



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ILLEGAL MINING AND INSECURITY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: EXPERIENCES AND POLICY MEASURES

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is endowed with significant amount of solid mineral resources, with concentrated deposits in the northern region, which also harbors a high level of insecurity. This research aims to examine the effects of illegal mining as a driving force of insecurity in northern Nigeria. The paper adopted the structural functionalism theory, and the qualitative method of data analysis to examine the relevant variables to adduce outcome. Findings revealed that illegal mining activities have played a significant role in fueling insecurity in northern Nigerian states hosting significant deposits of solid mineral resources. The paper argues that resulting from Nigeria's weak security architecture and challenges to effective enforcement of its regulatory laws, local and foreign miners engages in illegal mining operations. It is observed that illegal miners patronize or sponsor violent armed groups for protection, and because there are no measures of control, these criminal forces disrupt local communities with threats and incessant terrorist attacks, including banditry and kidnapping, and engage state security forces in open hostilities. Worst still, they become entrenched and also involved in the illegal mining activities by seizing and looting mining sites to amass wealth to retool their armories. The paper concludes that illegal mining fuels insecurity in northern Nigeria, and can be mitigated if government develops the required political will for enhanced security and effective enforcement of its regulatory laws to combat illegal mining activities, localized conflicts and diverse forms of criminalities.

Keywords: solid minerals, illegal mining, armed groups, insecurity, policy measures

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The state is the primary provider of order, security and economic development, and relies on scarce resources to prosecute its development agenda. Solid minerals are one of these critical resources with vast economic potential for transformational development (Business a.m., 2020). The evolving transition towards greener energy has increased demand for solid minerals for manufactures, and clean energy security. Nigerian ranks among African states richly endowed with variety of these strategic minerals such as californium, uranium, lithium, gold, sapphire, diamonds, iron ore, lead-zinc, rocks, barite, salt, limestone, granite, coal, tar and sand/bitumen (Ajayi et al, 2024). Nigeria solid mineral endowment is estimated at \$700 billion in commercially viable minerals, giving it the capacity to diversify its revenue sources and boost foreign exchange earnings (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2024). However, in spite of its rich solid mineral endowment, Nigeria like other African states has shown lack of capacity to effectively regulate and exploit this solid mineral sector for national economic development. Instead, the sector has become a source of complex security challenges arising from illegal mining operations by local and foreign actors (Nkwocha, 2024).

Historical studies have shown that for centuries, gold mining has been done by wealthy and influential individuals in communities namely kings, merchants and colonial rulers aided by recruited local peasants who served their masters. And intense competition between the owners of the mine fields led them to hire armed groups to guard their mine fields from their competitors. The creation of Mineral Survey of the Northern Protectorates by the colonial government in 1903 ushered in the commencement of modern era of artisanal and corporate mining in Nigeria (Olade, 2019). In recent epoch, non-state actors both individuals and groups, including top government functionaries spearhead a vast network of illegal mining operations. Minefield owners patronize bandits and insurgent groups and provide them with weapons, arms, drugs, food and logistics for the protection of their gold pits. As such, illegal mining activities have created a hotbed for these violent armed groups to infest mining sites for economic enrichment and to retool their weaponry. These diverse groups of illegal mining operators with their collaborators which include government functionaries have continued to sabotage government effort at tackling the challenge of the mining sector (Ogbonnaya, 2020).

According to Africa Report (2020), the weak regulatory measure of the mining sector in Nigeria, and cash related transactions associated with gold mining have attracted rural bandits, responsible for disrupting the social security landscape of rural communities in the north. Bandits are attracted to the region and communities by illicit and artisanal mining, raiding mining sites for gold and cash. As observed by Ogbonnaya (2020), resulting from incessant attack by bandits and insurgent groups due to the activities of illegal miners, dwellers of mineral-rich communities are in grief regarding farmers who have abandoned their farms due to insecurity, small and medium scale businesses which have left the affected areas for safety, students who continually dropping out of schools due to insecurity, and others who are compelled by poverty and deprivation to involve in illegal mining. Oyekola



(2024) stated that security challenges in host communities have resulted in the abandonment of developmental projects by government authority. It has also resulted in internal and cross border displacement, and contributed to the overall economic sustainability crisis in the north. The research therefore aimed at assessing the extent to which illegal mining has contributed in worsening the security situation in northern Nigeria by examining the role of foreign and local actors, with domestic collaborators and armed groups in the mix.

