

ILLEGAL MINING SETTLEMENTS IN FOREST RESERVES AS EMERGING THREATS TO HUMAN AND NATIONAL SECURITY.

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Occasional Paper 66



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Design and Typesetting: DARIPS Editorial Team

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Abstract:

Illegal mining, commonly known as galamsey, continues to be an enduring challenge for successive governments in Ghana. Despite repeated political commitments to address this menace, the problem persists. While government institutions, civil society organisations, and activist groups largely frame galamsey as an environmental and economic issue, this paper argues that entrenched illegal mining settlements particularly within protected forest reserves, constitute an emerging and underappreciated human and national security threat. The paper introduces the concept of a “galamsey state” to explain how these settlements operate as parallel systems of authority, sustained by the involvement of foreign nationals, local collaborators, political actors, and deep state networks. Using Abrewa Ne Nkran, an illegal settlement in the Subri Forest Reserve as a case study, the paper examines how illegal mining settlements threaten human security, undermine state authority in mining areas, facilitate organised crime and illicit economic activities, and erode public trust in both state and local institutions. It situates galamsey within a human and national security framework. The paper concludes by calling for a coordinated and sustainable multi-stakeholder framework to dismantle these enclaves and prevent the consolidation of parallel systems of power within Ghana’s forest reserves.

Keywords: *Galamsey; Human Security; National Security; Forest Reserves; Governance; Ghana*

1. Introduction

Illegal mining, commonly referred to in Ghana as “*galamsey*”, remains a persistent and destructive challenge to the nation’s development. The term *galamsey*, derived from the phrase “gather them and sell,”¹ Artisanal Small-Scale Mining (ASM) is legal under mining laws of Ghana.² However, unlicensed ASM activities have been evidenced to threaten the country’s environment, economy, and national safety and security.³ Evidence shows that more than 85% of ASM in Ghana are illegal.⁴ It has also been recorded that since the return to constitutional rule in 1992 under PNDC Law 218,⁵ successive governments, particularly the two dominant political parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) have repeatedly made ambitious promises during and after election campaigns to tackle this menace. *Galamsey* has consistently featured as a major electoral issue, with candidates pledging either to regulate or ban the practice completely. Despite these pledges, however, the problem continues to be an enduring one.

In the 2024 presidential elections, for instance, then candidate and now-president John Dramani Mahama vowed, under his “120 Days Social Contract”⁶ and the NDC manifesto, to promote responsible mining as part of a sustainable development agenda, and to take decisive

action against illegal mining.⁷ However, a year and half into his presidency, excavators remain in remote forests reserves, while some have occasionally been seized,⁸ This situation underscores the persistence of *galamsey* despite enforcement actions, and exposing gaps in sustained implementation.

Beyond the life-threatening risks *galamsey* poses to individual miners and their surrounding communities, the state itself has become increasingly vulnerable to the infiltration and influence of deep state actors. In the context of *galamsey*, Ishaq Akmei Alhassan conceptualises the deep state and its actors as a network of insiders and collaborators within and outside formal state institutions, that sustain illegal mining power structures.⁹ Ishaq explains that the deep state operates covertly within and around formal state structures, capture or co-opt actors within state institutions, undermine security agencies, governance structures and regulatory systems, create parallel centres of authority and influence, and function like a shadow governance system that protects illegal economic interests in illegal ASM.

In the Ghanaian context, the confrontation between illegal miners and the military personnel at the Hwidiem Police Station on November 1, 2025, and several other similar incidences across

¹ G. Hilson and N. Yakovleva, “Strained Relations: A Critical Analysis of the Mining Conflict in Prestea, Ghana,” *Political Geography* 26, no. 1 (2007): 100
² *Minerals and Mining Policy of Ghana*, FAOLEX (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), accessed January 6, 2026, <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/gha194056.pdf>. (FAOLEX Database)

³ Emmanuel Ababio Ofori-Mensah, “Transformation of Artisanal Small-Scale Mining (ASM) in Ghana: From Pre-Colonial to the Modern Era,” *Journal of African Policy Studies* 27, no. 1 (2021), <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/joaps/vol27/iss1/4>. (ecommons.udayton.edu)

⁴ Niladri Basu, Elisha P. Renne, and Rachel N. Long, “An Integrated Assessment Approach to Address Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Ghana,” *Energy Policy* 167 (2022): 113049, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2022.113049>. (Pacific Standard)

⁵ Ghana. *Small-Scale Gold Mining Law, 1989 (PNDC Law 218)*, Sec. 2(a), enacted 2 June 1989.

