the reserves including sacred groves will be destroyed. Agricultural lands and important watersheds will also be endangered and the magnificent reserves turned into an industrial eyesore, blighted by roads, pipelines, construction debris, discarded sardine tins and plastic bags. Even the Environmental Impact Assessment of four mining companies operating in the area gave a total number of populations to be displaced as 22,267, from 20 communities.

Detailing the impact of mining in the Wassa area, lecturer and writer Thomas Akabza points out that: "While mining companies and central government reap the benefits of mining if any, very little benefits go to the people in the mining communities. These people who mostly practice traditional and subsistence agriculture are displaced from their land on which they farm leading to loss of livelihoods and the breakdown of social ties. Additionally mining has led to growing conflicts among communities displaced by mining operations as well as serious mining related health and social problems such as malaria, tuberculosis, conjunctivitis, skin diseases, prostitution and drug abuse".

Friends of the Earth's Abraham Baffoe said: "We can prosper as a nation without having to raze down our forest reserves for mining. We know very well that after the mining there will be no forests. They're trying to tell everyone that they can reclaim degraded sites but we should not deceive ourselves, its not just a matter of planting grass and trees here and there but the fact is that plantations do not make forests."

Networked with each other nationally, regionally and even globally, mining affected communities in Ghana have stepped up the struggle for human rights, self-determination and social and environmental justice and also calling on private lenders to reject mining projects that create problems for communities. However, human rights violations continue to rise with several cases of arbitrary arrests, violations of the right of access to food, forceful evictions, inadequate compensation and demolishing of villages.

"When the forest reserves are destroyed, the rivers will dry up and so will our lives", they declare. "When we went into the forest to plant cocoyam, plantain and pepper to feed our families, government people chased us out and told us not to farm there again. They told us it's a forest reserve and farming is not allowed there, they wouldn't even let us collect snails from the reserves but now government itself wants to send bulldozers there to destroy the forests because the white man says so. My brother, is this fair? When a poor man cuts a stick or kills a rodent in the forest reserve, he is thrown into jail; when a mining company pulls down a forest reserve, the big men from Accra travel all the way here to celebrate with him, is this fair?" asked Sisi Nana, a thirty year old mother of four at Bibiani.

Excerpted and adapted from "Golden Greed. Trouble Looms Over Ghana's Forest Reserves", by Mike Anane, e-mail: lejcec@ghana.com , sent by Lambert Okrah, Institute for Cultural Affairs (ICA), e-mail: icagh@ghana.com The full document is available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Ghana/Goldengreed.html