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Ghana's Golden Magnet:

**Illegal Mining, Regional Migration, and the
Security Economy of Galamsey**



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INTRODUCTION

Gold mining in Ghana has been an economic activity for many years. Gold is a key part of the nation's cultural heritage with the Chiefs and Queen mothers displaying ornamental gold at formal functions. Today gold is generating a different phenomenon, expressed in a highly lucrative informal and illicit economy that attracts not only Ghanaian miners but migrants, financiers, equipment suppliers, and gold traders from across West Africa and beyond. Illegal small-scale mining, popularly known as *galamsey*, which has traditionally been discussed as an environmental problem no longer captures the full picture. *Galamsey* is increasingly a regional political-economy problem.

The goldfields of Tarkwa, Prestea, Bogoso, and Wassa in the Western Region, along with sites in Ashanti, Eastern, and Bono, are attracting people from across West Africa. In September 2022, 164 suspected foreign illegal miners were arrested in the Eastern Region, most from Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire. One woman arrested reported she had been trafficked into the country (Ghana News Agency, 2022). A 2025 raid near the Subri Forest Reserve found a settlement of more than 10,000 people, including nationals of Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, which a regional security official described as effectively a "mini ECOWAS" and a potential haven for human trafficking (Africa Defense Forum, 2025; GhanaWeb, 2025). In October 2025, 21 Burkinabe nationals were arrested for mining in water bodies in the Ashanti Region (Ghana News Agency, 2025). Similarly in March 2026 the National Anti-Illegal Mining Operations Secretariat (NAIMOS) reported that most of the 237 people arrested in its operations were foreign nationals, some trafficked through organised networks (Ghana News Agency, 2026a).

These developments raise a central question. Is Ghana's gold economy becoming a regional pull factor for irregular migration and illicit commerce? The evidence suggests it is, although the precise scale cannot yet be reliably quantified. No comprehensive national database records how many foreign nationals work in Ghana's illegal mining economy. The more important finding is that Ghana's goldfields have become attractive nodes within regional networks of labour, capital, and illicit commerce. In this mix, the foreign miner at the pit is only one component of a system that also includes financiers, equipment suppliers, land intermediaries, gold buyers, and transporters.

A REGIONAL ECONOMIC MAGNET

Migration into Ghana's mining towns is not new. Tarkwa, Prestea, and Obuasi have long drawn workers from across Ghana and West Africa. What has changed is the scale, technology, and organisation of the informal sector. The clearest precedent is the influx of an estimated 50,000 Chinese migrants into Ghana's artisanal gold-mining economy between 2008 and 2013. Sadly, the nation stood by while they introduced mechanised

techniques and transformed the sector's productivity. Hilson et al., (2014) argued that this was not simply a foreign "takeover" but a manifestation of deeper weaknesses in the formalisation and regulation of Ghana's mining sector. This is a lesson that remains directly relevant to the West African migrants now entering the same goldfields.

Ghana's goldfields are attractive because they combine resource availability with an already-established economic ecosystem of land access, equipment, financing, transport, and gold-buying networks. Owusu-Nimo et al., (2018) mapped thousands of such illegal operations concentrated in the Western Region alone. A migrant does not enter an economic vacuum but a self-reinforcing system that, once established, spreads through informal networks that share information about where gold is available and how to enter the trade. A recent trip to the Western Region by a US based Ghanaian exemplifies this trend when he found himself in a bus full of people who spoke a language not native to the country. Upon further enquiry, he was told they were from Niger and were going to Tarkwa to undertake galamsey. This dynamic is reinforced by the sector's sheer economic weight. Small-scale mining's share of national gold production rose from 27.7 percent in 2023 to 39.4 percent in 2024 (Ghana Chamber of Mines, 2025), a figure that includes legal production but illustrates the scale of the market within which illegal activity operates.

The regional security context compounds this pull. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have experienced severe insecurity as jihadist groups, including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin and the Islamic State Sahel Province, have increasingly taxed and extorted artisanal miners near Sahelian gold sites to finance their operations. This is more worrying when viewed against the fact that roughly three-quarters of recorded mining-related violence in the central Sahel was concentrated in Burkina Faso alone since 2015 (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2026). Ghana, by comparison, remains relatively stable, and this contrast is already visible in migration data. As of June 2026 Ghana hosted 21,246 registered refugees, of whom roughly 63 percent were from Burkina Faso (Migration Policy Institute, 2026). Refugees and illegal miners are distinct categories, but both reflect the same underlying geography of instability pushing people toward Ghana, while analysts warn that the same jihadist pressure on Sahelian mining belts could extend toward Ghana's own goldfields (Africa Defense Forum, 2026).

This pull is reinforced by the legal architecture of West African integration. The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, adopted in 1979 and ratified by all fifteen member states, grants Community citizens the right to enter, reside, and establish themselves in any member state. It has always been argued that this lowers the practical and legal barriers that might otherwise slow labour migration into Ghana's mining districts (United Nations Network on Migration, n.d.). In practice, however, the Protocol's accompanying requirement that migrants obtain residence and work

permits is not enforced in the informal sector, and Ghana's own immigration authorities have acknowledged persistent abuses at border crossings. These include harassment, extortion, and an incomplete rollout of the ECOWAS biometric identity card across member states (Ghana Immigration Service, n.d.). The result is a regional migration regime that facilitates movement in principle but lacks the monitoring capacity to distinguish migration types, particularly into Ghana.