⁶ John Dramani Mahama, *Mahama’s First 120 Days Social Contract with the People of Ghana*, August 24, 2024, PDF, accessed August 23, 2025, <https://manifesto.johnmahama.org/files/shares/Social%20Contract.pdf>, P.9

⁷ National Democratic Congress (NDC). *2024 Manifesto: Abridged Version*. 2024.p. 61 Accessed August 23, 2025

⁸ News Ghana, “NPP Questions Mahama’s Galamsey Strategy as Enforcement Challenges Persist,” *News Ghana*, January 5, 2026, <https://www.newsghana.com.gh/npp-questions-mahamas-galamsey-strategy-as-enforcement-challenges-persist/>. (News Ghana)

⁹ Alhassan, Ishaq Akmei. “Galamsey and the Making of a Deep State in Ghana: Implications for National Security and Development.” *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 16 (2014): 49

mining communities in the country reflect an unusual level of boldness that is typically linked to the involvement of deep state networks.¹⁰ Their operations undermine legitimate governance, weaken state security systems, and erode public trust in institutions tasked with combating illegal mining. In this way, we argue that *galamsey* settlements, particularly within forest reserves, risk evolving into a “galamsey state” operating parallel to the state’s own anti-*galamsey* agenda through the influence of the deep state. Such a shadow system not only facilitates organised crime and illicit financial flows, but also threatens human security by perpetuating lawlessness, corruption, and resource exploitation at the expense of both people and the environment.¹¹

Ghana’s Minerals and Mining Act, 1986 (2a), which has since undergone several reviews (e.g. see Minerals and Mining (Amendment) Act, 2015 (Act 900)), prohibits licensing of ASM by foreign nationals.¹² Yet the country’s vast gold reserves, particularly in the Ashanti, Brong-Ahafo, Eastern, Western, and Northern Regions, continue to attract both local and foreign actors engaged in illicit mining. Nationals from neighboring West African states such as Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire as well as individuals from farther afield,¹³ increasingly exploit Ghana as a lucrative hub for illegal mining. This growing foreign involvement intensifies

the challenge, as illegal mining not only depletes natural resources but also undermines national sovereignty and weakens state security systems.

In an effort to fulfill its campaign promises, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) government, under the directive of then Minister of Defense, the late Dr. Omane Boamah, launched a series of anti-*galamsey* “surgical operations” across three strategic commands: the Northern zone (Bole and Black Volta Basin), the Central zone (Nkawie and Mankranso Forest Reserves), and the Southern zone (Jerusalem and Subri Forest Reserves).¹⁴ These operations uncovered an alarming development: an extensive illegal mining settlement deep within the Subri Forest Reserve in the Western Region. This settlement, estimated to house nearly 10,000 illegal miners, was largely composed of foreign nationals from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) such as Nigeria, Guinea, and Cote d’Ivoire, the three Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) countries—Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso—alongside some Ghanaian collaborators.¹⁵ Reports revealed that the enclave had evolved into a self-sustained entity, a “state within a state” with its own informal systems of control, trade, and protection, unknown to the state.¹⁶ Such entrenched settlements, we argue, exemplify the emergence of a “*galamsey state*” operating within

¹⁰ News Ghana, “NPP Questions Mahama’s *Galamsey* Strategy as Enforcement Challenges Persist,” News Ghana, January 5, 2026, <https://www.newsghana.com.gh/npp-questions-mahamas-galamsey-strategy-as-enforcement-challenges-persist/>. (News Ghana)

¹¹ Ishaq Akmei Alhassan, “*Galamsey* and the Making of a Deep State in Ghana: Implications for National Security and Development,” *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 16 (2014): 47–54, PDF, accessed August 23, 2025, <https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/87130929/234674063-libre.pdf?>

¹² *Small-Scale Gold Mining Law, 1989 (PNDCL 218), Revised Edition*, Parliament of Ghana, 1989, <https://ir.parliament.gh/bitstream/handle/123456789/2659/PNDCL%20218%20Rev%20Ed.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. (Parliament of Ghana)

¹³ Enoch Randy Aikins, “Ghana Must Stop *Galamsey* Before It Sinks the Country,” ISS Today, 24 September 2024, Institute for Security Studies, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ghana-must-stop-galamsey-before-it-sinks-the-country>. (ISS Africa)

¹⁴ ModernGhana, “GAF Launches Anti-*galamsey* Operations across Three Commands,” *ModernGhana*, April 15, 2025, accessed August 24, 2025, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1393098/gaf-launches-anti-galamsey-operations-across-three.html>

¹⁵ Anka, Gertrude. “Armed Forces Dismantle Illegal Mining Settlement in Subri Forest Reserve.” *Graphic Online*, April 15, 2025. Accessed August 24, 2025. <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/armed-forces-dismantle-illegal-mining-settlement-in-subri-forest-reserve.html>.

