

THE GOLD CURSE

By Benjamin Tetteh

In December last year (2011) a group of women in Dumase, a community near Bogoso in the Western Region of Ghana, blocked the road leading to the Golden Star Resources Mines to protest against the pollution of their only source of water. Police were called in but the women refused to move. They did not leave until officials from the District Assembly came to assure them that their water tanks, which had ran out of water for days, would be filled. Months on the villagers insist they can no longer drink from their streams. As mining continues in the area with assurances that the residents would be relocated, Joy News' Benjamin Tetteh finds out how else residents are coping with mining activities in the area.

Intro: Fight over water at standing Water Tank:

For centuries the people of Dumase have been subsistence farmers, living peacefully and depending on their environment for survival. The main sources of water have been streams and smaller water bodies that flow throughout the area. The people have long held spiritual and emotional attachments to all their water bodies in the area...some people consider them to be sacred gifts that must be protected.

But things changed 20 years ago when government granted licenses for large-scale mining in the area. The companies moved in and two decades years later the Apepre, Beenya, and Wurawura- the main water bodies of the area have been poisoned by mining spillages of cyanide, Arsenic and other heavy metals.

CUE: WOMEN COMPLAIN

The only company with the license to mine in this area is Golden Star Resources, a multi-national mining company registered in Canada. It also, has operations in six other countries. Golden Star is responsible for two major reported cases of cyanide spillages here since 2004. In both cases when the local people raised the alarm, the company sought to either play down or deny that there was pollution. In 2005 the people publicly protested against environmental and human rights abuses perpetrated by Golden Star Resources. The protest ended in the shooting down of 7 protesters by police and security forces. The people of Dumase say they have still not been compensated for the spillages.

Today Golden Star Resources on its website boasts a new improved positive relationship with the local community and the surrounding environment, but the people of Dumase report a very different experience.

Stand up

NGOs working in mining areas believe that denials made by mining companies when spillages occur leads to local people continuing to use and consume polluted water, which can result in people contracting serious

and sometimes life -threatening illnesses, such as cyanide poisoning. A situation they say would be avoided if mining companies were honest and about spillages as soon as they happen.

Stand up-

The women of Dumase complain that they can still see traces of heavy metals in their streams. In 2004 when the first cyanide spillage was reported, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA asked the local people to stay away from their water bodies. Eight years later the company still advises the locals to stay away from these water bodies. Public Relations Director of Golden Star Resources, Mrs. Ellaine Kwame tells me it is still not safe for the people of Dumase to use their own water.

CUE: GOLDEN STAR- DON'T DRINK (You cannot have tailings dam sitting by a stream and say that people should go and drink it. For the time being it is not possible to have them drink from water from this source)

However she does not accept that it is the activities of the mining company that continue to pollute local water bodies.

While in Dumase I meet two women who say they drank water from the Apepre stream in 2006, became sick and have been living on medication ever since.

One of them, Afia Asantewa tells me she used water from the stream the very morning of the second cyanide spill, and she blames her current condition on the cyanide.

CUE: SICK WOMAN (*I have blood pressure. Every month I go to the hospital. If I don't get to the hospital on time then my head aches badly as if I would die. We didn't have this kind of ailments until the water got polluted*) what are the other illnesses that can be contracted from drinking water that has been poisoned by cyanide?

A recent water analysis by the Centre for Environmental Impact Analysis, an environmental research organisation, found high levels of heavy metals in the waters at Dumase. By the World Health Organisation's standards the presence of Arsenic, a toxic chemical, in water should not be more than 0.01 gm/L. But some water bodies have as much as 24 mg/L of arsenic, more than two thousand times the acceptable level. It should be noted that Arsenic is the most toxic of all the chemicals used in Gold mining. It can cause skin cancer, itchy skin, and the black foot disease and death. And they fear for food crops planted in such conditions. The research found arsenic levels in cassava in Prestea to be 30.68 milligrams per kilogramme. Compared to WHO standards which are less than 0.003 milligrams per kilogramme, this is far above the level for human consumption. Samuel Obiri led the research.

CUE: OBIRI

WACAM an environmental group that champions the rights of mining communities, points out that Dumase is part of the nation's food and fruit basket so the quality and safety of its produce should be of concern to all Ghanaians.

While in the area, some of the concerned women of Dumase take me on a long walk to see the area where Golden Star Resources has its tailing dam, where waste water from the mine is dumped. We spend over an hour trekking the long windy farmland to the dam. The locals call it Nakafa.

CUE: STAND UP AT DAM (Narration at the scene)

From the Dam I walk past a security post pretending I'm going to fetch water for my fellow farmers. Less than 20 metres from the security post are traces of seepages from the dam flowing right into the stream. Water seeping through the tailings dam into the Apepre stream is visibly different. The women farm in this area and they see this seepage regularly. They accuse the mining company of polluting their water without making any effort to stop it. Instead the company tells them to stay away from their water bodies, without providing them with adequate alternatives. When will this company stop polluting our water? One of them asked rhetorically.

