

Greetings from Ghana #18  
“Let’s Line Up All the Chairs On That Side”

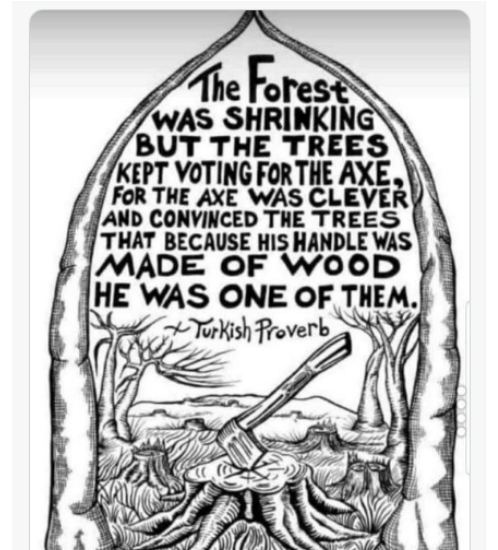
Back in 1977 folk artist Harry Chapin wrote a song about a young man who worked as hard as he could to become the best guitar player he could be and to excel as a musician. After years of trying and determination to be the best his dreams came true. He tried out for and was awarded a coveted position in a dance band that could launch him into a great music career. He won a seat in the dance band. . . on the Titanic.

Sometimes our dreams are not as well realized as we might expect at the outset.

Ghana is one of Africa’s richest nations when it comes to gold. In fact, it is so plentiful that it takes very little to extract it from the earth. And therein lies the problem The Ghanaians have a phrase for the problem they are now facing, “galamsey.” It means “gather and see.”

In the northern and rural areas of the country it is possible to dig down into the earth and bring up buckets of soil loaded with gold. And it used to be that miners would dig by hand.

When word got out that extraction was that easy a Chinese criminal element came in back as early as 2007 and using excavators began “small scale mining.” They talked about how they could make local and tribal officials wealthy. They paid officials and scooped up the soil, washed it and after taking out the gold left large amounts of mud and chemicals behind.



In 2017, a Chinese national named Aisha Huang was arrested for being the leader of illegal mining operation. It was reported that she she was arrested and deported to to China. National political figures called for the elimination of the illegal mining and the president vowed that during his tenure he would find way to end the mining.

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This year it was discovered that Huang had returned to Ghana. This was possible because she was never deported. She was repatriated. And now she is married to a high-power Ghanaian attorney.



If you head east from my house, about five miles down the road you look to the right and see dozens of excavators in a field, looking a lot like this picture. They were taken from gamsej sites. There are similar fields in other areas of the country.

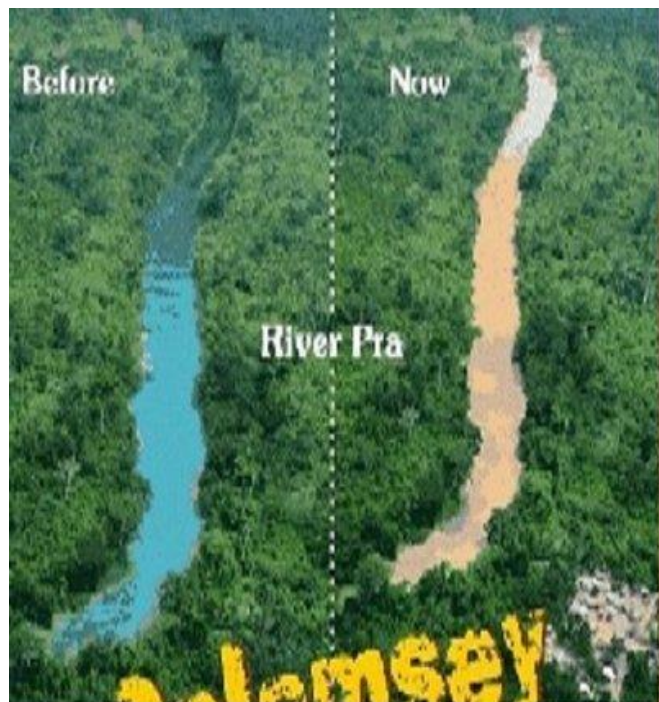
According to people in the mining areas, when the original public outrage occurred, police officers swept in and seized equipment and shut down operations. And the easy money was stopped. Yeah. Right. What happened is that (according to locals) other politically savvy persons stepped in to fill the void.

It is estimated that in 2022 almost 30% of the gold extracted annually from Ghana is done by illegal mining resulting in billions of cedis of gold being taken out of the country. The economic loss is dramatic to say the least; however the real problem with gamsej. . . beyond people drowning in the mining pits created and left . . . is the environmental damage caused.



The residue from the mining operation is being dumped back into the rivers. There are three major rivers in Ghana. Each is drawn on to provide drinking water for major areas of the country.

It was announced six days ago that the river Pra that serves the Sekondi-Takoradi area in the Western Region is becoming so silt laden that they are afraid the water treatment plants will soon be shut down.



The Sekondi-Takoradi area is growing at an average of five percent a year and currently has 990,661 people depending on the river Pra. By next year it will have over a million people and at the rate things are going there will soon be over a million people with no municipal water source. Officials are citing dire warnings and demanding the mining operations be eradicated. The pumps that draw from the river were never made to deal with mud.



News outlets are reporting this week that 300 chafans (floating platforms that wash the mud) have been burned and mining equipment has been seized from miners who fled the area.

Is there hope that the illegal mining operations will cease?

A friend of mine graduated from secondary school a few years back and used his savings to be trained as a forklift driver. He wanted to do more but that is what he could afford. He worked in a warehouse for an international consumer products company and saved his money so he could get better training. Once he had enough set aside to allow him to pay a master for training, he found someone who would take him on – and soon found himself learning how to run an excavator . . . in an illegal mining camp.

I asked him what his life was like. He said, “We hear about inspectors coming in. Everyone stops operations. They come in and collect their fees and report that they can find no mining operations in progress and leave.”

It is a shame but it may soon become apparent that the efforts of some well-intentioned folk are just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.