



GCERF

Preventing Violent Extremism
and Terrorism



THE SHADOW OF GALAMSEY

A security perspective on illegal and
small-scale mining in Ghana

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Cover photo

Delali Adogla-Bessa / Shutterstock. Ghanaian illegal miner finds a small nugget of gold.

Glossary

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
ASM	Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining
BMC	Burkina Mining Company
COCOBOD	Ghana Cocoa Board
GCERF	Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund
GoldBod	Gold Board of Ghana
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
LMC	Large-scale Mining Company
NAIMOS	National Anti-Illegal Mining Operations Secretariat
RCOMSDEP	Responsible Cooperatives Mining & Skills Development Program
VE	Violent Extremism

Executive summary

This report examines illegal artisanal and small-scale gold mining, or *galamsey*,¹ as an emerging security risk in Ghana, rather than solely an environmental or economic challenge. While Ghana remains free of terrorist attacks, *galamsey* is quietly creating conditions that enable insecurity, which can be exploited by violent extremism, namely: governance erosion, illicit economies, arms proliferation, youth marginalisation, and cross-border spillovers from the Sahel.

The report situates Ghana within a regional security continuum extending from Mali and Burkina Faso, warning that Ghana is currently being used as a resource and logistics zone by extremist-linked and criminal networks.

Eliminating *galamsey* to address the security challenges that it poses is an unrealistic and potentially destabilising endeavour. However, solutions exist for governing, formalising, and redirecting *galamsey* to prevent violence and radicalisation and to create stability and economic development.

The findings below result from extensive GCERF engagement on the issue of *galamsey* in Ghana over the past 6 months, and draw on a mixed-methods approach including:

- Three GCERF scoping missions (Ashanti, Upper East, Upper West regions).
- Extensive stakeholder consultations with communities, traditional leaders, artisanal miners, security officials, large-scale mining companies, civil society, international donors and cocoa-sector actors.
- Desk research and comparative analysis.
- Data triangulation, including ACLED² conflict data, global gold price trends, and geological mapping of gold-bearing zones.

Key findings

- ***Galamsey* is a national security issue, systemic and no longer a marginal livelihood problem:** *Galamsey* operates in over 120 of Ghana's 261 districts, engages more than one million people, and underpins a sprawling informal economy worth an estimated USD 2 billion annually. Its scale, informality, and deep political entanglement now directly undermine state authority, community cohesion, and security sector credibility.
- **Rising gold prices are a security risk multiplier:** The unprecedented surge in global gold prices is accelerating (i) entry into illegal mining, (ii) financing capacity of illicit networks and (iii) environmental destruction that eliminates alternative livelihoods. Comparative analysis shows a clear correlation between gold prices and violent extremist activity in Mali and, until recent shifts, in Burkina Faso. Ghana has not (yet) seen this translate into attacks, but the same economic mechanism is quietly embedding itself in vulnerable zones.

¹ Galamsey is generally understood as a corruption of the phrase 'gather them and sell', which was subsequently shortened and phonetically transformed into 'galamsey' over time.

² Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) is a US non-profit organisation specialized in the real-time collection, analysis, and mapping of data on political violence and protest events around the world.

- **Ghana is becoming a spillover zone from the Sahel:** State counter-offensives in Burkina Faso's mining zones have displaced hundreds of illegal miners into border districts of northern Ghana. This creates a latent convergence space where criminal networks, militant logistics, arms trafficking, and vulnerable youth overlap. While Ghana is not a centre of operations, analysis indicates that it is increasingly a resource, transit, and recuperation environment.
- **Governance erosion is the central vulnerability:** The most dangerous consequence of *galamsey* is the steady erosion of the legitimacy of state and traditional authorities. Politicised mineral governance, elite capture, perceived complicity of political and traditional authorities, selective enforcement, and repeated failures of benefit-sharing and formalisation schemes have severely weakened trust. Traditional leadership, long a pillar of stability, is losing credibility in mining areas, leaving communities without trusted authorities or effective grievance-resolution mechanisms. These legitimacy gaps create fertile ground for alternative power structures to emerge, increasing the risk of criminal and extremist exploitation.
- **Illicit economies and arms proliferation are firmly entrenched:** Illicit economies and arms proliferation are now deeply embedded in mining areas, where illegal gold extraction increasingly converges with gold smuggling, informal taxation systems, and cross-border criminal networks. This ecosystem has facilitated the circulation of small arms and explosives, including Ghana-origin explosives later recovered in Sahelian jihadist camps, underscoring the transnational dimensions of the risk. In this environment, violent clashes involving illegal miners, security forces, and large-scale mining companies have become more frequent, resulting in significant casualties, eroding community-company relations, and heightening radicalisation risks, particularly among marginalised youth.
- **Environmental destruction is fuelling livelihood conflict and competition over resources:** Severe environmental degradation caused by toxic chemicals used in illegal mining is intensifying livelihood competition and conflict. More than one million hectares of farmland³ have been destroyed, up to 60 percent of rivers in mining areas are polluted, and cocoa production, one of Ghana's strategic national assets, has been severely affected. As agriculture and related livelihoods collapse, many communities are pushed into mining by necessity, heightening tensions between miners, farmers, migrants, companies, and the state. This tightening livelihood squeeze fuels deep grievances, particularly among youth and women, who face economic displacement and limited alternatives.
- **Securitized-only responses increase risk:** Evidence across regions shows that ad hoc military crackdowns temporarily displace miners but permanently deepen grievances, often releasing armed, unemployed youth into nearby towns. These dynamic risks creating exactly the kind of disgruntled, weaponised population that extremist recruiters exploit.

