AFRICA'S RESOURCES

Blind to the Truth
Africa’s Gold Standards

The relationship between local communities and large mining multinationals operating in Africa is tenuous at best, writes Zahra Moloo

In May 2009, after a night of heavy rainfall, the Tigithe river in the north of Tanzania turned a strange shade of red. The river, the water source for thousands of people, had allegedly been contaminated by a leaking storage pond at the nearby North Mara mine, operated by the African subsidiary of one of the world’s largest gold companies, Canada’s Barrick Gold. Testing by the company found water too acidic for fish to survive and well short of Tanzania’s drinking water standards. Later subsequent reports alleged that 21 people and hundreds of livestock had died as a result.

In the same year the price for an ounce of gold surged past the 1980 record of $850, by the end of 2009 it had passed the $1,100 dollar per ounce mark and would move higher still in 2010.

So a high gold price is good news for miners of the precious metal and with more than half the world’s gold reserves in Africa this is clearly the place for companies like Barrick to be. But what about the human cost?

Despite numerous appeals by the community to shut down the mine, in July 2010 the Tanzanian government declared the river free of pollution. A spokesman from Barrick itself has said that toxic spillage is no longer an issue. But Chacha Wambura, the executive director of Foundation Help, an organisation that has been working in the area, is far from convinced after having consulted with members of the community. “High concentrations of heavy metals still seem to be there. The communities are using this water and some of them might experience health or physical implications over time,” he says.

The toxic spill is only the latest incident in a series of controversies plaguing Tanzania’s mining regions of Biharamulo, Kahama and Tarime where Barrick mines for gold. Like most companies, Barrick has taken pains to demonstrate its commitment to corporate social responsibility. Barrick declined to speak to the BBC but in an interview with Dow Jones, it acknowledges a spill from its North Mara mine did occur but says it dealt swiftly and effectively with the situation, and that any alleged health complications were not as a result of its activities in the area. It also says in a statement released on its website that case studies produced to back up claims of ill health could not be corroborated by Barrick’s team of independent medical experts. It claims that it “conducts itself with the highest ethical standards”. But these claims appear to be at odds with reports from journalists and local communities.

For instance, the latter have documented incidents in which up to seven villagers were shot at different times while venturing close to the mine in North Mara. The mine’s management told The Citizen newspaper that the individuals concerned were suspected looters who were targeting mainly gold sand and fuel. But Dow Jones reports that locals resent the mine because it has displaced artisanal miners in the area.

Furthermore, in a 2006 report, Tundu Lissu, a lawyer working for Lawyers for Environmental Action (Leat), said that since 2004, the company had been taking land required for its mining operations by force. “This is done by simply dumping millions of tonnes of waste rock and rubble onto village lands without even the pretence of seeking owners’ consent or payment of compensation as required by law.” Leat has what they say is video evidence and testimonies to back up these claims.

Barrick has not responded directly to these allegations, but does insist that it is “committed to making a positive contribution to local communities”, and that all land acquired has been done so legally.

But the series of allegations against the company goes even further back. Leat produced evidence in 2001 that more than 50 small-scale miners were buried alive
Newly mined gold bars at the AngloGold Ashanti mine at Obuasi, Ghana
in the Bulyanhulu gold mine in Shinyanga region, 55 kilometres south of Lake Victoria. The mine belonged to a Canadian company, Sutton Resources, which Barrick acquired in 1999. Barrick maintained that the claims were unsubstantiated and, with the World Bank, issued a report refuting the allegations. One of the report’s findings is that “The Tanzanian press has found people alive in other parts of the country who it is alleged died at this time.” The report has been rejected by Leat as containing inaccuracies. Again, Barrick declined an interview with the BBC.

These controversies have not deterred the Tanzanian government from continuing to grant concessions to foreign multinationals and expanding the country’s mining sector, including its unexploited uranium deposits. In April this year, the government made changes to the country’s mining laws to increase royalties on minerals from three to four per cent. Industry groups have opposed the changes, claiming that they will deter foreign investment in mining which is already a risky and costly business.

Tanzania perhaps provides a microcosm of a much larger conflict between what is seen to be the opposing interests of mining multinationals and local populations. In neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the extraction of gold and other minerals has fuelled the most devastating war on the African continent. But Delly Sesete, the director of Credhoo, a Kivu-based human rights organisation, says that companies have been known to collaborate with armed groups in times of conflict in order to protect their interests.

