

Greetings from Ghana #31

Welcome to the Whack-a-Mole world of Ghana

I doubt there could ever be a slow news day around here. Government here knows that delays bring memory loss. But lack of attention does not cancel the situation. There are so many strings of corruption that several flare on any given day. Much is done by the authorities to ignore them. In addition to the less than desirable notices, an election will be coming soon so the party in power is doing everything it can to ignore the news flashes and to make things seem rosy with sunshine and lollipops in the forecast. They seem to believe as the Roman Empire believed, you can do what you want as long as you give the populous bread and circuses to keep them happy.

The glamsey (illegal gold mining) situation that the government swore was being dealt with has gotten worse. Instead of fighting the illegal mining, the government has given licenses to a mining company that is owned by government ministers to take out parts of the national forest. At last count there were 500 miners (some illegal) working there, more than ever recorded before. The resulting increase in pollution is raising even louder calls about the degradation of the water supply to millions. So far, no response from government.

A group of illegal miners entered an abandoned mine and used it to tunnel into an active mine run by the "legal" operators. They are being arrested for trespassing and theft.

The current government exceeded their budget by 120% this past year and was in danger of default. The president's cousin, who happens to be the finance minister, petitioned the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an infusion of three billion dollars to cover the debts. The chiefs and virtually every member of parliament called for the finance minister's removal. The president asked that the minister be allowed to stay to finish the loan process. The ministers and chiefs agreed. The president then quietly announced that the loan process could take months. He also said that it was never stated that the finance minister would be removed, only that he and others would evaluate the situation and make the decision that would be best for the country.

The IMF said the bond market was in need of reform, so the government approached the investors who bought government bonds with a 20% interest rate and asked them to return them and take a 12% rate instead. The government argued that the additional funds in their coffers would allow them to make better investments in the economy and strengthen everyone's monetary position. After several volleys of resistance the government announced that 80% of bond holders had agreed.

The IMF said the reserves were not strong enough, so the government instituted new levies. They eliminated the toll booths and the jobs associated with them and put two levies on electronic money transfers (something people use here instead of cash). They also added a fee

for any private transportation service like Bolt or Uber. Again, taxing the populous instead of the corporations.

Despite predictions to the contrary, the IMF approved the loan. As soon as they did the government announced that all the projects that had been previously approved but put on hold because of lack of funds were now going to be paid for and implemented. When people called for fiscal responsibility, the finance minister responded that these were not new programs. They had promised the IMF no new spending. These were programs previously approved, so it was okay.

(This is the same group of folks who said when they took money from programs and spent it on a different project that it was okay because they were using allocated funds, even though the allocated funds were for other things).

The president began having ceremonies to mark progress in major road construction and new police housing projects. The IMF called for restraint. The government announced that all previously existing programs were now subject to review – including the free secondary school education – should they need to find money. Then they announced they had found millions because of an accounting error.

The education minister announced they would be buying laptops for all secondary school students, a remarkable idea considering there are parts of the country where dialup would be an improvement over what they have now. And this despite the reports that schools do not have enough food for their breakfast and lunch programs and one has reported having not received any textbooks for this year.

The government electrical utility is going to corporations and government institutions demanding outstanding invoices of (sometimes) millions of dollars from years of non-payment be resolved or they shut down power to the university or hospital or whatever. People were rather surprised at this until the IMF called for a review of all current spending programs and it has come out that the country gets 50% of its electricity from independent suppliers. The government set up contracts with the suppliers to pay them for electricity whether it was being used or not and is now almost two billion dollars in debt to the suppliers. They have been overpaying for electricity and not collecting the government account payments. According to the latest demands from the suppliers, if payments are not received from the government on its debt, the suppliers will pull the plug on 50% of the country.

About three months ago when it was announced that the loan had been approved the cedis went from eleven to the dollar down to eight to the dollar. People were celebrating the strength of the economy – yada, yada – and when reality checked in, it went back to eleven to the dollar. (Two years ago it was six to the dollar. When this government took office seven years ago it was three to the dollar). This past month when it was broadcast that the loan was being backed by China and that the note, if called, would result in social turmoil, the story died quickly.

The government announced social programs and spending three weeks ago and the cedis strengthened to just below ten cedis. The IMF said they want to see all programs being funded. The cedis went back down to eleven plus to the dollar.

The government has recently announced cutting funding for fertilizer subsidies and increasing allocations for importing chicken meat. Many farmers have a tough time affording fertilizer now and some cannot. The poultry industry is crying that they may have to fold due to decline in sales because of the cost of cheap imported meat.

And just about the time you think you cannot handle the government strife, the headlines change to announce the latest celebrity scandal. And people look elsewhere than at the elected officials.

Everyday there are other ongoing situations that create the daily life we have here. The vehicle traffic volume goes up by an estimated 9% a year and the roads have not been added to in 20 years. They estimate that the current roads are handling volumes of about 40% over what they were designed to hold. The major roads are so congested that vehicles run on adjacent neighborhood streets and trash them. If you find a road in good condition and no large potholes or ruts you know you are in the rich folk's areas. Otherwise you may suddenly find yourself facing potholes three to four feet across and several inches deep whether you are on the highways or in-town roads. Some roads have sections where the asphalt has been completely worn away and you have both potholes and ruts.

I mentioned the driving situation here before. They call intersections here, "junctions." When you enter a junction or a roundabout it is not uncommon to have other cars less than a few inches from your car and in motion. It used to scare the hell out of me. Recently I hired a driving instructor to learn how people do it day after day with minimal accidents. (Americans would be piled up on the roadside). Believe it or not, there is a behavioral pattern that people follow.

When you approach a junction you come to a stop and check traffic. Then you begin to inch forward. It is similar to the steady creep dogs will do to get on the bed. . . a paw tentatively placed. . . a bumper slightly into the lane. . . an slight elevation of the body if no indication of alarm. . . the front of the car into the lane and then. . . almost as slowly as the dog climbing on the bed when you see an opening you drive into the traffic. I was told, "If you accelerate while you are entering the traffic, you will surely cause an accident." You increase speed only after you have entered the traffic lane. Mind boggling but it works.

Of course you must always watch to make certain the oncoming traffic is aware of you and only then proceed. And you have to watch for motorcycles who believe that their lane is the one marked by a single white dotted line. Motorcycle riders will change lanes, whip in front of your vehicle, ride the white line and completely disregard other traffic. And if, like the other day, a motorcycle happens to clip your car, wipe out a mirror and dent your car they keep going with no recourse for the car owner but to shoulder the repair.

Even with the constant state of alarm over this and over that— popping up like the little moles in the carnival game, with the government adding fees that people making \$120 a month have to pay, and the health of society seeming dubious . . . people still laugh and love and marry and live.