³This refers to cumulative agricultural land affected nationally, not just forest reserves or formally gazetted land.

1. Background

While Ghana remains the only coastal West African country bordering the Sahel without recorded terrorist attacks in its territory, this relative stability masks underlying structural vulnerabilities and emerging risks. Chief of which are:

- **Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM):** ASM, which is widely known as *galamsey*, has evolved from a traditional livelihood activity into a complex political economy, with a large illegal component and significant environmental, governance, and security implications. ASM activities are present in more than 120 of Ghana's 261 districts, underscoring the nationwide reach of this phenomenon.⁴
- **Criminal, extremist and terrorist groups:** The increased presence, though largely non-kinetic, of actors linked to groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is facilitated partly by Ghana's porous northern border with Burkina Faso. These actors use border areas for logistics, movement, and recuperation. Alongside some criminal groups, they also see *galamsey* as a source of revenue, a channel for arms movement, and a recruitment pool.⁵

The rise of illegal *galamsey* and its accompanying shadow transnational illicit economy raises concerns over potential enabling environments in Ghana for terrorists' expansion and radicalisation: there is a growing connection to organised crime, arms proliferation, governance erosion, and youth marginalisation – all notable drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE).

A senior district security official in the Talensi district,⁶ where the high proliferation of arms⁷ is driven by the exchange of gold for weapons, summarising the intensity of the intersection of *galamsey* and insecurity:

"Our main challenge in this district is armed crime due to galamsey. There are times we record very daring and high scale armed robbery activities every single day in a week across markets and communities. They shoot indiscriminately, including sometimes in the regional capital Bolgatanga with very sophisticated weapons."

The significant increase in gold prices over the past years (a 55% increase in 2025)⁸ is accelerating this process, with a vicious cycle emerging that drives more people into *galamsey*, increasing pollution and the destruction of arable land, thereby reducing viable economic alternatives to *galamsey* and raising its appeal.

Communities that surround or host *galamsey* exemplify not only its rising appeal but also its significant social impacts. In a community of about 5'000 residents near the Talensi mining district, only 7 pupils, all girls, registered for this year's West Africa Basic Education Certificate Examination, which is the required

⁴ Benjamin Damoah & Richard Boglo, Resource curse and sociospatial implications of artisanal gold mining in Ghana.

⁵ Marcena Hunter and Gideon Ofosu-Peasah, *Violent Extremist Threats to Northern Ghana's Gold Sector*, December 2025.

⁶ Talensi district is one of the main mining districts in Ghana (based in the Upper East region of northern Ghana) with two large scale mining companies and a widespread *galamsey* economy.

⁷ Some *galamseyers* and community members allege that *galamseyers* give between 1-3 blades of gold in exchange for different types of guns including AK-47s. A blade is a local term equivalent to 0.8 grams of gold.

⁸ The price of gold had an unprecedented run up in 2025 and has continued its trajectory into 2026. According to the World Gold Council the average price of gold in the fourth quarter of 2025 reached USD 4'315 per ounce, up 55% year on year.

examination for transition into high school. The boys drop out of school at a very early stage to pursue quick money in *galamsey*.

***Galamsey* in Ghana in numbers**

According to ENACT Africa (2023), over one million people are involved in the small-scale mining sector, with more than 85% engaged in illegal operations. The upstream and downstream industries employ 4.5 million people, accounting for 60% of the country's mining workforce. Gold represents over 90% of Ghana's mineral export revenues, meaning a sizable share of a strategic national asset is linked to poorly regulated or illicit production chains.

Significant volumes of ASM gold are believed to bypass formal channels, contributing to substantial revenue losses, informal taxation systems, and parallel economic circuits, though precise fiscal losses remain underreported. While *galamsey* contributes an estimated USD 2 billion to Ghana's informal economy annually, the environmental and social costs far outweigh these gains.⁹ The government of Ghana loses over a billion US dollars in tax revenues due to unreported gold exports, reflecting a broader regional pattern in which tens of billions of dollars' worth of African gold transits through the UAE annually, often with limited reporting and documentation.¹⁰

⁹ [Harnessing opportunities from galamsey: Turning a menace into sustainable livelihoods \(BFT Online\)](#).

¹⁰ [Gold worth tens of billions smuggled to the UAE each year, report says \(Reuters\)](#).

2. A regional perspective on illegal mining and violent extremism

Illegal mining and *galamsey* dynamics intersect in multiple ways with the drivers, enablers, and operational needs of violent extremist groups. These interlinkages may not always be direct or immediate, but they create permissive conditions that can be exploited as extremist violence from the Sahel expands southward, including along the Mali-Burkina Faso-Ghana axis.

Ghana is currently being used more as a resource zone than as a location for VE groups to set an active operational presence. However, the Ghana-Burkina Faso borderlands represent one of the most strategically sensitive interfaces for understanding the potential convergence between *galamsey* and violent extremist risks.

Looking at the situation in Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana, there is emerging evidence of increasing interaction between *galamsey* economies and cross-border illicit flows, including reported cases of gold smuggling and potential barter exchanges between *galamseyers* and armed groups. While these findings are nascent and require further empirical validation, they point to:

- A growing convergence between local vulnerabilities and regional insecurity dynamics on the one hand.
- And an emerging convergence between *galamsey* economies, and cross-border illicit flows with direct consequences for violent extremist activities, on the other.