¹⁶ Robert Dover, “The Deep State: Definitional Debates and Impacts,” in *A Research Agenda for Intelligence Studies and Government*, ed. Robert Dover, Huw Dylan, and Michael S. Goodman (Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), 155–165, here 155. [hull-reposi](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108888888)

forest reserves. The phenomenon poses profound threats to Ghana's territorial integrity, environmental sustainability, and human security, including compromise to food and water security, displacement of communities, and the exposure of populations to health hazards.¹⁷

Although some policy papers¹⁸ and academic research have been conducted on the impact of *galamsey*, the new emerging threat of “*galamsey* state” is yet to receive adequate attention in both academic and policy research. This occasional paper seeks to contribute to understanding the implications of these illegal *galamsey* settlements in forest reserves on human security and national security. The paper examines the complex dynamics surrounding illegal mining settlements within Ghana's forest reserves, with particular focus on the Subri Forest Reserve. It begins with understanding human security and national security. It then reflects briefly on the historical and political context of *galamsey*, and the infiltration of illegal immigrants whose activities potentially undermine human security and state sovereignty. Subsequent sections analyse the implications of such illegal mining settlements on human security. The paper further discusses how entrenched illegal settlements operate as hubs for organised crime, social vices, and transnational threats, eroding local governance structures and perpetuating national insecurity. Finally, it recommends pragmatic interventions to dismantle these illegal enclaves and strengthen

state institutions to prevent the further entrenchment of such parallel systems of power.

Conceptual Discussion: Human Security and National Security

The concept of human security, articulated in the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report, shifts the focus of security from the state to the individual. Rather than emphasizing territorial defense alone, human security prioritizes the protection of people's lives, livelihoods, dignity, and freedoms.¹⁹ It is defined as protection from chronic threats such as poverty, hunger, disease, repression, and environmental degradation, as well as from sudden disruptions to daily life, including conflict, displacement, natural disasters, and health emergencies.²⁰ Since its introduction as an alternative understanding of security by the UNDP, scholars and institutions have developed diverse interpretations of the concept. These include human security as the protection and preservation of critical freedoms that safeguard people from critical threats in the domain of surviving, everyday livelihood and the dignity of humans,²¹ and the ability of individuals to avoid severe deprivations and maintain a minimum acceptable level of well-being.²² These themes, captured broadly under human security, are studied as part of Critical Security Theory which challenges the traditional state-centric approaches to security.²³

¹⁷ Boadi, S., C. A. Nsor, O. O. Antobre, and E. Acquah. “An Analysis of Illegal Mining on the Offin Shelterbelt Forest Reserve, Ghana: Implications on Community Livelihood.” *Journal of Sustainable Mining* 15, no. 3 (2016): 115–119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsm.2016.12.001>

¹⁸ *Minerals and Mining (Amendment) Act, 2015 (Act 900)*, enacted 24 December 2015, Republic of Ghana.

¹⁹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Commission on Human Security. *Human Security Now*. New York: Commission on Human Security, 2003.

²² Gary King and Christopher J. L. Murray, “Rethinking Human Security,” *Political Science Quarterly* 116, no. 4 (2001).

²³ Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2021).

The original UNDP conceptualisation of human security which serves as the operational definition for this paper, is anchored in the twin objectives of *freedom from fear and freedom from want*, operationalised through seven interrelated dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.²⁴ These dimensions underscore the interconnected nature of security threats and demonstrate how vulnerabilities in one domain can escalate into broader instability, particularly in contexts marked by weak governance and contested natural resources. Our paper applies the UNDP human security framework to analyze illegal mining settlements within Ghana's forest reserves, focusing on economic, environmental, community, and health security. These dimensions are most directly affected by galamsey activities and provide a useful lens for understanding how illegal mining undermines livelihoods, degrades ecosystems, disrupts social cohesion, and exposes communities to serious health risks.