HISTORICAL CONTINUITY: FROM CHINESE MINERS TO A WEST AFRICAN WORKFORCE

The current wave of West African migration into galamsey did not emerge in a vacuum. It follows, and overlaps with earlier and better-documented Chinese experience. A 2013 crackdown led to the deportation or voluntary departure of more than 4,500 Chinese nationals, prompting the creation of Operation Vanguard, a joint police-military task force, in 2017. Between 2009 and 2022, an additional 1,600 Chinese nationals were repatriated for illegal mining (Migration Policy Institute, 2026). The impact was minimal and West African migrants have since moved into many of the same mining communities, often using the roads, markets, and informal financing networks that Chinese-linked mechanisation helped to entrench. This continuity suggests that nationality-specific crackdowns treat a symptom that recurs in a new form once each wave of enforcement recedes.

EVIDENCE ACROSS THE REGION

Beyond the cases already noted, multinational mining settlements have taken root along Ghana's borders. Around the Dollar Power, Accra, and Dablakrou sites in Bui National Park, straddling the Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire border, Ivorian and Burkinabe miners arrived first, and Ghanaian miners followed once gold was discovered. Friction between Ghanaian and Ivorian workers has since given way to a relatively stable, cohesive settlement encompassing miners, families, and businesspeople from Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, and Togo (Institute for Security Studies, ENACT Africa, 2024). NAIMOS operations through March 2026 resulted in the seizure of 94 excavators, destruction of nearly 3,000 changfang water-pumping machines, 237 arrests, most of them foreign nationals and the confiscation of 59 weapons (Ghana News Agency, 2026a).

NOT A FOREIGN INVASION, BUT AN ECOSYSTEM

Ghanaian law reserves small-scale mining licenses for citizens, so foreign nationals cannot legally mine simply because gold is available. Yet the policy challenge is more complex than identifying and deporting foreign miners. Botchwey (2019) found that Chinese miners built lasting partnerships with Ghanaian miners and local economic

actors. Antwi-Boateng and Akudugu (2020) also showed that Chinese participation combined finance, technology, management, and market access with Ghanaian state weakness as a key pull factor. Kumah (2023) further linked such foreign participation to local distributional inequities. The pattern is an ecosystem, in which foreign participants supply capital, technology, labour, or market connections, while Ghanaian actors supply land access, local knowledge, political connections and logistics. Overall, the illegal economy depends on both sides.

This ecosystem also complicates the human-security picture. Not every foreign worker at a mining site is a willing participant in crime. Some are organised operators, some are experienced miners pursuing opportunity, and others have been trafficked. The 2022 Eastern Region case and NAIMOS's March 2026 finding that some foreign nationals were moved through organised trafficking networks without knowing their destination typifies this (Ghana News Agency, 2022, 2026a). This shows that not all foreign participants must be treated identically.

SECURITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL STAKES

The environmental toll of galamsey is well documented. The World Bank (2018) identified extensive damage to forests, farmland, and waterways, along with the mercury and cyanide contamination. This has in many respects led farmers to abandon longer-term agricultural investment for short-term mining income. What deserves more attention is the national-security dimension. Large concentrations of informal workers, substantial cash flows, weak oversight, and cross-border movement create conditions exploitable by criminal and, potentially, extremist networks. A March 2026 national policy dialogue convened by the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre explicitly framed illegal mining as a safety-and-security ecosystem rather than a purely environmental issue (Ghana News Agency, 2026b). The seizure of 59 weapons during NAIMOS operations underscores this concern (Ghana News Agency, 2026a). The danger is less that miners themselves become insurgents than that weakly governed economic spaces create openings for criminality and erode state authority, a dynamic already visible in the Sahel's mining belts (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2026).

TOWARD A REGIONAL RESPONSE

Because the gold economy is increasingly regional, Ghana's response should be too. First, Ghana should work with ECOWAS partners on an intelligence-led (not nationality-led) system tracking recruitment networks, trafficking routes, financiers, and cross-border gold flows. Second, financial investigation is urgently required, as to who owns the excavator, who financed it, who controls the concession, who buys the gold among others. Third, legal small-scale mining must be made genuinely accessible, through faster licensing, designated mining areas, technical assistance, and affordable financing and

strictly controlled. Fourth, gold traceability should be strengthened through the Ghana Gold Board (GoldBod), which is intended to regulate purchasing, assaying, trading, and export across the small-scale value chain. This way, gold entering formal markets can be traced to a legitimate source. Fifth, foreign workers encountered at mining sites should be screened for trafficking, with serious sanctions for organisers and protection for victims. Finally, local facilitators, including traditional authorities, landowners, and politicians who enable illegal mining must be held accountable alongside foreign participants. To this end, one wonders why nationalisation of all unencumbered lands cannot be engendered.

CONCLUSION

Ghana's galamsey problem is undergoing an important transformation. It is neither a collection of isolated illegal operations run by poor rural Ghanaians nor simply a foreign invasion of the country's goldfields. Ghana has developed a regional gold economy in which natural resources, labour migration, foreign capital, local entrepreneurship, weak regulation, and illicit commerce intersect.

Foreign participation, as documented among nationals of Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire is real. The right question is therefore not "how do we stop foreigners from coming to mine Ghana's gold?" but "how do we dismantle the economic incentives and networks that make Ghana's illegal gold economy attractive to foreign and domestic actors alike?" That requires controlling the resource, regulating the market, disrupting illicit financial networks, managing migration intelligently, formalising legitimate small-scale mining, and deepening cooperation with West African neighbours.

Another key question to ask is whether Ghana can require citizens of AES countries to obtain visas, since they are no longer members of ECOWAS. Would this stem the tide a little while more concrete efforts are being made to deal with this menace?

Ghana's challenge is not that it has too much gold, but that gold in poorly governed locations has become an economic magnet that transcends national boundaries. Until the political economy of the gold rush is addressed, the nationalities and locations involved may change, but the system that attracts them will not. The time for action is NOW.

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