Golden Star Resources has provided 4 large water tanks for the town, which has a population of 4000 trying to deal with the situation. The area is

a hilly and some women and children have to trek long distance to get to the tanks, and the women say that the water is insufficient and it is not available regularly.

CUE: WATER INSUFFICIENT (We have four tanks in the town and only one tanker brings a single load of water to distribute to all four tanks. That's not sufficient for the whole community. This has resulted in fights and people have hurt each other, even pregnant women get beaten. Government must save us from this trouble)

Executive Director of WACAM, Daniel Owusu Koranteng says Ghana's mining laws give a blank check to mining companies to treat water bodies anyway they like with impunity ...

CUE: WACAM- LAW (When you go into the minerals and mining Act-section 17 it allows a company, of course with some license from the water resources Commission, that they can impound, obtain and divert and do many things with water. That is close to a blank check...)

He adds that mining companies in Ghana have based their argument on this clause in the mining law to pollute water bodies in their areas. And often all you see is a signpost warning communities to stay away from local water bodies. There are dozens of these notices spread across Ghana's mining communities.

Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency, the EPA has not made a definite statement about the water quality in Dumase. But for the past 3 years the EPA has been rating the performances of mining companies in the country. Termed "AKOBEN" the rating has caused unease in the mining industry since its inception. It rates the performance of mining companies in seven key areas: from legal issues through the environment to corporate social responsibility. So far, Golden Star Resources failed to impress in the two ratings released in 2009 and 2010. 2011 result is not out yet. In both years, the company was rated RED, on compliance with environmental quality standards and toxic releases. In the words of the EPA: The company has NOT complied with the environmental quality standards for toxics.

In both years, Golden Star's overall ranking was RED, which was defined by the regulator as failing to fulfill the requirements of LI 1652, AND creates risks from toxics and hazardous wastes mismanagement and discharges. This Legislative Instrument relates to the Environmental Impact Assessment.

Some civil society organisations have criticised the EPA for not taking a step further to penalize mining companies who flout these basic legal regulations, and thus exposing the environment and citizenry to poisonous chemicals.

So as it is the "AKOBEN" or rating is only serving to name and shame companies that do not stick to mining standards....beyond this there is no further action.

It is also worth mentioning that so far no mining company in Ghana has performed any better, according to the ratings. In 2009, out of 11 companies selected, 8 were rated red and 3 yellow. A yellow rating means satisfactory compliance. In 2010 two companies, Abosso Goldfields, a subsidiary of Goldfields, based in the Western Region, and Newmont, Kenyase in the Brong Ahafo Region scored Blue, out of 11 companies. Blue means Good. Green is Very Good, and Gold- Excellent. No company has got a Green yet...and it appears most of them are very far from Gold.

The situation in Dumase has now become dire, says Mr. Koranteng of WACAM, a fact confirmed by District Chief Executive for Prestea Huni Valley, Robert Cudjoe. He adds that the current water supply to Dumase is not adequate.

CUE: DCE- (The Assembly would wish to get them one or two mechanized boreholes but since very soon they will move from the place that has been our hindrance. Concerns have been raised that the water they provide is not adequate...)

And the DCE laments the precious man-hours his outfit spends attending to social concerns from mining communities. For the about 15 or so minutes that I've spent in his office the DCE received at least three phone calls on mining-related issues. I had expected to hear him talk about the District's swelling revenues from mining. But no, he rather tells me his

District is not benefiting much from mining activities here. He says mining is the greatest threat to the peace in the area.

CUE: DCE- PEACE (Everyday you wake up to receive a complaint from a mining community against a mining company... almost every day there's an issue to be resolved)

But this is very different to the picture Golden Star paints on its website with descriptions of the systems of communication they have put in place to listen to and respond to the views and complaints of local people.

Water is not the only concern of the people of Dumase. There is also the issue of noise from blasting and dust pollution. Mr. Dei Nkrumah, a middle-aged man shows me rocks on his compound, rocks he says were hurled into his home from the mining pits, by the force of blasting. He also shows me cracks in his building.

CUE: DEI-NKRUMAH-CRACKS (We are suffering from blasting. Where my bed is (there are) lots of cracks. You see the new building there (the part that has collapsed) is due to their blasting)

He also complains of dust constantly pouring into the community from the mine. And now there are reports of rising numbers of cases of respiratory infections from Dumase. The nearest major health facility is in Tarkwa.

And each time a person falls sick here the patient has to make a long trip on the rough and dusty road to Tarkwa.

On the day of my first visit to Dumase the taxi that took me here had all windows closed to avoid the dust on the road; there was no air conditioner in there. And we had to cope with the heat from the blazing sun in a condition nearing suffocation.