Importantly, contemporary security scholarship increasingly recognises that human security and national security are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. Persistent human insecurities including economic marginalisation, social exclusion, and environmental degradation can accumulate over time to generate conditions that threaten the stability and authority of the state. Environmental insecurity, in particular, has emerged as a significant driver of national security risks. The degradations of ecosystems, depletion of natural resources, and increasing impacts of

climate variability undermine livelihoods, exacerbate poverty, and intensify competition over scarce resources. These pressures can weaken public confidence in state institutions, especially where governments are unable to provide effective environmental governance or ensure access to essential resources. As state legitimacy and institutional capacity decline, opportunities arise for criminal organisations, insurgent groups, and other non-state actors to exploit local grievances, expand their influence, and challenge state authority. Furthermore, where environmental degradation leaves large segments of the population, particularly the youth, without viable livelihoods or economic prospects, frustration and social discontent may increase, raising the risk of mobilisation into violence, organised crime or anti-state movements. In this way, environmental insecurity is not merely an ecological or developmental concern; it constitutes a structural condition that can erode the foundations of national security by undermining governance, social cohesion, and the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force.²⁵

Ghana's National Security Strategy (NSS) reflects this broadened understanding by identifying illegal exploitation of natural resources and transnational organized crime as major risks.²⁶ In this context, galamsey is viewed not as an environmental or economic challenge, but as a multidimensional security threat capable of fostering parallel systems of power and undermining human and national security in the long term. Three NSS priorities are most relevant for this paper: regional and international cooperation (Strategy 3), promotion of good

²⁴ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1994*.

²⁵ Roland Paris, "Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?" *International Security* 26, no. 2 (2001): 87–102.

²⁶ Republic of Ghana, *National Security Strategy* (Accra: Government of Ghana).

governance and peaceful coexistence (Strategy 4), and sound economic and resource governance that prioritizes food, energy, and health security (Strategy 6).

Conceptual Discussion: Galamsey and the Making of a “Galamsey State”

Galamsey in Ghana is not merely an illegal mining activity but the product of historically embedded patterns of exclusion, weak governance, and political accommodation conditions that collectively approximate what may be described as a *galamsey state*²⁷. During the colonial period, mining in the Gold Coast was largely monopolised by colonial authorities, systematically excluding indigenous populations despite their long-standing engagement in gold extraction²⁸. This structural exclusion normalised informal mining practices that later evolved into *galamsey*. In the postcolonial era, the persistence of *galamsey* can be argued to reflect the state’s limited capacity to integrate artisanal miners into formal economic structures. Regulatory frameworks, particularly PNDC Law 218, introduced formal licensing regimes but imposed bureaucratic and financial barriers that displaced many miners into informality.²⁹ Combined with chronic youth unemployment and rural poverty, these constraints transformed *galamsey* into a rational livelihood strategy within marginalized communities.³⁰

This paper asserts that *galamsey* state emerges where governance institutions simultaneously prohibit and tolerate illegal mining. Although Article 268 of the 1992 Constitution mandates parliamentary oversight of mineral exploitation, inconsistent enforcement has weakened regulatory authority and fostered impunity.³¹ This governance gap has enabled political complicity, elite capture, and selective enforcement, allowing *galamsey* networks to operate alongside formal state institutions.³² Over time, the involvement of foreign actors, criminal syndicates, and local belief systems has and deep state actors has further entrenched *galamsey* as a socio-political order rather than a transient illegality.³³ Within this context, the state is not absent but selectively present exercising coercion episodically while benefiting from informal rents and political loyalty. Conceptually, the “*galamsey state*” thus captures a hybrid governance condition in which illegality becomes institutionalised, challenging conventional distinctions between legality, informality and state authority.

Forced Economic Migration and Settlements

Unauthorised immigrants, as used in this paper, refers to the movement of people across national borders or within a country in violation of the legal and regulatory frameworks governing entry, residence,

²⁷ In a sequel article, we shall elaborate the concept of the *galamsey state*. We decided against having it in this paper due to constraints with word limits.