1.1. Statement of the Problems

Regardless of existing laws prohibiting illegal mining activities, states and host communities in the north have suffered the brunt of unauthorized mining activities. Illegal mining and associated security crisis continues to fuel incessant killings and kidnapping in the north, subjecting inhabitants of the area to serious trepidation resulting from loss of lives and properties, and acute internal displacement. Apart from the lingering crisis of insecurity associated with illegal mining, unsolicited mining activities accounts for serious economic loss to the nation, with consequences for environmental degradation, revenue loss, socio-economic sustainability crisis and endemic poverty to the host communities, state and the nation. Though enormous financial resources have been plowed into the mining sector, including policy measures aimed at sector transformation by the government, to tackle illegal mining and insecurity especially in the north, holistic transformation remains elusive. Therefore the research intend to investigate the depth of illegal mining activities in the northern Nigeria and the extent it has fueled insecurity, localized conflict and banditry across host states in the region.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

To guide this research, the specific objectives are to.

1. Examine the extent of illegal mining activities in northern Nigeria.
2. Determine the extent to which illegal mining drive insecurity in northern Nigeria,
3. Evaluate the policy measures aimed at tackling illegal mining in Nigeria.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions will prompt the research.

1. To what extent are illegal mining activities in northern Nigeria?
2. To what extent does illegal mining drive insecurity in northern Nigeria?
3. How effective are policy measures aimed at tackling illegal mining in Nigeria?

2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORITICAL FOUNDATION



2.1. Conceptual Framework

The Concept of Security

The concept of security is rife with ambiguity as scholars attempt to decipher its meanings in an involving world order. Security can be defined as the extent of potential or actual threat to the physical and psychological wellbeing of individual or group in an environment (Baldwin, 2017). Security also refers to a situation in which citizens of any country are at liberty to go about their normal daily activities without threat to their lives or means of livelihood (Akinola, 2016). As stated by Nwagboso (2012), security embodies measures put in place to prevent, reduce or solve threats, conflicts and criminal activities that stem from citizens and non-citizens, state and non-state actors, or structural sociopolitical and socioeconomic conditions. Security is a pre-requisite to societal development and improvement in the existential condition of the populace. It therefore presupposes that development cannot thrive in an atmosphere of conflict, violence, anxiety, fear and destruction of lives and property.

The traditional notion of security, deals with the state as the core object of security, but later broadened to include human wellbeing as referent object to security (Baldwin, 2017). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) examines the concept from a human security perspective which differs from the state-centric notion. In this sense, security symbolize protection from threat of diseases, hunger, unemployment, crime, (or terrorism), social conflict, political repression and environmental disaster (UNDP, 1994). Security also involves a detachment from threats that endangers to human existentiality, such as environmental degradation, human rights violation, organized crimes, drug trafficking and continuous attempt to fight against these threats (Iztok, 2007).

According to Beland (2005) insecurity is a state of affairs characterized by the absence safety of lives and properties. It is a condition that generates fear or anxiety resulting from absence or lack of protection. Adebajoko & Ugwuoke (2014) opine that insecurity is the state of being subject in every respect to terror, threat, risk, harassment etc. According to Achumba et al (2013), insecurity connotes different meanings such as the absence of safety or the existence of danger, fear or apprehension, including a state of uncertainty, lack of stability and state protection. They see insecurity from two perspectives firstly as the state of being open or subject to danger or threat of danger. Secondly insecurity is the state of being exposed to risk or anxiety, where anxiety is a vague unpleasant emotion arising from a sense of misfortune. Implying that those affected by insecurity are not only bedeviled by uncertainty of what would happen, they are also vulnerable to the threats and dangers when they occur. In the context of this research, insecurity is mirrored to reflect a breach of peace and security resulting from either historical, religious, ethno regional, civil, social, economic or political that contributes to recurring conflicts, and destruction of lives and properties.



Insecurity is on the rise in Nigeria and has continued to show an upward trend ranging from militancy in the South-South, robbery and ritual killings in the South-West, nationalist agitations and kidnapping in the South-East, as well as banditry and extremist insurgency in the North. Residents in these regions live in apprehension, as government is unable to grapple with these security problems (Adebuakin, 2012). Insurgency and banditry are most prevalent across North Western states of southern Kaduna, Kano, Katsina and Zamfara states and are considerably linked to illegal mining operations in gold, lithium and other solid minerals (Kuna and Ibrahim, 2016). In the affected northern states, farmers have lost their land to miners for fear of attack from sponsored armed groups, as government institutions are virtually absent in such remote communities. Also, children of school age have abandoned their schools in search of livelihood from solid mineral mining. Critical rivers and streams that once served existential purposes are now contaminated with toxic chemicals from the extraction process. Consequently, this has left residents with life-threatening health issues (Soni, 2024; Akogun, 2024).