An internal GCERF data-driven comparative analysis of a decade of ACLED conflict-event data, monthly World Bank gold prices and open geological layer identifying where gold-bearing Birimian rock sits, reveals a strong gold-VE activity mechanism.¹¹ More specifically:

- **In Mali**, a ten percent rise in the world gold price lines up with roughly a third more jihadist events in the country's gold-suitable regions, and almost half more when measured against JNIM-coded attacks specifically. The mechanism operates as the rent-capture literature predicts.¹² Higher gold prices raise the rents extremists can extract from sites under their influence, and that shows up as increased operational tempo within weeks.
- **Burkina Faso** is more complicated. The same mechanism as in Mali held through 2021 and then reversed after the January 2022 coup. The pre-coup direction was as predicted by the literature. However, the post-coup direction is the opposite. A state-led counteroffensive concentrated in the gold provinces partly explains the reversal of the mechanism post-2022, and since early 2024, Burkinabé armed forces have pushed JNIM out of some of its Sud-Ouest strongholds (which borders Ghana), thus further constraining JNIM's territorial access to gold-mining rents in the area.
- **As regards Ghana**, field data from northern Ghana confirms the effect of the Burkina Faso state-led counter offensive against VE in mining zones, as some *galamseyers* and illegal miners who

¹¹ Based on a regression of ACLED conflict events on gold prices and district-level gold suitability (Adm2), controlling for country and region fixed effects, across 355 districts and 123 months (January 2015–March 2025). Sensitivity analyses confirmed the effect is specific to JNIM and does not hold for other armed actors. A pre-2022 placebo test against pre-bull-run trends returned null, ruling out a pre-existing structural pattern.

¹² Berman, N., Couttenier, M., Rohner, D., and Thoenig, M. (2017). This mine is mine! How minerals fuel conflicts in Africa. *American Economic Review*, 107(6), 1564–1610.

used to engage in *galamsey* in the concessions of large-scale mining companies (LMCs) in Burkina Faso have shifted into illegal mining sites along the border in Ghana.

For example, as revealed by hundreds of illegal miners who were forced out of the concession of Youga Gold Mine (a subsidiary of BMC in Burkina Faso) into a *galamsey* site in the Bawku West district of Ghana, fewer than 500 meters from the boundary of Youga Mine. According to one illegal miner:

“We used to work in the concession of the BMC mine that you can see from here just across in Burkina Faso. But the Burkinabe security now controls that mine and they sacked us from the concession because they say the jihadists disguise as galamseyers to enter mining zones to gather intelligence for attacks. So, we no longer have access to galamsey in Burkina Faso, and that is why we moved here with our Burkinabe brothers with whom we used to do galamsey in Burkina Faso.”

This reveals not only how the counter-offensive in Burkina is pushing illegal miners from bordering mining districts into Ghana, but also the VE threats and vulnerabilities in Burkina Faso that necessitated the counter-offensive in the first place. The fact that mining labour flows from Burkina Faso into *galamsey* and illegal mining sites in Ghana, where the activity is not regulated or under security scrutiny, highlights how a latent VE threat could be gathering momentum quietly in a vulnerable blind spot.

Likewise, while the south of Ghana has hitherto remained largely insulated from VE vulnerabilities prevalent in the north, *galamsey*-driven migratory patterns linking high volumes of unchecked labour from the north and the Sahel could serve as a potential transmission mechanism of these vulnerabilities to mining hubs in southern Ghana. The migratory dynamics, in addition to the nature of grievances and vulnerabilities that define the sector, increase the possibility in the future of the emergence of entrenched VE interests in mineral-rich zones of southern Ghana to exploit its informality and coexistence with illicit economies, both to recruit and extract resources to finance their operations and expansion.

3. The specifics of *galamsey* in Ghana

There are three angles to understanding *Galamsey* in Ghana and how it relates to violent extremism:

- **Governance erosion:** Politicised mineral governance, elite capture, perceived complicity of political and traditional authorities, selective enforcement, and repeated failures of benefit-sharing and formalisation schemes have severely weakened trust in authorities. Traditional leadership, long a pillar of stability, is losing credibility in mining areas, leaving communities without trusted authorities or effective grievance-resolution mechanisms. These legitimacy gaps create fertile ground for alternative power structures to emerge, increasing the risk of criminal and extremist exploitation.
- **Criminal economy:** *Galamsey* is a pull factor for multiple illicit and criminal activity involving gold smuggling, unregulated cash flows, arms proliferation, and transnational trafficking networks. The coexistence of illicit economies and *galamsey* fosters an enabling environment for violent extremists and criminal networks to exert influence and operate through illegal mining. For example, while the Government of Ghana is making efforts to nationalise gold purchases and cut-off criminal and smuggle networks, the *galamsey* sector continues to be the lifeline servicing these networks and exacerbating VE vulnerabilities.
- **Environmental degradation and livelihood loss:** *Galamsey* has caused extensive environmental damage in Ghana, including:
 - Pollution of rivers and water sources.
 - Deforestation and land degradation.
 - Loss of arable land for farming and grazing.

The agricultural sector, particularly cocoa, has been adversely affected. Illegal mining activities have destroyed over 1.2 million hectares of farmland,¹³ undermining Ghana's position as a leading cocoa producer. Ghana's cocoa regulator (COCOBOD) reports that three major cocoa-growing regions are badly affected, with overall cocoa production declining by about 5%¹⁴ as a result. In mining-affected regions, up to 60% of rivers and surface water bodies are polluted, primarily by mercury, cyanide, and sediment from illegal mining, posing direct public health and economic risks. Such environmental stressors often translate into horizontal grievances, between miners and farmers, locals and migrants, communities and authorities, which are a known vulnerability factor.