²⁸ Amankwah, R. K., and C. Anim-Sackey. “Strategies for Sustainable Development of the Small-Scale Gold and Diamond Mining Industry of Ghana.” *Resources Policy* 29, no. 3 (2004): 132

²⁹ Provisional National Defence Council Law 218, *Small-Scale Gold Mining Law, 1989*. Ghana: Act of 19 April 1989, published 2 June 1989. FAOLEX. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/gha41085.pdf>

³⁰ John Doe, *Small-Scale Mining and Environmental Change* (Nakuru: DKUT Press, 2023), accessed November 18, 2025, <https://repository.dkut.ac.ke:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/12894/29abe4f3-f302-4d1d-ab29-002b76cf5eff.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

³¹ Republic of Ghana. (1992). *The Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992* (p. 152). Accra: Ghana Publishing Company

³² Ankomah, Ace Anan. “Galamsey Dilemma: Not a Lack of Resources or Brains, but of Political Will.” *Graphic Online*, October 9, 2025, 20:10. <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/galamsey-dilemma-not-a-lack-of-resources-or-brains-but-of-political-will.html>

³³ Antwi, Bright Baffour. *Galamsey as a Livelihood Approach in Ghana: From a Poverty Reduction Strategy to a Money-Spinning Business*. Master’s thesis, University of South-Eastern Norway, 2014.

or employment. It involves individuals entering a country without authorisation, overstaying visas, using falsified documents, or engaging in activities not permitted by their immigration status.³⁴ One is considered as undocumented immigrants when the person in question undertakes any of the actions below:

- Unauthorised Border Crossing – Entry into a country without passing through official checkpoints or inspection.³⁵
- Visa Overstay (“Overstayers”) – Entering legally with valid documents but remaining beyond the authorized period.³⁶
- Falsified or Fraudulent Documentation – Using fake passports, visas, or permits to gain entry or residence.³⁷
- Smuggling and Trafficking – Movement facilitated illegally by organised networks for profit or coercion.³⁸
- Clandestine Employment Migration – Working in a country without the required legal authorisation, often in informal or exploitative conditions.³⁹

Whether through unauthorised border crossings, falsified documents, or visa overstays, unauthorised migration is argued by security analysts to add another layer of insecurity to nation-states.⁴⁰ Dimensions include human trafficking, terrorist group movements, and economic migration. Unauthorised migration can also result in tensions between nationals and undocumented migrants, amplifying

threats to both human security (pollution, food insecurity, community tensions) and national security (loss of state control over natural resources, environmental degradation, and potential violent conflict). Importantly, unauthorised migration often results in the proliferation of illegal settlements, which manifest through multiple interrelated dimensions.

First, such settlements are characterized by insecure tenure, as occupants frequently face the risk of eviction from either landowners or governmental authorities.⁴¹ Second, they are marked by inadequate housing and basic services, where residents lack access to essential infrastructure such as roads, sanitation systems, and potable water, often resorting to informal or unauthorised connections to utilities.⁴² Third, these settlements reflect non-compliance with planning and regulatory frameworks, since their construction typically disregards established building codes and urban development standards.⁴³ Fourth, illegal settlements are frequently located in hazardous areas, including flood-prone zones, polluted sites, or areas with heightened criminal activity, thereby exposing residents to significant physical and social risks.⁴⁴ Fifth, their expansion exerts considerable environmental pressure, as high

³⁴ Castles, Stephen, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. 5th ed. New York: Guilford Press, 2014.

³⁵ International Organization for Migration (IOM). *Glossary on Migration*. 2nd ed. Geneva: IOM, 2011, 54.

³⁶ Koser, Khalid. *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 19–20.

³⁷ Triandafyllidou, Anna. “Irregular Migration in Europe in the Early 21st Century.” In *Irregular Migration in Europe: Myths and Realities*, edited by Anna Triandafyllidou, 1–21. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.

³⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018*. Vienna: UNODC, 2018.

³⁹ Castles, Stephen, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. 5th ed. New York: Guilford Press, 2014, 114–116.

⁴⁰ Bodemann, Y. Michal, and Gökçe Yurdakul, eds. *Migration, Citizenship, Ethnos*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. P.199 <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403984678>

⁴¹ tkinson, C. L. “Informal Settlements: A New Understanding for Governance and Vulnerability Study.” *Urban Science* 8, no. 4 (2024): 158.

⁴² *Housing Adequacy in an Informal Built Environment: Case Studies from Ahmedabad*. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 38 (2023): 2059–2082.

⁴³ Verniz, Debora; José P. Duarte; Mário Márcio Queiroz. “Informal Housing Settlements and Code Compliance: The Case of Santa Marta Favela.” *Architecture_MPS* 31, no. 1 (2025): 3.

