

# Lithium Loot

## Kwara's Bani community becomes hotbed of illegal mining

By Dare Akogun

Illegal mining in Kwara State is a growing concern with significant implications for the local economy and environment. As the sun set, trucks started to rumble through the town of Bani in Kaiama Local Government Area of Kwara State. Loaded with lithium, on this day in August, the trucks began their journey to distant locations under the cover of darkness, often evading the scrutiny of law enforcement agencies. Bani was a quiet farming town until it became a destination for unlicensed miners chasing lithium as the global demand for the minerals needed to drive the transition to renewable energy surged. Despite intensified government crackdowns, illegal mining continues to thrive in Kwara State, driven by the high demand for minerals, leading to revenue losses for the government.

"The financial loss is immense," said Afeez Alabi, the Kwara State Commissioner for Solid Minerals Development. "A ton of lithium sells for over \$70,000, yet hundreds of trucks of lithium are illegally moved out of the state without record." But the socio-ecological consequence is also devastating. Farmers say they have lost their land to miners, who are sometimes armed, in remote communities where government institutions are virtually absent. The illegal mining operations in Bani, located at Google Earth coordinates 9°08'38.2 "N 4°11'53.3 "E and bordering Igbeti in Oyo State, are only accessible by a dusty road through the Old Oyo National Park. The operations are well-organised and involve a network of local youths working for patrons, including foreigners, mostly Chinese, and local mineral traders. A truck driver, Segun Abifarin, said Chinese buyers provide villagers with money to procure the minerals. After securing the ore, they contact transporters, like himself, in Ilorin to move the minerals to Ogun State. Mr Abifarin also said that the transportation cost is between N1.9 million and N2.3 million, depending on the state of the road at the time of travelling. He said the work is enabled by compromised security operatives, who charge "ground commission" to look away as the minerals are transported. "We pay ground commissions to security agencies, including policemen, officials of the Nigerian Customs Service, and local vigilantes, to guarantee easy passage," he said.

The government is not oblivious to the illegal operations and the involvement of foreigners, mostly Chinese. Between 2022 and March 2024, at least 19 Chinese miners and 50 local collaborators, along with their vehicles, were arrested in connection with illegal mining activities between Oyo and Kwara states. Of these, three Chinese nationals and one Nigerian have been convicted. None of the convicted individuals served jail terms. For instance, on 19 October 2022, a Chinese national, Gang Deng, was sentenced to five years in prison for illegal mining in Kwara State. However, he was given the option of a N1 million fine instead of imprisonment. On 15 May 2024, two other Chinese nationals, Xiao Yi, 50, and Duan Ya Hong, 52, were sentenced to a year imprisonment each for



mining offences. Like Mr Deng, they were given the option to pay fines of N2 million and N1.5 million, respectively. In July 2023, the EFCC arrested 13 Chinese nationals for similar offences. The agency revealed that some of these miners entered Nigeria on visitor visas, valid for a non-extendable 90-day period. Many of the artisanal miners operate with impunity, residents said. Their activities are well-known to local collaborators, including young locals who work at collection centres and truck owners who facilitate the transport of the ore, a Bani resident, Umaru Ladan, said. The trade-in lithium ore, popularly referred to as 'Konsa' in Bani, is conducted both covertly and openly. At a local market, this reporter observed several dealers in a store full of bags of lithium ore sourced from Bani and nearby communities, such as Daba, another settlement known for its illegal mining sites deep within the old Oyo National Park.

Mining activities in Bani reportedly began about three years ago. Initially, the business was fraught with violence, as internal disputes between the predominantly non-Yoruba-speaking miners and Yoruba transporters often led to deadly clashes. However, these tensions have subsided. "That is no longer the case. All of us are working together now because fighting will not allow us to get money from buyers," an artisanal miner who refused to give his name said, explaining the newfound cooperation among the miners. Once the minerals are transported out of Bani, they are usually taken to different locations in Sagamu, Ogun State, and sometimes to Lagos, truck drivers said. An Ilorin-based indigene of Bani, who requested anonymity and owns two trucks used for transporting lithium, shared insights into the trade's logistics. He

disclosed that the transportation cost for a well-packed 50-kilogramme bag of lithium ore from Bani to Ogere or Sagamu in Ogun State ranges between N1.5 million and N1.9 million. Before a consignment can leave Bani, it is marked to indicate the identity of the receiving agent and the appropriate collection centre.

The existence of "permits" that purportedly protect those involved in illegal mining from law enforcement officials raises further concerns about corruption and the effectiveness of regulatory enforcement. Mr Abifarin claimed that these permits, issued with the understanding of compromised security operatives, shield them from arrests by law enforcement officials. When asked about the risk of arrests by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), he said, "We have never been arrested because we collect permits." Another artisanal miner, Mohammed Ilyasu from Kebbi State, disclosed that the miners use a dedicated WhatsApp group to coordinate their activities. The group serves as a platform where drivers are linked with buyers and sellers and where discussions on permits and security payments are conducted.