Galamsey is no longer a marginal livelihood activity. It now constitutes a large-scale informal extractive economy, deeply embedded in Ghana's political, environmental, and security landscape. Its reach, revenue potential, and socioeconomic footprint mean that ineffective governance of ASM does not merely harm the environment; it creates structural vulnerabilities with long-term state stability and security implications.

¹³ [Illegal Mining and Land Use Change as Drivers of Agricultural Land Scarcity in the Amansie South District in Ghana, West Africa \(Research Square\)](#).

¹⁴ [Illegal gold mining threatens cocoa production in Ghana \(African Agribusiness\)](#).

A perspective from a senior Obuasi municipal security official [1]: Shaping a viable future for the youth

“The young people and children in mining areas are not exposed to much diversity in terms of livelihoods and careers. Even the LMCs that are in these areas are heavily fenced and secured, cordoning off their professional workers from the communities. As a result, children grow up predominantly exposed to galamsey and a few low-paying professional jobs, such as teaching and nursing.

Seeing that galamseyers live more luxuriously than teachers and nurses, the kids grow up aspiring to be galamseyers, and consequently, many abandon school to pursue risky, illicit shadow activities on the periphery of galamsey, hoping to get into its core to earn a living. The educated professionals whose careers and lives would have inspired kids to aspire are fenced off and hardly relate to the community. This pattern creates an unfortunate cycle where galamsey is what kids and young people know and aspire to as the fastest route to wealth. The increasing price of gold further fortifies this cycle, pulling in many youth and children.”

3.1 Governance erosion and the fragmentation of state and traditional authority

Galamsey is undermining state legitimacy and creating governance vacuums that breed popular resentment and conditions that can potentially be exploited by extremist interests. This is a consequence of:

- **Politicisation and patronage networks:** Appointments into mineral governance structures, access to mining opportunities and regulatory enforcement are often shaped by political connections, undermining fairness and transparency. Membership of community-level mineral governance structures that are supposed to exercise oversight over the utilisation of communities’ share of mineral resources on behalf of communities often mirrors political affiliations, lacking community input, thereby bereft of true legitimacy and exposing them to elite capture. This leaves aggrieved communities and individuals without any trusted recourse.
- **Perceived complicity of political, traditional, and local authorities:** Widespread perceptions of elite involvement and interests in illegal mining, are eroding trust and weakening institutional legitimacy. Traditional leaders such as chiefs and tindanas (landowners) are alleged to be selling land (including cocoa farms) to miners without due process, while others usurp channels for genuine engagements between LMCs and host communities to capture benefits meant for whole communities for their private benefit.¹⁵ Conversely, in areas such as parts of northern Ghana where some chiefs oppose these practices and *galamsey*, their positions are threatened as actors in the sector allegedly sponsor rival chiefs, including instigating violent tensions to unseat principled/legitimate chiefs in favour of illegitimate but pliant ones.¹⁶
- **Weak and uneven enforcement of regulatory frameworks:** Alleged selective and inconsistent enforcement fuels grievances, resulting in non-compliance and an entrenched culture of

¹⁵ GCERF field interviews, March 2026, Obuasi.

¹⁶ GCERF field interviews with traditional leaders, April 2026, Upper West Region.

impunity. These persist in both the formal LMC and the *galamsey* sectors. Host communities feel shortchanged by both LMCs and the state, as benefits due to them are never realized, despite mining concessions displacing them from farming and other traditional livelihoods.¹⁷ The consolidation of these grievances and disillusionment by mining communities has not only chipped away at the trust and legitimacy of the state and LMC, but also propelled a growing acceptance and support for illegal mining, even within concessions of LMCs.¹⁸ Likewise, enforcement of bans and raids against illegal mining is perceived to be biased and only targeting the less politically exposed, less influential and the least networked within the traditional and formal governance structures, thereby undermining the capacity of the state to resolve the *galamsey* crisis.

The eroding trust in traditional leadership

Once seen as a resilient alternative to weakening state authority, the chieftaincy institution is now losing legitimacy under the weight of mining, especially *galamsey*. From south to northern Ghana, communities increasingly view chiefs as compromised actors aligned with mining interests rather than as custodians of community welfare.

Community voices are clear: *"The chief does not represent us. The mining company prefers him because he agrees to what they want, even against our interest."* Another community adds: *"our chief is a contractor for the mining company, making himself rich at our expense. Though he has a big house here, he cannot live here because he is illegitimate."*

Chiefs themselves acknowledge the erosion of authority: *"They no longer regard the chiefs. If you resist galamsey, they sponsor rivals or instigate conflict against you. They can even kill you."* Another reflects: *"Being a chief is no longer like before. If I oppose galamsey, I cannot enforce it because the galamsey people are very powerful and can even invade my palace if I dare."*

There is a strong and evolving legal framework to address *galamsey*,¹⁹ but implementation has been challenging. Mining communities and *galamseyers* widely perceive enforcement regimes as unjust, favouring large-scale mining companies and/or politically connected actors. This has generated deep mistrust toward both state and traditional authorities, creating opportunities for the emergence of alternative nodes of authority, especially in a sector with such diversity of interests, including organised crime networks.