In 2005, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a damning report titled The Curse of Gold. The dossier set out to show how the gold mining company AngloGold Ashanti allegedly supported the Nationalist and Integrationist Front (FNI) — an armed group that was killing civilians and using forced labour to gain access to mines in Ituri province in the east of the DRC. According to HRW, the company provided logistical, transportation and housing assistance to the group. AngloGold Ashanti has since admitted some of the allegations, but denied the motive, saying that it had “unavoidable encounters” with the FNI and that vehicle transport was provided to the rebels “under threat of abuse and assault” — so the jury is out on how widespread Sesete’s claims are.

But AngloGold Ashanti remains active there, alongside others in the north and east, and new projects are being planned. For instance, Randgold Resources, a gold mining company listed on the London Stock Exchange, was given permission to begin construction on a mining project in Kibali in the DRC’s Province Orientale in 2013. The mine will require displacing an estimated 15,000 people. Mark Bristow, the company’s chief executive, says that Randgold Resources will adhere to the country’s legislation which requires providing a displaced person “with 50 per cent better living conditions than what he’s [currently] got”.

Randgold is in a joint venture with AngloGold Ashanti in the DRC. Bristow says that Randgold has a very clear set of values. He claims that the mining industry has been unfairly targeted in the past by reporters. "People... don't publish truths. You go to AngloGold and they definitely don't employ crooks. And the atrocities and exploitation happened during the days when there was no legitimate government," he says.

While one might argue that Kinshasa now has a legitimate government, recent events — including the assassination of the Congolese human rights activist, Florbert Chebeya, and the mass rape of hundreds beside a United Nations’ camp — are testament to the climate of impunity that persists in the country. The BBC has also recently uncovered evidence that the company Gemimanco curried favour with a senior officer in the country enabling it to take over the Omale gold mine in eastern DRC. The officer was allegedly promised 25 per cent of the gold revenue in return. Gemimanco denies any involvement. This emerged only two months after President Joseph Kabila ordered a ban on mining in the east to root out the so-called 'mafia' involved in mineral extraction. However Sesete says the ban "did not affect companies involved in industrial exploitation”.

But as more foreign firms begin to prospect for gold — not only in the DRC and Tanzania but also increasingly in West Africa — what kind of legal precedents exist to oversee the conduct of mining companies?

In 2007, a Congolese military tribunal acquitted nine Congolese soldiers and three former employees of a Canadian company, Anvil Mining, a copper producer, of complicity in war crimes. This was related to alleged logistical assistance given to the Congolese military in 2004 in an effort to protect a mine which resulted in the massacre of 700 civilians in the town of Kiwu. And towards the end of last year, the Canadian legislature voted against a law that would have enabled the government to investigate complaints against its companies operating abroad.

But at roughly the same time, in a Canadian courtroom, a law firm representing Congolese citizens filed a new civil case against Anvil relating to Kiwu. The company has denied the original charges and says that it intends to defend itself in court.

Uranium is sought after for nuclear power, but are health risks overlooked? Zahra Moloo reports

It seems to be a desperate situation. "Desolation, environmental destruction, armed conflict, unknown illnesses, unemployment, resource pillage and open pit mines," is how human rights activist Almoustapha Alhacen, a member of the nomadic Tuareg people of North Africa, describes life around the industrial town of Areal. Situated in the north of Niger, Areal sits uneasily beside mountains of radioactive waste from a mine belonging to the French industrial conglomerate, Areva.

In Africa, there are sought-after deposits of uranium — widely recognised as a deadly, dangerous metal. Its radioactivity was first discovered by a French physicist, Henri Becquerel, whose findings ultimately led to the creation of the two atomic bombs that devastated Japan at the end of World War II. Today, uranium is in demand by countries like China and India as an alternative to carbon-emitting fuels; yellowcake, a concentrated uranium powder, is used in the preparation of fuel for nuclear reactors. Areva’s interest in Niger, a former French colony, is explained by the fact that nuclear power from uranium is France’s principal energy source. And 80 per cent of that comes from Niger.

The region where uranium was discovered in Niger, stretching from Tamesna to Talak and Teguida to the west of the Air mountains, was historically a zone of freedom for the indigenous Tuareg. It was outside direct control of the first colonial government and later the authorities in the capital, Niamey. In fact, according to an anthropologist Jeremy Keenan, the Tuareg considered this land almost sacred. "All their camels came here for pasture, to give birth. They called it the camel restaurant." But decades of uranium extraction starting in 1971 have transformed the landscape.

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**Have Yellowcake**

Formerly a worker on the mines, Alhacen used to repair machines until he became ill and his co-workers began to die from unidentifiable illnesses. It was then that Alhacen decided to set up his organisation, Aghririn Man, to campaign for better health protection against radioactivity for miners and also to help indigenous residents of Arlit benefit from their own resources.