Despite occasional arrests and seizures by government authorities, the trade continues, with drivers like Mr Abifarin confident that their "permits" will protect them from legal repercussions. The environmental impact of illegal mining in Kwara State is as severe as the economic toll. Farmlands that once yielded bountiful harvests are now barren scarred by deep pits and craters left by miners. The once-clear rivers and streams that served as lifelines for the community are now contaminated with toxic chemicals used in the extraction process. The repercussions are dire. Residents like Alhaji Musa and Munir Mariam, who once depended on farming for their livelihoods, now struggle to survive. "I used to sell vegetables from my farm at the local market," said Mr Mariam. "Now, my farm is gone, and I have no way to feed my family. The illegal miners have taken our livelihoods and our peace." Bani, known for its yam produce, now face an ironic scarcity. The yam market stands empty, partly due to limited rainfall but primarily because farmers have abandoned their crops to engage in mining. The town's population has ballooned to nearly 70,000, with people arriving from across Nigeria, further straining the community's resources.

Beyond the environmental and economic damage, the human toll is profound. In Bani, the influx of artisanal miners has led to increased insecurity, with reports of violence and crime on the rise. Community members live in fear as their once peaceful town transforms into a hub of illegal activities. "We live in fear because of the illegal miners," said Mariam Baba, a resident of Shigberia, a neighbouring community. "They bring crime and violence to our community. Our homes are no longer safe, and we cannot farm our lands." Many students have also dropped out of school to join the ranks of artisanal miners. Musa Usman, the head teacher at KLGEA Primary School Bani, said the community witnessed a population explosion two years ago when mining activities began in the town. He said many farmers abandoned their farmlands to make quick cash from the newfound business. "Formerly, the market was five days, but now its daily farm produce cannot meet the population. This has made the price of food skyrocket, even costlier than what is obtained in Ilorin, the state capital," the teacher said. Mr Usman said school enrolment has dropped as many pupils, encouraged by their parents, have become artisanal miners. The

influx into the community has also led to an increase in rents. "A room rate went for between 5,000 – 10,000 just three years ago, but now it is as high as 70,000 for a 'face-me-I-face you', while shop rent goes for as high as between N150,000 to N200,000 per year," he said.

Mohammed Umar, a 23-year-old artisanal miner, says he earns between N20,000 and N50,000 daily from mining work. He says mining is more productive than farming and he has no plans to return to farming. "My brothers have joined me too. They are no longer going to school, we need to make enough money to build houses for our aged parents so that they can enjoy life," he stated. Despite crackdowns, enforcement remains a significant challenge. The remote locations of mining sites make monitoring difficult, and the involvement of influential stakeholders complicates efforts to curb illegal activities, residents and officials said. "Illegal mining continues to thrive due to inadequate enforcement and the involvement of influential individuals," Kwara Commissioner Abolore explained. "We need stronger legal frameworks, better community engagement, and international cooperation to address this issue effectively."

Despite the legal frameworks in place, including the Miscellaneous Offences Act Cap M17 of 1983, which prescribes life imprisonment for mining without a license, these laws are rarely enforced. The result is a lucrative but unregulated mining industry that bleeds the state and nation of revenue. The rampant illegal mining has also contributed to the dwindling fortunes of the agricultural sector. Bani, once a thriving agricultural hub producing yams, guinea corn, and soya beans is now a shadow of its former self. With farmlands destroyed by mining activities and water sources contaminated, many farmers have abandoned their livelihoods for the quick cash promised by illegal mining. Our farmlands are gone, and our water is polluted," lamented Musa, a community leader in Bani. "Illegal miners exploit our resources without regard for our welfare. Our children are falling sick from the polluted water, and our crops can no longer grow on the poisoned land." Despite the booming illegal mining activities, the mining sector's contribution to Nigeria's economy remains negligible. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) report stated that the sector contributed only 4.47 per cent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the fourth quarter of 2023, a slight decrease from 4.51 per cent in the same period in 2022. The sector is plagued by illegal operations, which lead to significant economic losses. Nurudeen Adetula, an Ilorin-based security expert, estimated that Nigeria loses billion annually to illegal mining. "Numerous reports have it that illegal mining is a significant problem, with estimates ranging from \$3-6 billion annually, and in some cases, as high as \$10 billion," he said. Mr Adetula advocated that international cooperation is essential, given the global demand for minerals like lithium. "Strengthening cross-border collaborations and intelligence-sharing can help track and curb the flow of illegally mined minerals, reducing the incentive for illegal operators," he said.

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