¹⁷ GCERF Field Interviews with mining community members, March 2026, Obuasi.

¹⁸ GCERF Field Interviews with mining community members, March 2026, Obuasi.

¹⁹ Ghana is one of the first countries in Africa to promulgate a small-scale mining law. Ghanaian mining codes not only recognise artisanal and small-scale mining as a legitimate livelihood source but also establish a framework aimed at formalising it. So far, though, the regulation of artisanal and small-scale mining in Ghana has been mostly unsuccessful. According to the *Artisanal and small-scale mining formalization challenges in Ghana: Explaining grassroots perspectives* study, by Richard Kumah, two main factors explain this failure: (i) the transient and migratory character of local mines do not synchronize with the complex and lengthy bureaucratic licensing regime currently in place. Less than 15% of small-scale mining operators have been able to acquire the requisite mining licences; (ii) the regulatory regime takes on a generic formalization framework for all of the country's diverse ASM operations and fails to link the various types of the sector's operations to appropriate levels and forms of control, neglecting the compliance capacity of the sector's rudimentary and subsistence operators.

Consequently, current efforts to formalise the sector through programmes like the Government's Responsible Cooperatives Mining & Skills Development Programme (RCOMSDEP), which was set up in 2025, face popular scepticism for fear that, like others in the past, it will benefit only those aligned to the ruling government or that progress will be truncated in the event of a change in government.²⁰ Due to this and the lack of opportunities in the formal mining sector, the majority of miners remain in the informal, unregulated, and illegal realm, controlled by powerful financiers, including criminal networks, and work under insecure, exploitative, rent-seeking arrangements.

These dynamics have even more serious implications, as *galamsey* typically occurs in areas of limited state presence/oversight, creating opportunities for such legitimacy deficits to be exploited by alternative actors to assert themselves.

Participatory governance mechanisms were introduced in Ghana's mining regions to ensure that host communities directly benefit from the mineral revenues of large-scale mining companies. These mechanisms, often established as community development funds and/or local management platforms, were designed to channel a share of mining benefits into social services, infrastructure, and livelihood support of host communities. However, a significant gap persists between intent and practice in participatory governance.

While platforms are meant to be formally inclusive, in practice, many communities experience weak representation, limited decision-making power, and low technical capacity to influence resource allocation. When local actors feel excluded or perceive the process as controlled by elites, trust in both mining companies and government authorities erodes. This not only undermines the purpose of benefit-sharing but can also intensify grievances and amplify conflict risks and infiltration in mining zones.

Violent extremist groups have historically exploited such stress points by positioning themselves, at least initially, as protectors, providers, or arbitrators. Even without ideological uptake, increased community grievances can weaken local resistance to infiltration and reduce cooperation with state security services.

The voice of *galamseyers* in Sanso Community, Obuasi

"Anything that wants to formalise galamsey and protect our livelihoods is a good idea, so we support it. But the reality is that this is not the first time. It is a rebrand of the previous community mining scheme. When that programme was rolled out, we, the actual miners, did not have access to it.

Instead, it was given to party boys and financiers, some of whom are not known as miners. So, if this current one follows the same path, it will fail even before it starts. But if they have learnt some lessons and are willing to give us assurance that the programme will benefit us, the actual miners, and that it will not be truncated the moment another person (party) takes over, then we will be happy to support it to succeed."

²⁰ Interviews with miners and community members during GCERF scoping mission, 17 to 20 March 2026, Obuasi.

3.2 Convergence of illicit economies, proliferation of arms and transnational crimes

The *galamsey* economy operates within a broader ecosystem of illicit and armed activity, including:

- Gold smuggling, illicit and informal financial flows, some of which fund criminal and terrorist groups.
- Proliferation of arms, ammunition, and drug trafficking.
- Trafficking of vulnerable people, gender-based violence and exploitative labour practices.

Reports from mining communities indicate high and increasing circulation of small arms and light weapons in mining areas, driven by competition over mineral-rich land and as a coping mechanism against securitized state crackdowns. Consequently, violent clashes among miners, clashes between miners and crop farmers, and between miners, security forces, LMC private security, and local communities are frequent. For example, in one year alone, over 1'500 sophisticated weapons were seized in Ashanti and western regions alone following clashes. Between 2020 and 2023, clashes with illegal miners killed at least 50 security officials and over 120 civilians in Ghana, according to Human Rights Watch.²¹

Violent clashes are not limited only to illegal mining sites. For example, in January 2025, clashes between security and alleged *galamseyers*, leading to the death of at least 9²² people and 3²³ people at AngloGold Ashanti and Newmont sites, respectively, came with high financial, operational, and social costs to the companies that linger on long after the episodes.²⁴ Similarly, in the Upper East region of northern Ghana, the two LMCs have been in constant struggle with illegal miners in their concessions, resulting in regular clashes with company security and military, leading to casualties.²⁵

The rise in security incidents within large-scale mining concessions over the past several years has significantly degraded relationships between mining companies and surrounding communities. It has also amplified perceptions of injustice and inequitable benefit-sharing from gold mining activities. Collectively, these challenges are transforming the mining sector from a driver of investment and development into an increasingly destabilizing force.