Previous Views on Solid Mineral Mining and Regulatory Laws in Nigeria

Mineral resources are valuable earth contents extracted for human economic benefit, while mining is an extraction process of valuable minerals from beneath the earth (Olade, 2019). Illegal mining on the hand refers to mining activities that are undertaken without accounting for due processes such as seeking state permission, mining licenses and land rights, as well as exploration or mineral transportation permits. This can take place at a subsistence level in the form of artisanal mining, or it can take the form of a large-scale organized crime by illegal mining syndicate of both internal and external involvement (Dozolme, 2018). Illegal mining can also be described as the extraction of minerals or other geological materials that do not comply with mining requirements or adhere to labour laws, environmental regulations and tax legislation, as well as licenced miners operating past their required coordinates (Agas, 2024).

In Nigeria, the rights to ownership of mineral resources are held by the federal government, which grants titles to organizations for the exploration, mining and sale of mineral resources. Illegal mining is regarded as an act of sabotage under the Nigerian law, and it is an offence punishable with life imprisonment under Section 1(8) (b) of the Miscellaneous Offences Act Cap M17, 1983. Also, the Miscellaneous Offences Act Cap M17 of 1983 prescribes life imprisonment for mining without a licence. The mining regulation is handled by the Federal Ministry of Mines and Solid Minerals Development, which oversees the management of all mineral resources, while mining law is codified in the Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act, 2007 (Oyekola, 2024).



2.2. Theoretical Framework

Structural Functionalism

The theory of structural functionalism emanated primarily from the field of sociology and other social science fields. The theory by Talcott Parsons (1902–79), focuses on the structural-functional analysis, which explains the “functional prerequisites” that any social system must meet in order to survive. This includes developing routinized interpersonal arrangements (structures), defining relations to the external environment, fixing boundaries, as well as recruiting and controlling members (Gomez-Diago, 2019). The theory extrapolates the integrated functions of each institution, hierarchies, relationships, roles, and norms that together constitute a society that serves a purpose. And being a functional interconnected network, each is instrumental to the sustainability of the others and the society as a whole.

In this regards, functions refers to the extent to which a given activity promotes or interferes with maintenance of a system. From the perspective of structural functionalism, social change is regarded as an adaptive response to some tension within the social system. When some part of an integrated social system changes, a tension between this and other parts of the system is created and can only be resolved by the adaptive change of the other parts (Mahner and Bunge, 2001). Émile Durkheim (1855-1917) buttresses this in his work “contemporary notion of social structure”, stating that part of a society are interdependent, and that this interdependency imposes structure on the behaviour of institutions and their members.

Flowing from the above, it can be argued that a dysfunctional state system lacks critical coherence and functional interdependence to create conditions to guarantee order and security. Functional disconnect between the state and state security agencies, as well as lack of synergy between the state security apparatus is recipe for disorder and insecurity. In a state, the condition for insecurity arises from state fragility; a state’s inability to function optimally as equitable source of value allocation, service delivery and a coercive force of social order and system stability.

It is reasoned that the people do not fail the system; rather the system fails the people. Thus, when a nation’s core values with which it must deal in order to exist are in harmony with each other, the society is immune from widespread insecurity, but social crisis abound when this singular imperative is lacking. The Nigerian weak governance system and ineffective state security services has created a hotbed for insecurity ravaging the nation, especially the northern states in Nigeria ravaged by insurgency and banditry (Ojo, 2020). It can be argued that illegal mining activities and insecurity in the north emanate from state failure, evident in state inability to coherently work in synergy to secure what is perceived as ungoverned spaces, where armed non-state actors operate as disruptive forces against the state (Okoli and Ugwu, 2019).



3.0. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method adopted is the hybrid or mix-method mode of analysis, which involves both the quantitative and the qualitative method in understanding relevant variables, experiences, and phenomenon to achieve more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Babbie, 2011). The research involves content analysis of secondary data from textbooks, journals, articles, magazines, government publications etc.

4.0. EMPIRICAL DISCOURSE

4.1. Illegal Mining and Insecurity in Northern Nigeria

The rise in the world market price of solid mineral resources in recent era has propelled the proliferation of illegal mining of Nigeria's valuable resources, smuggled across neighboring states of Niger, Togo, Benin etc. Particularly, illegal mining of gold and lithium has become prevalent across North West, North Central and South Western regions of Nigeria traversing Benue, Kaduna, Kano, Kebbi, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, Zamfara, Kwara and Ogun states (Amaefule et al., 2019; Associated Press, 2024). Illegal solid mineral mining in Nigeria is a well-organized operation involving foreign network of corporate syndicates, influential domestic elite, and traditional rulers sponsoring artisanal mining operations. Others include armed groups, government insiders and state security operatives working for patrons (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2024; Soni 2024). As stated by a local miner "We pay ground commissions to security agencies, policemen, officials of the Nigerian Customs Service, and local vigilantes, to guarantee easy passage" (Ojewale, 2025). According to Dele Alake (The Minister of Solid Minerals and Steel Development) some influential Nigerians are criminally collaborating with Chinese nationals, and other multinational companies to engage in illegal mining and sponsorship of banditry. This align with Senator Adams Oshiomhole's claims that retired military officers coordinate illegal mining activities nationwide (Soni, 2024; Ujah et al 2025).

