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Ghana: The gold curse

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Demonstrations against illegal gold mining in Ghana are becoming a major political issue, highlighting the corruption of the country's ruling elites. With just two months to go before the country's presidential elections, the environmental issue is entering the debate as citizens mobilise against illegal gold mining.

Increased mobilisation

An initial demonstration initiated by the Democracy Hub movement brought together around a hundred activists protesting against the activities of illegal gold miners known in Ghana as *galamsey*, a word derived from 'gather them and sell'. The police intervened violently and imprisoned around fifty demonstrators. This repression, far from weakening the struggle, strengthened it. As a result, the three days of mobilisation called for at the beginning of October brought together a much larger number of people. Most were dressed in red and black, demanding the release of the demonstrators and an end to illegal gold mining. Several placards were held up saying "Your greed fuels our crisis".

Illegal mines

Most of the mines are concentrated in the south of the country, and illegal gold panning could involve almost a million miners, providing a livelihood for 4.5 million people. This activity has many harmful consequences for the environment. It destroys forests, pollutes rivers with mercury and cyanide, and degrades the land through the use of high-pressure water, which eliminates nutrients. What's more, the holes are often not filled in, leading to accidents. Miners and their families suffer from health problems linked to exposure to chemicals. The use of mechanisation is also cutting into the agricultural land used for cocoa plantations.

Government accused

The repression of the demonstrators was aimed at stifling this issue, which remains perilous for the government. Although some measures have been taken against illegal mining, they are above all symbolic because the stakes are so high. There are social issues at stake - the jobs of hundreds of thousands of people - as well as economic ones, since Ghana is Africa's second largest gold producer, with companies that do not hesitate to buy gold produced in illegal mines at very low prices.

Finally, this controversy sheds a harsh light on the system of clientelism and corruption in the country's two main parties. The report by Professor Kawabena Frimpong Boateng, a former Minister of the Environment, implicates a number of senior members of the government involved in *galamsey* activities.

The solution would be a radical rethink of the extractivist model imposed by multinationals on African countries, offering young people prospects other than polluting their country and endangering themselves and their families.

PS:

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