The discovery in jihadist camps in Burkina Faso of mining explosives manufactured in Ghana adds credibility to assessments suggesting the infiltration of terrorist-affiliated elements into goldmining networks operating in Ghana. Ghana-origin explosives have also reportedly been recovered in Mali and Guinea-Conakry, indicating broader subregional circulation. The illegal mining sector is noted as the opening through which explosives are acquired and smuggled across the border, including into the hands of violent extremists.²⁶

According to security sources, there are reported activities of radical preachers in some of the illegal mining sites, suggesting that VE group-aligned actors are exerting more and more influence on some of

²¹ [Ghana's Complex Illegal Mining Epidemic Grows More Dangerous \(ADF Magazine\)](#) and [Obuasi mine clash: Death toll rises to nine, government assures justice \(Asaaser Radio\)](#).

²³ [Calm restored at Ntotroso after Newmont breach attempt \(My Joy Online\)](#).

²⁴ The incident at the AngloGold Ashanti concession led to a temporary closure of the company's operations including the closure of a school run by the company in Obuasi, the town in Ashanti region where the company operates and where the incident happened. The issue was widely reported in the media and condemned by many including CSOs, Parliament, the Small-scale miners' association etc. The President ordered a probe into the incident, while the company was made to support (financially) the burial of the deceased and pay hospital bills for the injured.

²⁵ GCERF field interview with mining executives, April 2026, Bolgatanga.

²⁶ GCERF field interviews, March and April 2026.

these sites, proving that Ghana is currently being used more as a resource zone than as a location for VE groups to set an active operational presence.

A perspective from a senior Obuasi municipal security official [2]: Safety for communities

“The galamsey issue is a very complex one requiring a comprehensive solution. For the people engaged in it and those living in mining areas, it is their main and most lucrative livelihood. Any attempt to simply get rid of galamsey is bound to fail from the start. Galamsey is no longer just mining; it has become a high-risk undertaking, with galamseyers heavily armed and a ring of other illicit activities developing around it.

So, we are talking about a whole population whose livelihoods come from galamsey. Many lives depend on it, so getting rid of galamsey is simply not possible, and doing so would unleash an ‘army’ of radicalised and disgruntled youth with arms into the society. We are already seeing the signs. Whenever the ad hoc military crackdowns on galamsey happen, we record very high numbers of armed violence and crime, such as armed robberies, in the days and weeks following the operations.

The perpetrators are often armed galamseyers who take their arms out into town to make a living because they have been temporarily displaced from their main source of livelihood – galamsey. Any solution must necessarily include sustainable livelihoods, and galamsey must be made a safer livelihood as part of the approach.”

In fact, artisanal gold mining sites constitute assets of strategic value for these violent extremist actors. They function not only as direct or indirect sources of financing, through mechanisms such as zakat, protection rackets, and informal taxation, but also as venues for ideological dissemination and recruitment, particularly among youth facing acute socio-economic marginalisation. The involvement of violent extremist and terrorist groups in parallel economic circuits, combined with their influence over illicit trafficking zones, through border regions, has facilitated their establishment and consolidation within these localities.

While reports about the growing numbers of Sahelian combatants being brought in to provide site security for *galamsey* in Ghana²⁷ remain low, multiple local stakeholders, including security actors and civil society organisations, report patterns consistent with growing cross-border criminal linkages to *galamsey*. This is also consistent with concerns raised by indigenous members of mining communities, local security officials, and investigative journalists about the rising numbers of ‘foreigners’, especially from the Sahel, entering *galamsey* areas in proportions that, in some areas, reportedly rival or exceed local populations.²⁸

The rise in the number of migrants in mining areas is also slowly creating tensions between host communities and migrants over the dilution of cultural and social values. The allure of *galamsey* money keeps children out of school and homes, with shadow activities such as prostitution, armed activities and

²⁷ GCERF interview with mining industry leader, March 2026, Accra.

²⁸ GCERF scoping mission, 17 to 20 March 2026, Obuasi.

drugs that service the *galamsey* economy are abhorred by host communities, not just as incompatible with their values, but also creating intergenerational tensions that threaten social cohesion eventually.²⁹

These dynamics create opaque, transnational value chains operating outside the state's oversight, increasing the risk of convergence with terrorist financing, logistics networks and radicalisation drives if not addressed.

3.3 Ecoterrorism and a clash over livelihoods

Galamsey is described by activists in Ghana as an ecocide or ecoterrorism,^{30,31} due to its severe environmental damage. *Galamseyers* make use of highly toxic chemicals, and their destruction of the environment through the use and misuse of industrial machinery is severe:

- 15% of the country's total forest cover has been destroyed by *galamsey*.
- 60% of water bodies are polluted, especially due to high mercury and cyanide use.
- Water turbidity³² levels in polluted bodies are 10–24 times above the safe limit for treatment.³³
- Over 48'000 hectares of prime cocoa farmland have been destroyed, and other crops are also significantly affected, threatening food security.

These dynamics are driving a structural shift in rural livelihoods, with mining increasingly displacing farming and other agriculture-based livelihood options. As one miner noted:

*"Galamsey is our livelihood and it is all we know."*³⁴

This reflects the deep economic relevance of the sector, especially for the over one million people directly involved.

Economic competition from *galamsey* results in lesser return-yielding options, like farming, being the worst affected, especially as the large concessions of LMCs have already swallowed whole communities, leaving them no land for economic activity. Similarly, in the north, the use of harmful chemicals such as cyanide, especially by migrant Burkinabe *galamseyers*, and the pollution of open water bodies that support dry season farming are creating tensions with local communities.³⁵ In some cases, like parts of the Upper East region, LMCs in whose concessions illegal miners encroach to mine with cyanide bear the ultimate brunt from affected community members and regulators, as the LMCs are more identifiable and traceable than the *galamseyers*.