As reported, 80% of illegal mining activities in the North Western states of Nigeria are carried out by artisanal miners, mostly members of the local population, causing a loss of about \$2 billion to the nation annually (Ujah et al 2025). The fight for control of mining sites, amidst attacks by criminal gangs who raid sites, as well as threats from state security, propel illegal miners to identify with factions of these armed groups for protection, exacerbating the resurgence of rural banditry and other forms of insecurity in northern states (Ognonnaya, 2020). In some cases, these sponsored armed groups perpetuate violence and create crisis scenarios to displace local dwellers and provide operational space for illegal miners. They impose levies or taxes on artisanal miners, on local farmers and communities members in exchange for protection (Tunji, 2025). According to Izuaka (2023), locals in the north agree that rural banditry is fallout of illegal mining, and that those who sponsor illegal mining also sponsor rural banditry and cattle rustling in mining communities in order to create conflict situations for local cattle breeders. This view aligns with Alhaji Lai Mohammed (former Minister of Information and Culture) stated:



...banditry, kidnapping, killing and cattle rustling were largely sponsored by illegal miners in the state. The miners were fuelling instability to pave way for their illegal activities. The more unsettled the area is the better for them.....ammunition and money were being turned out to the bandits so as to make the area ungovernable...higher the rate of the crisis, the better for the illegal miners.

Tayo Yusuf (an anti-terrorism financing expert) affirmed the nexus between illegal mining and instability in the northern region. That proceeds from illegal mining operations have for long been connected to the financing of terrorist organizations, as they are deployed to procure sophisticated armory, recruit fighters, and establish logistical networks through which counterterrorism becomes difficult succeed. With access to funds, terrorist groups have expanded their influence and carry out deadly attacks. Olugbenga Ajala (chairman of the Association of Licensed Small Scale Mining Operators of Nigeria (ALSSMON) emphasized that terrorism financing through illegal mining as witnessed in Nigeria is alarming (Ujah et al, 2025). As observed, mined gold is exchanged for arms for use by bandits and insurgent groups, adopting covert measures such as the use of girls and women. As mined gold is moved from sites to the border, young girls and women are ingeniously used to transport weapons from the border to recipients (Ogbonnaya, 2020).

4.2. Examining Selected Northern States

The lingering crisis of rural banditry in Zamfara state emanated with illegal gold mining, where bandits targeted mining sites and village markets, which harbors large deposit of cash and other valuable (Ogbonnaya, 2020). A fact-finding mission regarding communal killings and pervasive insecurity in Zamfara state in 2020, revealed a correlation between the conflicts and economic interest arising from illegal mining activities, in which actors such as members of the traditional institution, top government officials and security forces including Chinese nationals were indicted (). The arrests of two Chinese citizens, a Ghanaian and three locals in Zamfara State in 2020, lend credence to claims of a powerful network of organized criminal activity, involving the local population and foreign nationals in illegal gold mining in Nigeria (Bilesanmi, 2021). Between the borders of Zamfara state and the Republic of Niger, illegally mined gold is exchanged for arms and ammunitions using young girls and women (Sahara Reporters, 2019). In 2019, armed conflict, banditry, kidnapping, and other widespread crime in the mining communities rose to an alarming level due to gang rivalry, prompting the inspector General of Police to declare ban on mining in Zamfara State which accounts for over 80% of illegal mining activities. Regardless, conflict, violence and deaths resulting from illegal mining continued to thrive; worst still is the proliferation of illegal migration into the country from across West Africa to the goldmines (Amosu and Adeosun, 2021).



In Zamfara state, the impact of illegal gold mining and banditry is far-reaching. The state accounts for years of serious losses in human and material resources, resulting from illegal gold mining and activities of bandits (Amnesty International, 2023). Bandits operated 105 camps from where deadly attacks were launched, to kill and steal properties (Sahara Reporters, 2019). In 7 November 2016, gunmen on motorbikes raided mined gold and cash, attacking and killing a minimum of 40 miners at Bindin mining site, a village in the Maru LGA of Zamfara state (Africa Report, 2020). Between 2016 – 2020, a total of 6,319 persons were arbitrarily killed resulting from banditry and communal conflicts; 3,672 kidnapped; N2, 805,049,748 paid as ransom; 6,483 widows and 25,050 orphans left behind by slain victims. Also, 215,241 cows, 141,404 sheep, 20,600 of other animals were rustled or slain. Furthermore, 3,587 houses, 1,487 vehicles and motorbikes were burnt (Nagarajan, 2020). Amnesty International (2023) reported that from January to July 2023, there were more than 2,000 abductions relating to mining site disputes in Zamfara State. And it is estimated that 1,615 incidents and 4,201 deaths were recorded from 2010 to 2023 due to banditry in Zamfara and Katsina states. A joint meeting was held between Zamfara, Katsina and Niger state government, with representatives of illegal mining syndicates to negotiate solution to the overwhelming insecurity crisis, but that the meeting was held under conditions determined by the illegal miners is a testament to the political influence they enjoy as a disruptive force (Sahara Reporters, 2019).