Dr. Jack Galley is the Municipal Health Director at the Tarkwa government hospital. Like most parts of Ghana Malaria is the leading reported illness, mostly because hospital staff group most fever cases as malaria, including typhoid and common cold. But of more concern to him are the rising cases of dust-related diseases.

CUE: DR- ACUTE RESPIRATORY (In 2009, about 7 per cent of the cases that we saw were upper respiratory infections. In 2010, it was 8 per cent. And in 2011 we saw about 11.7 per cent.)

And it appears a more serious form of acute respiratory tract infection, mostly present in mining areas, called silicosis, is also on the rise here. The chronic disease caused by long exposure to dust affects the lungs and makes breathing an uphill task.

CUE: DR- SILICOSIS. (We have silicosis as also a problem. It is confined to mining areas or dusty environment.)

Back in Dumase the Chief of the town, Nana Kwabena Pong takes me to the outskirts of the community, about 150 metres away. From here we can see serious mining going on. Heavy equipment are digging the earth and heavy-duty trucks busily hauling gold ore from the pit. Nana tells me the location of the mine is too close to the town, and government must halt the operation of the mining company here, until the fate of the people of Dumase is known.

CUE: NANA- STOP WORK (Before we leave here we will all get sick. Some of my people will even die before we leave here. The EPA will have to tell them to stop work. Either they stop work or they find somewhere else to work)

For some time now there have been attempts to relocate the people of Dumase to make way for mining here. But so far little seems to be happening. I asked Mrs. Kwame of Golden Star for an update on the relocation.

CUE: RELOCATION (It's ongoing. There's a Dumase resettlement committee. Resettlement is government driven.....)

As work on the relocation drags on the people of Dumase are daily putting up with the misery of mining. Each day as dynamites explode loudly on the outskirts of the community homes get shaken, dust fills the skies and fresh cracks emerge on their buildings.

LET YOUR SOUNDS TALK HERE

Today I am witness to one such blast. At about quarter to five in the evening a four-wheel drive with workers of Golden Star pulls over. A piece of equipment, the size of a car battery is taken out. It's attached to a mic.

I'm told this measures the intensity of the noise from the blasting of rocks. I get closer and realize the monitoring equipment is not recording. I draw the operator's attention to it. But while attempting to fix the fault, the next blast goes off. The monitor is still not repaired and, yet one of the workers writes a figure in his notebook. I stand there wondering whose job it really should be to monitor the noise!

Just then I receive a call from, Yaaya. Yaaya and her children live in a single room in the centre of Dumase. She takes me round to show me the cracks in her building, cracks she says are as a result of constant blasting from the pit.

CUE: CRACKS ON BUILDING

She also tells me about the time one of her young children dropped on the floor due to vibration from one of these explosions. Yaaya sees no end to her family's' woes.

This is the fate of the people of Dumase, and WACAM's Owusu Koranteng describes it as a sad situation.

CUE: WACAM- SAD STATE (**I will describe it as a sad state**, in the sense that anybody who knew Dumase before the advent of mining operations you will realize that there has been very serious changes in the negative, in terms of the livelihoods of the people, in terms of access to potable water, in terms of the health status, in terms of human rights conditions, and even the cohesion of the people. It is a sad state)

And Mr. Owusu-Koranteng fears that if urgent action is not taken and the mining company here folds up, as others have done in the past, then Dumase will be doomed forever. Groups like Wacam have referred to Ghana's constitution which demands that the rights of every Ghanaian be protected. They argue that as long as communities like Dumase and their people exist in conditions like these, Ghana's fight to uphold the fundamental rights of its citizens has a long way to go. And until these people are equally treated as citizens of this nation, Ghana's motto of Freedom and Justice for all will forever remain a mirage.

I look back to a statement made by former Mines minister, Prof. Dominic Fobih back in 2008 when he spoke about the state of communities in and around Prestea. He said people in the area had a genuine case to make noise.

CUE: FORMER MINISTER (In the social sense there is some legitimacy in sometimes what they (people) are doing. One time we had to stop them (company) from mining because there was the need for them to construct some road and keep their operation outside the centre of the town, and they were not listening, until EPA stepped in and gave them orders to stop until they have done the right thing. These things will normally create tension and you can't walk over them. This is the problem, and we want them (company) to reason up and put themselves in the place of the community and see whether you would welcome these things in your own country)

As the people of Dumase await responses to their concerns ...year-old Yaaya can only patch the cracks in his walls.

CUE:

And Afia Asantewa with a high blood pressure must continue to be on medication to survive.

CUE:

CUE: LUMBA'S MUSIC

In the second part of this report I'll look at the change of laws in Ghana that has allowed companies to flout Ghana's environmental protection laws. I'll also look at how other mining communities around the world have taken back control of their natural resources and find out if gold mining can ever stop being a curse for communities in areas where it is mined.

For Joy FM's hotline, I am Benjamin Tetteh report.