**Child Labour in Eastern Cameroon's Gold Mines**

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Jan 06, 2017 (Deutsche Welle/All Africa Global Media via COMTEX) -- Children in eastern Cameroon leave school as young as seven to work in gold mines. Moki Kindzeka travelled to the mining town of Betare-Oya where residents have an uneasy relationship with the Chinese mining community.

The road to Betare-Oya in eastern Cameroon is better than it used to be. Five years ago, it was

narrow and bumpy but in the meantime the surface has been tarred and the ride is much smoother.

Simon Estil, the senior government official in Betare-Oya, says urban development in the area is being driven by gold mining. He said there used to be a market just once a week, now the market is open daily and a second one has sprung up. Young traders used to sell fuel in cans, but now there are four fuel stations even though mining is still on a small-scale. "That is enough to make you understand how gold mining can transform a locality," he told DW.

30-year-old Armand Zibi is digging away at a gold mine just 25 kilometers (16 miles) from the center of Betare-Oya. He said they start work at around 6 a.m and leave the mine at around 6 or 7 p.m.

"Honestly speaking, we are happy," he said. Many traders now come to Betare-Oya, levels of theft and robbery have dropped. He said that a mine worker earns "an average of $30 (29 euros) a day."

'Money today'

Individual incomes like these are having an impact on life in Betare-Oya. At the local government-run nursery and primary school, the classrooms are full. But teacher Bernice Yaya says that when the children reach the tender age of seven, around 80 or 90 percent drop out of school and head for the gold mines.

"They prefer the money they see today to promises of a better future after an education that they are not even sure of," she told DW. They see the older ones who stayed on at school digging for gold alongside them for the same salaries. Magloire Oya is now 17. He left school when he was 12.

"My family had practically nothing to live on or to eat," he said. When such huge numbers leave school "it is because they have discovered what is under the soil and can now raise their heads."

Local residents began alluvial gold mining - the simplest form of which is 'panning for gold' - in Betare-Oya in 2007. Some three years later, around 300 Chinese miners arrived bringing with them more industrialized techniques. The Chinese extracted the gold, but did not carry out any development projects.

Adamu Assamou, Betare-Oya's traditional leader, says that is why the Chinese are unwelcome.

Betare-Oya's residents had been told by the governor of Cameroon's eastern region that the Chinese miners had all agreed to build houses in the villages before starting to extract the gold.

"Immediately the governor left, the Chinese who had bought pieces of land abandoned the area for thegold mines in the bushes," he said.

Assamou added that the only Chinese you see regularly in Betare-Oya are the miners' bosses, their directors. "We only see the others in town when they come to buy food."

Local authorities in Cameroon complain that the Chinese miners do not respect environmental norms. Mining companies also neglect to pay an annual $2,000 environmental management fee.

The mayor of Betare-Oya, Iya Justin told DW that the town has never received any revenue from mining exploitation. He said there was an agreement to pay mining royalties to the population and a committee was set up. It has since been dissolved and the population has received nothing. "I was told that the mining companies pay their taxes in the country's capital Yaounde. I wrote letters asking for clarification but we have not received any concrete reply," he said.

Harnessing resources for development

Ndi Richard Tantoh works for the Cameroon branch of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). This is a global initiative aimed at reducing money laundering and corruption in the extractive industries. Tantoh said the Cameroonian government needs to declare what it receives from Chinese companies. Such transparency would enable people "to hold their government responsible for the amounts it receives from these companies." This would, in turn, give the population "the possibility to request development using resources from this sector."

It is not known how much gold is extracted from Cameroon's mines, only that most of it ends up in China. Cameroon says its economy - now growing at 6 percent - showed resilience during the 2008 European financial crisis because it had sought a greater diversity of partners. That means stronger trade ties with China, an indication that more Chinese may be on their way to Cameroon's mines, even if their presence creates tensions with the local population.

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by Moki Kindzeka

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