Nasarawa state is considered one of the highest deposits of mineral resources in Nigeria, and it is particularly referred to as “Home of Solid minerals”. In the same vein, illegal mining has flourished as it has become a means of survival for the people and economic enrichment for corporate entities across its vast agrarian landscape, with consequences for security of lives and properties (Soni, 2024). The scramble for mining activities in the state has attracted both legitimate and criminal elements. Boko Haram made entry into 5 local government areas in 2019 and has remained entrenched, leading to deaths and devastation of the social landscape of the people. Remarkably, Loko and Doma Local governments were once over-run by bandits. In their uncanny mode of operations, these criminal elements subjected females to various forms of abuse including rape and gruesome mass murder. The impact of unprecedented illegal mining in Nasarawa state has devastated farmlands, crops and economic trees, and aggravated the security situation in the state (Okolie and Ugwu, 2019).

Borno state is one of the largest states in the North East Nigeria with abundant mineral resources. Particularly, the Sambisa forest which is estimated to stretch across 60,000 square kilometers, and transverses the north east from Borno, Yobe, Gombe and Bauchi states houses precious gem stone considered more valuable than gold. Overall, Borno state is blessed with oil and gas, californium, and other precious stones in the shores of Lake Chad and some parts of Sambisa forest. It is argued that, economic interest in the mining sector is more or less the driving force of Boko Haram insurgency than the widely presumed religious ideology crusade (Soni, 2024). Comrade Bulama Abiso (The Executive Director, Network for



Civil Society Organizations) corroborates this view in stating that, it is external forces whose objective is to sustain instability with aimed of siphoning the states' numerous mineral resources that drives the lingering Boko Haram crisis (Ogbonnaya 2020). Borno state has over the years suffered from incessant attacks by diverse rival armed groups in the form of terrorist activities, kidnapping and other heinous crimes, including indiscriminate attack on oil exploration facilities in Lake Chad Basin (Ujah et al, 2025).

In Taraba State, the activities of illegal miners seem to have gone unchecked for years and the devastating effects are visible in communities across the three senatorial zones. In Arufu and Akwana communities in Wukari local government area, lands are more suitable for farming due to the effect of mining activities. While law enforcement agencies are dislodging these syndicates across the state, rural communities where the illegal miners mostly operate are still witnessing rising cases of kidnappings and banditry (Egwu, 2016; Soni, 2024). Regarding Katsina state, Garba Shehu (spokesperson under ex-president Buhari's regime) stated: "there is a strong suspicion that some choppers are being used to ferry arms for bandits and also to evacuate gold illegally smuggled out of the country" (Ogbonnaya, 2020).

The notion aligns with the Katsina State Government declaration that "illegal mining is the wheel that propels armed 'banditry' in Katsina and neighbouring states in Northwestern Nigeria.....bandits use weapons to disperse innocent rural people to have access to the mineral resources" (Ojo, 2020). Besides loss of lives and properties perpetuated by armed groups, there is account of severe lead poisoning that affected more than 3,500 children, and leading to the death of more than 400 adults in Katsina and Zamfara State via contamination of Local River. Also lead concentration in the atmosphere rose to 23,000 parts per million above the 400 parts per million limit considered safe by the FMSD (Amosu and Adeosun, 2021).

In Kebbi state like most solid mineral host states, poor safety measures of illegal mining continue to take its toll on the peasant dwellers that constitutes the labour force. According to a resident "illegal miners keep dying yet they keep digging because of the economic gains". An estimated death of 60 illegal gold miners was reported when the boat transporting them across the Yauri River capsized from the weight of gold (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2024). In Plateau state, Martina Danuk (the Director of Environmental Assessment and Climate Change) lamented "Our major problem is that the minefields are fraught with all kinds of vices from perpetrators of illegal, including drugs use and the proliferation of arms" (Ojo, 2020). In Kaduna State like others, illegal mining activities is facilitated mostly by foreign non-state actors who continued to rob the state, degrade and deplete natural vegetation, create extreme situations, attract bandits and other criminal elements, and posing serious threat to communities (Soni, 2024). In Bani local government area of Kwara state, the influx of artisanal miners has spiked crime rate and the crisis of insecurity. According to Mariam Baba (a resident of Shigberia community) "we live in fear because of the illegal miners; they bring



crime and violence to our community. Our homes are no longer safe, and we cannot farm our lands” (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2024). Benue state is inclusive of states whose youths of school age, are dropping out of school to engage in illegal mining, and also indulge in widespread use of hard drugs (Ujah et al, 2025).