The displacement of people, especially unemployed youth, from traditional livelihood options and crowding them out of mining by state security enforcement raids and/or migrating labour under these dynamics creates unintended security risks. Anytime that state-led anti-illegal mining raids are carried out, there is a corresponding increase in armed violence and crimes such as highway armed robberies,

²⁹ GCERF scoping mission, March and April 2026, Ashanti, Upper East and Upper West Regions.

³⁰ [Are they Party Financiers or Ecocide Terrorist? \(Modern Ghana\)](#).

³¹ [The eco-terrorists in action! #StopGalamseyNow \(Video\)](#).

³² Water turbidity is the measure of the *cloudiness* of water caused by suspended particles.

³³ [The State of Ghana's Forest Reserve and Water Bodies \(Parliament of Ghana\)](#).

³⁴ Focus group discussion with miners in Sanso Community, Obuasi.

³⁵ GCERF field interviews, April 2026, Upper West Region.

as some of the *galamseyers* who are displaced by these ad hoc raids reportedly resort to criminal activity.³⁶

This indicates that ad hoc, uncoordinated, and securitised-only approaches do not work. A more coordinated and comprehensive approach, especially one that is community-led and prioritization of livelihoods, is necessary.

A perspective from the Bensire community

Women in the Bensire community lament the loss of the community's glory as one of Ghana's most preferred orange-growing destinations.

"We have no land to farm because the company has taken it all and keeps pushing us back. When you manage to get a small piece to farm, it gets taken over by *galamseyers* too.

This town used to be known for the best oranges, but that is no longer the case. Due to mining chemicals, oranges do not grow here again. They are no longer as big, juicy, and sweet. Instead, they are very tiny and hard, and we are told several times that both our foodstuff and water are unsafe because they are infested by unsafe levels of chemicals, especially mercury."³⁷

The threat to the cocoa industry

Cocoa, one of Ghana's major and longstanding foreign exchange earners, and a crop for which the country, together with neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, controls over 60% of the global supply, is under severe threat. According to an assessment by Ghana's Cocoa Board, about 85% of all cocoa farm destructions are attributed to mining. Incidentally, the cocoa-growing areas are also mineral-rich, and the challenges the cocoa sector now faces are not only a consequence of *galamsey* but also, to some degree, a reflection of the deeply complex nature of the problem.

For example, as part of a policy to help protect the cocoa industry from mining, the Cocoa Board is providing legal support to cocoa farmers to prosecute individuals who destroy cocoa farms for mining. However, it turns out that most of the people in the dossier of alleged offenders are traditional chiefs and Politically Exposed Persons who use their influence and power to sell and/or acquire cocoa farms for mining. This dynamic reflects the extent to which the *galamsey* economy is networked and influential.

³⁶ Interviews with senior state security officials, 19 March 2026, Obuasi.

³⁷ Focus group discussion with women leaders in Bensire community, Obuasi.

4. The timeliness of engaging now

While the challenge of *galamsey* is not new, there has been renewed and significant mobilisation by the state and the private sector to address it.

The government is demonstrating its commitment through various interventions, with the President and key senior government officials describing *galamsey* as a national security threat. Most notably:

- In 2025, the Government of Ghana established the Gold Board of Ghana (GoldBod) as “the sole authority with exclusive right to buy, sell, weigh, grade, assay, value and export gold and other precious minerals in Ghana,” thus contributing significantly to “combating gold smuggling and supporting small-scale miners and sustainability initiatives, with the ultimate goal of generating foreign exchange for Ghana and supporting gold reserve accumulation by the Bank of Ghana.” Active engagements with the World Bank and the World Gold Council are ongoing with GoldBod to introduce traceability systems, a further step towards addressing smuggling and rendering illegally mined gold unmarketable.
- Setting up a National Anti-Illegal Mining Operations Secretariat (NAIMOS): a specialised multi-security taskforce designated to fight and crack down on illegal mining, standing on lessons from previous taskforces.
- From a legislative perspective the government recently:
 - Revoked a regulation that permitted mining in forest reserves including Globally Significant Biodiversity Areas.
 - Engaged LMCs to cede some of their concessions to artisanal and small-scale miners.
 - Coordinated with other agencies, such as the Ghana Cocoa Board, to enhance efforts to address the impacts of *galamsey* on agriculture especially cash crops production like cocoa.
 - Set up the Responsible Cooperative Mining and Skills Development Programme (RCOMSDEP) in early 2025, to invest in formalizing ASM and developing alternative livelihoods to illegal mining.
 - Supported the signature of a Geological Investigation Service agreement between the Minerals Development Fund and the Ghana Geological Survey Authority,³⁸ to make available reliable technical geological data in mining hotspots to promote sustainable and responsible small-scale mining, represents a major shift in the way the government is tackling the *galamsey*-related issues, moving from security only approach towards a more inclusive one that recognises mining as a critical livelihood option, thereby taking steps to regularise and derisk it as such.

On the private sector side, key players such as LMCs, are showing willingness to act, having already lost large tracks of concessions, some as high as 60%, to *galamsey*. They have had to deal with armed

³⁸ Government deepens responsible mining drive with MDF-GGSA partnership (My Joy Online).

galamseyers encroaching into their concessions on a regular basis, posing both security and operational constraints.³⁹

Large-scale mining companies report millions of dollars in annual production losses due to *galamsey* encroachment, equipment sabotage, and forced shutdowns in concession areas, particularly in the Western, Ashanti, and Eastern regions, incurring additional private security and remediation costs, with industry sources noting that protection, surveillance, and site restoration linked to illegal mining now represent a structural operating expense rather than an exceptional cost.⁴⁰ As a result, LMCs have had to increase their security and protection budgets to address the mounting problem.