⁴⁴ Dlamini, Simangele; Bathabile Nhleko; Nomcebo Ubisi. “Understanding Socioeconomic Risk and Vulnerability to Climate Change–Induced Disasters: The Case of Informal Settlements in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.” *Journal of Social Issues* (2024).

population densities within limited spaces lead to the indiscriminate disposal of waste, water contamination, and broader ecological degradation.⁴⁵

The persistence of illegal settlements is strongly linked to socioeconomic marginalisation, as poverty and exclusion from formal governance and economic structures often drive individuals and communities into such precarious living arrangements. The description above, however, closely aligns with the characteristics of illegal settlements commonly found in townships and cities. Even in such urban contexts, living conditions are already precarious. It is, therefore, even more alarming to imagine the emergence of illegal settlements deep within forested areas, where access to basic social services, infrastructure, and state security are lacking.

The Case of Abrewa Ne Kran: A Human and National Security Reflection

The discovery of *Abrewa Ne Kran*⁴⁶, an illegal settler community deep within Ghana's Subri Forest Reserve, revealed a troubling intersection of environmental destruction, socio-economic deprivation, and state neglect. With an estimated population of over 10,000 people comprising both Ghanaians and nationals from other West African states, the settlement operated entirely outside the knowledge and control of state authorities.⁴⁷ The discovery, made during an anti-*galamsey* military operation codenamed "Surgical Operation,"

exposed widespread illegal mining and associated vices, including child trafficking, drug abuse, money laundering, and counterfeiting.⁴⁸ The case of *Abrewa Ne Kran*, alongside similar illegal settlements such as Jerusalem and Wasa Nkra, raises critical concerns about Ghana's internal stability and governance capacity and the broader human and national security implications, as argued below.

Economic Security

The foundation of *Abrewa Ne Kran*'s existence lies in economic deprivation. The community's residents, largely unemployed youth, turned to illegal mining *galamsey* as their primary source of livelihood. According to the UNDP human security framework, economic security entails having a stable income and access to productive employment to sustain a dignified life. In *Abrewa Ne Kran*, however, the lack of alternative livelihoods and state support may have fostered dependence on illicit mining activities that perpetuate poverty and exploitation. The economic insecurity observed within the settlement mirrors broader national challenges of unemployment and rural underdevelopment. Desperation can drive individuals into illegal economies that generate short-term survival but long-term instability as witnessed in the case of *Abrewa Ne Kran*. Furthermore, as seen in northern Ghana, extremist groups from the Sahel are reportedly trading firearms for gold from ASM patrons, signaling a nexus between illegal mining and violent extremism.⁴⁹ Such economic vulnerabilities can, therefore,

⁴⁵ Amoah, Isaac D., S. Kumari, P. Reddy, et al. "Impact of Informal Settlements and Wastewater Treatment Plants on Helminth Egg Contamination of Urban Rivers and Risks Associated with Exposure." *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 192 (2020): 713. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10661-020-08660-0>

⁴⁶ "Abrewa Ne Kran" (There are no old women in Accra)

⁴⁷ Kuzor, Albert. "W/R: Military Destroys Hidden Galamsey Settlement of over 10,000 Residents." *MyJoyOnline*, 15 April 2025. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/w-r-military-destroys-hidden-galamsey-settlement-of-over-10000-residents/>

⁴⁸ Ghana Armed Forces. (2024). Report on the "Surgical Operation" in the Subri Forest Reserve. Accra: Ministry of Defence

⁴⁹ International Crisis Group. (2023). *Gold and instability in the Sahel: How illicit mining fuels conflict*. ICG Africa Report No. 315.

be weaponised by transnational criminal networks, transforming economic insecurity into a security risk that threatens social cohesion and peace.

Environmental Security

Prior to its invasion, the Subri Forest Reserve was one of Ghana's most biologically diverse ecosystems, contributing significantly to the nation's green belt and climate regulation efforts. The activities of settlers at *Abrewa Ne Kran*, including extensive deforestation, excavation, and the use of toxic chemicals like mercury and arsenic, and the concentration of over 10,000 people within a localised part of the forest reserve, have caused severe damage to the environment. The destruction of the Subri Forest has undermined ecological stability, increases risks of soil erosion, flooding, biodiversity loss, while also reducing the capacity of the forest to sequester carbon from the atmosphere. Moreover, the burning down of the settlement by the anti-galamsey task force, while aimed at halting illegal activities, further worsens air pollution and green house gas emissions contributed to carbon emissions. Similarly, contaminated water bodies in the area now pose hazards to both local and downstream communities.⁵⁰ The erosion of the environment in *Abrewa Ne Kran* thus directly threatens other forms of human security, including economic, food and water security safety, potentially compromising nearby rural livelihoods of communities such as Subri, Wassa Nkran, "Jerusalem" etc.