4.3. Combating Illegal Mining and Insecurity through Transformation Strategy (2023-2025)

At inception of the current regime, a German company Geoscan was employed to conduct a preliminary survey of solid minerals underground. Findings reveal that Nigeria has an estimate of N750 billion worth of solid mineral resources, in which a quarter had not been harnessed. Equipped with this knowledge, the FMSD initiated policy measures aimed at transforming the solid mineral sector for greater productivity and revenue generation (Agas, 2024). As reported by Ezeugwu (2023), the FMSD unveiled what it termed “Agenda for the Transformation of the Solid Mineral for International Competitiveness and Domestic Prosperity” with focus on seven-point agenda which include;

1. The creation of Nigeria Solid Mineral Corporation
2. Joint ventures with mining multinationals
3. Big data on specific seven priorities mineral and their deposits
4. A 30-day grace for illegal miners to join artisanal corporative
5. Mines surveillance taskforce and mining police
6. Comprehensive review of all mining license
7. Creation of six Mineral Processes Centers to focus on value added products

Anchoring on the seven-point agenda, the ministry adopted a two-dimensional approach which involves the persuasive and coercive measures towards addressing illegal mining. Under the persuasive approach, the ministry engages in dialogue over confrontation. In this regard, it has engaged in collaboration with stakeholders in mining sector, in a bid to resolving lingering differences, reduce tension and engender incisiveness. Based on this framework, the federal government offered to allow state-owned companies through Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) to apply for mining license. Also is effort towards establishment of the Nigerian Mining Corporation, a state-backed but privately driven entity aimed at revitalizing the mining sector. As planned, the corporation’s equity structure will ensure minimal government interference, with 50% controlled by the private sector, 25% by the federal government, and 25% open to Nigerian citizens (Temitope, 2025).

Also, the artisanal corporative initiative has recorded success in making artisanal miners accountable by transitioning them away from illegal mining to profitable investment, and to partner with government in combating illegal mining and related offences in the sector. As stated by the Minister of Solid Minerals and Steel Development, Dele Alake, “as of October 2024, no fewer than 250 new cooperatives have been registered by the Artisanal and Small



Scale Mining Department”. Temitope (2025) indicate that this initiative has been successful; stating that 300 illegal mining groups have been persuaded to form cooperative societies. By formalizing their activities with the government, miners can now have access to financial support from banks and contributing meaningfully to the nation’s revenue as they are now fully structured and legalized, and in the good books of security agencies.

The FMSD launched a revised guideline of the Community Development Agreement (CDA) in 2023 as part of efforts to prevent disputes between host communities and mining companies. The agreement is designed to help mining companies define their relationships and obligations with their host communities and ensure corporation between host communities and mining operators. The goal is to be achieved through adequate monitoring, enlightenment, education and sensitization exercises. The CDA is said to have recorded significant success in the implementation of the initiative, as 252 companies are said to have signed CDA with their host communities based on needs assessment ranging from the provision of boreholes, electricity, schools, health centers, road constructions and scholarships (Aina, 2023).

Furthermore, to ensure a secured mining environment, the FMSD has made effort in strengthening the operations of the Mines Surveillance Task Force Team to tackle the challenges of illegal mining. In view of this, a total of 2,220 - strong Mining Marshals drawn from the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps were initially recruited to join other security agencies to constitute a task force in combating illegal mining (Etuk, 2024). Assessing the impact of the mining marshals over the past one year in enforcing provisions of the Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act (NMMA), Dele Alake (FMSD minister) asserted that the corps at inception has been scaled up to 2, 670 from 2,220 to sustain effective operations and law enforcement (Alaran, 2025). Also modern technology designed for satellite monitoring/surveillance of mining sites is approved for the sum of N2.5 billion. The equipment is designed as integrated framework to combating illegal mining, tackle revenue losses and curb the illegal extraction and exportation of stolen mineral nationwide. This technology is specifically designed to observe mining activities real time, track extraction volumes, monitor truck movement, and assess security situations at mining sites (Temitope, 2025).