Many LMCs are signing up to the government's formalization drive, ceding parts of their concessions for cooperative mining targeting *galamseyers*. Some are even planning to invest in programs that (i) train *galamseyers*, (ii) support them with the technology to identify gold deposits, and (iii) build safety in their mining activity, thus not only reducing the destruction footprint but ensuring safe and efficient operations for ASM.⁴¹

It will be key for these initiatives to succeed to meaningfully and sustainably engaging with communities to transform risk management into resilience and build a mining sector that thrives, delivers shared prosperity, and stands as a cornerstone of peace and stability in Ghana.

³⁹ In its 2024 global sustainability report, Newmont noted that its Ahafo South operations (followed by Ahafo North) are among the top sites where it faced the most security risks globally. The company describe the security situation in the two locations as: "Artisanal small-scale mining (ASM) activities, which are often illegal and pose significant safety risks, remain the primary security risk at Ahafo South. During the latter half of 2024, the site managed numerous incursions per week. Vandalism and disruption have also increased in parallel. The risk necessitates an adaptive security approach that adjusts based on emerging risks and includes monitoring high-risk areas using world-class technology within Newmont's concession. Ahafo South completed a security improvement plan in 2024, hardening perimeter fencing, installing cameras, improving lighting and implementing a specialist canine unit with trained handlers. Ahafo North, set to pour its first gold in 2025, faces a similarly complex, yet emerging, risk profile as Ahafo South. Newmont is working with internal and external partners to support a resilient and mutually beneficial coexistence with the surrounding communities."

⁴⁰ Clash between local community members and military personnel stationed at the Esaase site in the Galliano Gold concession on September 9, 2025, resulted in 1 death and destruction of company property. The company suspended operations on the site as a result. Subsequently, the company has cited this incident as a reason for reducing its full year (2025) gold production forecasts to between 120'000 & 125'000 down from an initial project of between 130'000 & 150'000 ounces.

⁴¹ Interviews with senior LMC officials, 26 March 2026, Accra.

5. Shifting from risk management to prevention: The GCERF approach

Galamsey is a structural stressor that links environmental collapse, governance failure, illicit economies, and regional insecurity. While Ghana remains relatively resilient, the rapidly evolving dynamics of *galamsey* pose an emerging risk and an immediate threat. Far from being solely an environmental and/or economic issue, it has emerged prominently as a latent security threat with growing linkages to violent extremism risk pathways.

Acting early presents a strategic opportunity to safeguard Ghana's stability and strengthen resilience within an increasingly fragile regional context. Ghana still has time to prevent these dynamics from consolidating into entrenched violent extremism pathways. The challenge is not whether *galamsey* should be eliminated, but:

- How it can be governed, formalised, and redirected to prevent violence and radicalisation?
- How to connect security, development, and private-sector actors in addressing *galamsey*?
- How to take a regional view on what is a cross-border issue?
- And, more importantly, how to implement a prevention-led approach rooted in communities, livelihoods, and state legitimacy?

Preventive, community-anchored, livelihood-centred interventions are not a soft option; they are a strategic security imperative. GCERF is uniquely positioned to support Ghana at this critical juncture because its mandate, operating model, and regional footprint directly align with the risk pathways identified in this brief:

- As a credible, neutral intermediary, GCERF can convene security, political, and commercial interests which allow it to operate, facilitating dialogue and cooperation where relationships are currently fragile or polarized. This is particularly valuable as large-scale mining companies and government institutions increasingly recognise that security-only or company-led solutions are insufficient.
- GCERF's community-anchored model enables investment in locally trusted civil society and community actors, strengthening resilience, social cohesion, and early prevention capabilities in areas where state presence is uneven.
- With programming that prioritizes livelihoods, inclusion, and local legitimacy, GCERF will reduce the appeal of illicit and violent alternatives without exacerbating conflict.
- With active engagement across the Sahel and coastal West Africa, GCERF is integrating risks from Burkina Faso and the wider Sahel in its programming for Ghana, thus ensuring it is informed by regional dynamics and coordinated with prevention efforts beyond national borders.

GCERF's core focus on preventing violent extremism by addressing underlying drivers, such as exclusion, marginalisation, and governance failure, directly corresponds to the dynamics at play in Ghana's mining zones.

The *galamsey* challenge cuts across mandates that are often addressed in silos. GCERF can help bridge:

1. Formalisation and marketable alternative livelihoods

- Support transparent and inclusive formalisation and cooperative processes, ensuring program design accounts for the varying capacities of small-scale miners to meet compliance requirements
- Expand market-relevant livelihood alternatives (skills, agriculture, value chains & market linkages), building on real-time and market needs assessments.

2. Trust-building and inclusive resource governance

- Facilitate structured dialogue among communities, *galamseyers*, government, and LMCs.
- Strengthen accountability and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms moving beyond token participation to inclusive, empowered decision-making platforms that communities trust.

3. Fostering community-based security and environmental resilience in mining areas

- Strengthen community-based mechanisms to reducing violence/organised crime.
- Facilitate reintegration through formalisation and alternative livelihoods.
- Piloting community-led innovations to land reclamation and sustainable environmental use.

Contact

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