Community Security

The absence of formal governance structures in *Abrewa Ne Kran* exemplifies

a profound breakdown of community security, a core pillar of the UN Human Security framework. Community security encompasses the protection of individuals from the erosion of social cohesion, traditional relationships, and communal institutions, as well as from exposure to sectarian or communal violence. The situation in *Abrewa Ne Kran* reflected precisely such a collapse. Residents lived within an essentially lawless enclave in which informal power brokers and criminal networks potentially under the influence of deep state actors displaced legitimate state authority. Under such conditions, women and children are rendered particularly vulnerable to trafficking, exploitation, and drug-related abuse, while the maintenance of social order depends on the interests and coercive power of illicit miners and their external financiers. The scale of such a security deficit became starkly visible following the April 2025 discovery of the illegal settlement. Reports indicated that human trafficking, child exploitation, prostitution, and money laundering were widespread prior to the intervention of the joint task force.⁵¹ These developments reveal not only the emergence of an unregulated criminal ecosystem but also a deep rupture in community cohesion and communication, produced by the entrenched activities of illegal gold-mining networks. The *Abrewa Ne Kran* enclave thus stands as a troubling illustration of how unregulated extractive practices can erode the foundations of human security.

Health Security

The conditions within *Abrewa Ne Kran* demonstrate profound threats to health security. Residents lived in unsanitary

⁵⁰ Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). (2024). Annual report on environmental degradation and illegal mining in Ghana. Accra: EPA Publications.

⁵¹ Kuzor, Albert. "W/R: Military Destroys Hidden Galamsey Settlement of Over 10,000 Residents." *MyJoyOnline*, April 15, 2025. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/w-r-military-destroys-hidden-galamsey-settlement-of-over-10000-residents/>

environments, with no access to potable water, health facilities, or waste management systems. The use of toxic chemicals in gold extraction, such as mercury, cadmium, and lead, likely polluted nearby rivers, exposing inhabitants to chronic poisoning and long-term health complications.⁵² Additionally, the lack of sanitation infrastructure may have led to indiscriminate waste disposal, increasing the risk of communicable diseases such as cholera, typhoid, malaria, and dysentery. The Ghana Water Company has reported escalating treatment costs due to chemical contamination in gamsey-affected rivers across the country.⁵³ These localised health insecurities can quickly escalate into national public health crises, placing severe pressure on healthcare systems and undermining water safety across regions. Moreover, the transboundary character of river flows means that contamination of riverine sources within the Subri enclave carries far-reaching implications for water quality and human security beyond Ghana's borders. Neighbouring countries that depend on these shared river systems may also bear the unintended consequences of the environmentally destructive practices associated with illegal mining settlements.

National Security Implications

An analysis of the national security implications of illegal mining settlements located within Ghana's forest reserves and along its porous national borders, in the light of Ghana's National Security Strategy (NSS) pillar 3 (Building trust and cooperation between security agencies and communities through public

awareness), pillar 4 (Leveraging membership in ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN to build national capacity against violent extremism, terrorism, and cybercrime), and pillar 6 (Developing Ghana's human potential through universal education, skills training, and entrepreneurship),⁵⁴ raises significant concerns. The case of *Abrewa Ne Kran* illustrates the complex and evolving threats that arise when unregulated spaces allow non-state actors, transnational criminal groups, and illicit networks to entrench themselves within the territorial domain of the state. Weaknesses across these four national security dimensions have enabled the emergence of alternatively governed territories or zones where state oversight is non-existent, or at the very best minimal, and where deep-state actors or local power brokers collaborate with illegal mining networks to undermine formal governance structures.⁵⁵

The existence of a large undocumented population consisting of both Ghanaians and foreign nationals living within a forest reserve connected to the national grid yet missing from official state records reflects profound lapses in state authority, inter-agency coordination, and law enforcement presence. These governance gaps create a fertile ground for organised criminal groups, including those involved in gold smuggling, arms trafficking, and money laundering.⁵⁶ Such enclaves risk evolving into state-within-a-state formations, where parallel governance systems driven by illicit economies gradually displace state legitimacy. If left unaddressed, these vulnerabilities not only threaten

⁵² World Health Organisation (WHO). (2023). Health and environmental impacts of artisanal and small-scale gold mining. Geneva: WHO.