At the time, the employees working in the mines knew nothing about the dangers of radioactivity and nor, they say, were they told anything about it. They had no protective clothing or masks, they were eating down there in the open pit mine where the dust was contaminating everything, inhaling it, ingesting it," says Gunter Wippel, an activist from the uranium network of the World Information Service on Energy.

Areva denies the allegations: "So far we have absolutely no proof of anyone dying within our work force or within the local population because of the operation of the uranium mines," says Didier Fohlen, Areva's vice-president for environmental and social responsibility in mining. "We are doing regular monitoring and operating within local regulation and environmental best practice. All our employees and subcontractors are provided with monitoring and protection equipment," he says.

But the company has reportedly precluded any formal investigation into the health effects of mining. "There is not even one doctor specialising in occupational illnesses in the company's two hospitals in Arlit and Akokan," says Alhacen. Fohlen disagrees and says it was the Nigerien government that stopped the investigation because the parties concerned had not received security clearance. He also says that the company has a doctor—a former employee of the company—to deal with occupational health cases.

Bruno Charreyron, the director of the French organisation Cridar, a non-governmental organisation established in 1986 to test radioactivity in France, went to Niger in 2004 to measure levels of radioactivity from uranium mining. Upon landing, his equipment was confiscated at the airport in Niamey. Nevertheless he managed to take some samples from water wells and returned with them to France for testing. His results found elevated levels of radioactivity, up to ten times higher than the level considered safe by the World Health Organization.

Decades of mineral extraction destined for Europe has led to the mobilisation of the Movement des Nigeriens pour la Justice (MNJ). The government believes that the MNJ is a front for criminal activity such as banditry and drug-smuggling, but the movement's spokesperson says they are fighting for indigenous Nigerians to have greater share of the revenue from uranium mining.

**Employees knew nothing about dangers of radioactivity**

Despite the grievances of the MNJ and civil society groups in France and Niger, the expansion of uranium mining continues unabated. Areva has concluded an agreement to begin another mining project in 2013 at Inmouaren in Niger which its spokesperson, Fleur Floquet, says will be "the biggest mine in Africa." Charreyron worries that this project will produce millions of tonnes of radioactive waste as well as depleting and contaminating already scarce water resources. But Fohlen rejects allegations of environmental destruction by saying that Areva has in place a process of "managed impacts" in the sites themselves which do not spread outside of the mines.

Areva is also currently engaged in talks with the Kinshasa government to begin exploiting Shinkolobwe, the mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Katanga province that provided uranium for the Hiroshima bomb almost 60 years ago. According to Wippel, the only way to prevent that kind of legacy in Niger is to "stop it before it even starts."

In Zambia that is precisely what concerned groups are trying to do—stop the government proceeding with what appears to be an already hazardous uranium mining project. In July 2010, the Council of Churches of Zambia published a report called Prosperity unto Death: Is Zambia Ready for Uranium Mining? This aimed to review the country's uranium policy and exploration projects already underway by a number of companies. The council found that companies claiming to be exploring for uranium in Zambia's Siavonga district, including Canada-based Denison mining, had drilled holes in community homesteads, extracting large deposits of radioactive ore which contaminated water supplies.

"Local communities have already started seeing forced evictions in livestock. They are also complaining of people's teeth rotting from the water," says Evans Rubara, a policy and advocacy advisor at Norwegian Church Aid and one of the main contributors to the report. Rubara explains that Denison's uranium mine will be located at the top of a hill causing radioactive waste to wash downhill into Lake Kariba which is shared by Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The mine's establishment will also increase forcibly evicting the communities in mining areas to an unsafe distance only five kilometres away from the site.

Denison's president and chief executive, Ron Hochstein, dismissed the report saying it has "absolutely zero basis" and that various chiefs and headmen in the affected area had signed off on relocation plans. He said that the radioactivity in the area had nothing to do with uranium exploration and that, because of water-collection systems that had been put in place, there were no issues that uranium contaminated any water supply. When asked where the radioactivity came from if not exploration activities, he responded: "From the good lord above. There is uranium everywhere. Environmental groups make statements with no basis."

After the report's publication, the Zambian government was outraged and tried to take action against the Council of Churches. Rubara says that he received a number of threats. "I was being followed by people, cars I did not recognise. Eventually I started receiving visitors in my office. One woman walked into my office and started yelling at me. She said: 'I will stop this report!'" Shortly after this, Rubara left Zambia.

The Zambian Ministry of Mines did not respond to requests for an interview, but Rubara says he suspects they will likely ignore the council's findings and give the go-ahead to foreign mining companies to extract uranium.