Successes recorded in combating illegal mining, in restoring investor confidence, and in contributing to substantial increase in revenue generated in the mining sector are not farfetched. In a stint operations carried out by the Mining Marshal, Codenamed “Operation Hayakin Kogo”, two Chinese nationals and a Nigerian engaged in illegal mining activities in the Ikah Community of Ankpa Local Government Area of Kogi state was arrested and prosecuted (Etuk, 2024). Illegal miners of Chinese origin were also arrested in Jema’a Local Government Area of Kaduna State for alleged illegal mining activities (Sonia, 2024). In February 2024, the Nasarawa police conducted a massive raid of criminal hideouts at Alogani



hills in Nassarawa-Eggon LGA, and arrested illegal miners. The team also arrested suspected kidnappers, and 109 illegal miners of topaz, tin, and aquamarine at different locations in the mountains areas from Mada Station to Wakama, and weapons such as guns, cutlasses, and knives were recovered (Bilesanmi, 2021).

Operations of the mining marshal across 10 states of Niger, Kogi, Nasarawa, Akwa Ibom, Ondo, Kaduna, Enugu, Abia, Kwara and the Federal Capital Territory has lead to identification of 457 illegal mining sites, arrest of 327 suspected illegal miners, arraignment of 143 suspects, and recovery of 98 mining sites (Alaran, 2025). Of the estimated number of 320 illicit mining operators arrested in 2024, about 150 underwent prosecution, with nine convictions. Record shows that no fewer than 133 persons were prosecuted for illegal mining in Cross River, Kogi, Oyo, Gombe, Taraba and Niger (Agas, 2024). Additionally, four foreign nationals involved in illegal mining activities have been prosecuted and convicted (Temitope, 2025).

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission's (EFCC) effort to break the rings of illegal mining operations in Nigeria has equally recorded successes. In July 2023, the EFCC arrested 13 Chinese nationals engaged in illegal mining. According to the EFCC, some of these miners illegally entered Nigeria on visitor visas valid for a non-extendable 90-day period (Akogun, 2024). Equally, the Ilorin Zonal Command arrested 41 suspects and impounded 12 trucks containing different types of solid minerals such as marble stone, white powder, lithium and lepidolite, among others. The culprits named some foreign nationals and influential Nigerians to be behind the illegal Mining (Shehu, 2024).

4.4. Challenges to Combating Illegal Mining in Northern Nigeria

There are several factors encumbering efforts at addressing illegal mining in Nigeria northern states, some of these challenges are examined as follows;

1. State fragility and inherent contradictions: Nigeria is a fragile state lacking capacity to guarantee effective security and sovereign order. This fact is evident in the mining sector where state failure has created opportunities for criminal groups to take over mining sites. The weak and inefficient state system has made it difficult for government to effectively achieve its aim of formalizing artisanal mining through a cooperative society model. Also, sensing state weakness, some mining operators have remained adamant regarding signing the agreement on Community Development Agreement (CDA) thereby creating distrust and sense of deprivation in host communities with consequent threats to security (Aina, 2023).
2. There is a complicated relationship between federal and state authorities in managing Nigeria's mineral resources. Despite legal clarity that mineral resources fall under federal jurisdiction, states still exercise some level of control and often exert significant influence over mining activities due to land ownership, under the Land Use Act., which leads to



misunderstanding and tension between the state and federal government. Also, the concentration of administrative, regulatory and oversight agencies of the mining sector at the federal level has created the challenges of effectively providing security and adequate supervision in the sector. In contradiction to Section 1 of the Land Use Act 2004, which vested all land in the Federation to the state, Section 1(1) of the Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act 2007, empowers the Federal Government of Nigeria to exercise ownership and total control over all mineral resources in the country (Oyekola, 2024). Therefore, as the mining sector remains bedeviled by irregularities, state level governance critical for effective engagement in the sector, lack the requisite empowerment to confront some of these challenges (Izuaka, 2023).

3. Endemic corruption, connivance and sabotage: resulting from endemic corruption that bedevils Nigeria fragile state system, illegal mining cartel often exploits the vulnerabilities of the regulatory officials and relevant institutions and community members. There are also cases of connivance and sabotage among the strata of the society ranging from traditional institutions to government officials. The situation is further worsened by a compromised visa approval process, driven by incompetence and corruption. The Nigerian immigration authorities which are the primary culprit, intentionally issue tourist visas to Chinese workers who regularly stay beyond the visa expiration date to work in the country (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2024). Systemic corruption is also evident in the fraudulent issuance of mining permit, and unwillingness to prosecute regulatory law offenders. Mining permits are indiscriminately issued by corrupt and ineffective regulatory enforcement officers to protect illegal miners from law enforcement officials who are also compromised. And even when offenders are arrested, there are never brought to face the law, while those convicted hardly serve their punishment (Akogun, 2024).

4. The crisis of existential poverty, illiteracy and ignorance before the law, especially in the north: Over 2 million people depend on illegal mining activities for their livelihood in Nigeria due to significant high level of unemployment and poverty, particularly in the north. Sponsors of illegal mining, exploit vulnerability of the youths to recruit them as labor force, which also constitutes bandits and insurgent groups. There is also high degree of illiteracy and ignorance regarding awareness of constitutional provisions on mineral resources in Nigeria; as such most people fall short of the law.