⁵³ Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL). (2024). Water quality and treatment cost assessment report. Accra: GWCL.

⁵⁴ https://mofa.gov.gh/site/images/pdf/national_security_strategy.pdf

⁵⁵ Jasper Abembia Ayelazuno and Maxwell Akansina Aziabah, *State Capture in the Militarized Fight Against Illegal Small-Scale Goldmining in Ghana* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-82673-3>. (Springer)

⁵⁶ INTERPOL. 2021. *Illicit Gold Trade and Transnational Crime in West Africa*. Lyon: INTERPOL.

internal stability but also expose Ghana to infiltration by violent extremist organisations, particularly those active in the Sahel who increasingly rely on gold-for-weapons exchanges.⁵⁷ Additionally, large concentrations of people facing limited economic opportunities and low opportunity costs for engaging in financially rewarding violence can become fertile ground for recruitment by armed groups. Illegal mining settlements such as *Abrewa Ne Nkran*, therefore, pose a serious risk to national security, especially in the context of the growing presence and consolidation of violent extremist groups across the West African region.

Conclusion

The case of *Abrewa Ne Nkran* is not simply an account of illegal mining; it serves as a powerful illustration of the broader human and national security deficits confronting Ghana. The community's circumstances reveal the deep interconnections between human insecurity and national instability, where economic hardship, environmental degradation, social marginalization, and public health risks converge to create conditions conducive to criminality and insecurity. The human security dimension therefore emerges as central to understanding the full impact of illegal mining on affected populations. Addressing the seven pillars of human security through a coherent policy framework supported by measurable implementation indicators must form the foundation of any government's strategy to combat *galamsey*, particularly when backed by genuine political will. Furthermore, sustained collaboration

with regional bodies and international partners offers an additional layer of protection, enabling Ghana to safeguard its sovereignty, protect the environment, and ensure the security of its citizens and foreign nationals. Such cooperation is also essential for preventing external threats, including the potential infiltration of terrorist networks, thereby reinforcing national and human security in a comprehensive and sustainable manner.

To effectively curb this emerging trend, policymakers and security agencies should consider the following recommended measures:

1. Strengthen Compliance with Ghana's Immigration laws

- The government of Ghana, through the Ghana Immigration Service, should intensify surveillance along land borders and all known entry points to curb the influx of undocumented foreign nationals. Additionally, all foreign nationals without valid resident permits should be identified and lawfully repatriated in accordance with Ghana's immigration law.

2. Equip Security Forces with Body Cameras During Operations

- All officers deployed for anti-*galamsey* operations should be required to wear body cameras throughout field activities. This promotes accountability and transparency, reducing opportunities for corruption and collusion among law enforcement personnel. Real-time recording helps preserve the integrity and credibility of operations.

⁵⁷ International Crisis Group. 2019. *Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush*. Brussels: ICG.

3. Use Arrested Illegal Miners as Informants to Expose Key Sponsors

- Arrested illegal miners should be strategically engaged as informants to help identify and expose the financiers, political figures, traditional leaders, and business elites who sponsor and profit from illegal mining activities. Addressing the influential networks behind galamsey is crucial. Targeting only small-scale operators treats the symptoms, not the systemic roots of the problem.

4. Enforce Environmental Restoration Through Community Service and Asset Seizure

- Those convicted of illegal mining should be compelled to participate in land restoration efforts refilling pits, planting trees, and engaging in environmental reclamation projects. Additionally, their confiscated assets should be auctioned, with proceeds directed toward restoration initiatives. This approach combines punitive and restorative justice, ensuring offenders actively contribute to environmental recovery while deterring future violations.

5. Establish Bilateral Agreements with Affected Foreign Governments

- Ghana should pursue bilateral agreements with the countries of origin of foreign nationals implicated in galamsey. Such agreements should promote joint accountability, facilitate the recovery of environmental damages, and enable the publication of offenders' identities through both local and international media. Given the involvement of foreign nationals, especially from neighbouring African states and parts of Asia, international collaboration is critical for enforcement, deterrence, and resource reclamation.

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How to Cite

Buck, G., & Nkansah, G. B. (2026). Illegal Mining Settlements in Forest Reserves as Emerging Threats to Human and National Security. *Occasional Paper 66*. Accra: KAIPTC

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