5. Geographical configuration of mining sites and threats faced by government regulatory officials: the marshals' operations have been hampered by logistical constraints due to vastness of Nigeria's territory, which makes proper monitoring difficult (Alaran, 2025). Also, the densely remote location of mining sites provides hideout to illegal miners and armed groups, making accessibility difficult to regulatory and law enforcement officers to mining sites (Amnesty International, 2018). Dele Aleke, the FMSD minister stated that one of the



challenges to mining sites is accessibility, as bandits now lay mines on the ground against ground forces who wade through the forests to dislodge them (Ajibola, 2024).

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

Although the Nigeria mining sector has a lot of potential for supporting national economic development, it is undermined by criminal groups profiteering from the sector at the expense of the nation. Nigeria mining activities is characterized unlawful trading of highly priced minerals, severe ecological degradation, and spread of diseases and huge loss of government revenue through smuggling. Regardless of the present government's effort, the lack of comprehensive legislation, funding, policy inconsistencies and political will to ensure effective enforcement has created disorder across mining sites and activities, which has opened the door for foreign organized criminals to exploit illicit minerals trade nationwide.

Nigerian states especially northern states with high deposit of solid minerals are targeted by criminal collaborations between members of the political elite and foreign corporations that engage in the illegal mining, which is ascertained to be fueling rural banditry and violent local conflicts. Consequently, it has reinforced the security dilemma confronting the northern region which suffers poverty, high level of illiteracy, extremist ideologies, insurgency and terrorism. As government continues to eulogize itself on claims of transforming the mining sector through its seven-point agenda, alongside massive expenditure for the procurement of arms and ammunition, on staff training and recruitment of combat forces in the fight against illegal mining and overall insecurity in the north, the challenge still remains.

5.2. Recommendations

To effectively tackle the challenge of illegal mining as it relates to institutional weakness and corruption in governing the mining sector, government should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach at the state, local government and host communities. This should include engaging traditional and religious leaders, community vigilante and neighborhood watch groups. There is also the need for effective synergy between the federal and state governments to curtail illegal mining activities, as the federal ministry alone cannot combat this challenge. Also, the current dialogue and corporation with governments should be sustained and enhanced. This cooperative approach, if effectively executed, can help create a more favorable environment for investment, boost investor confidence, and enhance socio-economic transformation.

The FMSD should be more committed in the development and enforcement of standard operational guidelines for the sector. While these efforts have been acknowledged by stakeholders in the sector, experts recommend digitization of artisanal miners, where they



would have identity cards that government can use for their identification. Furthermore, FMSD should effectively collaborate with other regulatory agencies in the mining and extractive sectors such as NEITI to build the capacity of staff in order to maintain mining standards and enforce compliance with national laws and regulations. Also, Public Private Partnership (PPP) should be explored to provide critical tools and infrastructure needed to facilitate effective exploratory engagement in the sector.

Governments at all levels should through deliberate policies address the ecological, socio-economic and political factors that cause and sustain the rise in illegal mining and criminality across the country. Specifically, government should address the links between poor service delivery, unemployment, illiteracy and poverty, and the challenge of insurgency and banditry in the north, by providing legitimate means of survival for youth and other vulnerable members of the population. Critical to this is the fast-tracking of complete formalization initiative of artisanal mining to provide legitimate source of income for the people.

The federal Government should also explore diplomatic channels, with the involvement of foreign nationals and corporations linked with illegal mining. Particularly, the federal government should liaise with the governments of Niger, Togo and other neighboring states, including the United Arab Emirates to develop a multilateral memorandum of understanding aimed at halting illegal mining, especially the smuggling of gold across border. He also noted that if the government must develop the mining sector, it has to be home-grown and not dependent on foreign investors to develop it, he stressed that such an approach will make mining attractive to foreigners.

The National Assembly should consider prompt amendment to the Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act, 2007 to align with the provisions of the Land Use Act 2004, by placing the ownership and control of mineral resources with state governments rather than the federal government. This will enable state governments develop long-term strategic plans for the development of mining sector. Giving state governments greater control of their resources, will incentivize states to legitimately collaborate with governments of Border States to strengthen cross-border security. States will further be willing to collaborate more with the Presidential Committee on Small Arms (Prescom) to address the inflow and illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Furthermore, it is the imperative of establishing Community Policing within each divisional police headquarters for effective management of insecurity. To enhance operations, government should ensure provision of state-of-the-art equipment, appropriate remuneration, good service conditions, and convenient after-service arrangements.

Competing Interest

The author declares that no conflicting interest exist in this manuscript.



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