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## GHANA: Dispute Over Newmont's Proposed Gold Mine At Akyem

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Plans by Denver-based multinational, Newmont mining Corporation to construct an open pit gold mine in the Ajenjua Bepo Forest Reserve located at New Abirem in the Birim North District of Ghana's Eastern Region are mired in controversy.

Months of heated debate and intense haggling between officials of Newmont Ghana Gold Limited and the Environmental Protection Agency have ended in a stalemate.

At the center of the controversy is the size of a proposed open pit mine and its post mining reclamation plans and a waste rock dump which Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency fears would have long term environmental and public safety implications.

The Environmental Protection Agency in Ghana has therefore asked Newmont to revise the initial project design, but company officials insist that the costs involved in doing what the Environmental Protection Agency wants will be too much to bear.

According to the environmental impact statement on the proposed Akyem project submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency by Newmont Ghana Gold Limited, the company plans to build a 2.65 kilometre open pit mine with a width of 0.9km and a depth of 0.465 km which the company says it will use for irrigation and a fish pond after the mine closes in seventeen years time.

Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency however sees far greater risks than potential benefits in the size of the open pit and the company's purported reclamation plans and the height of the waste rock dump.

The Environmental Protection Agency has therefore rejected the company's proposals to use the open pit for irrigation and a fish pond after closure of the mine on the grounds that since the proposed open pit will be located in a forest reserve there will be no farms in the area to irrigate in the first place. The depth of the proposed open pit also makes it unsuitable for use as a fish pond, the agency argues.

Public safety implications of the proposed 2.65 kilometre open pit, particularly its proximity to the communities, ranging from 1304m to 5200m and the effects and implications of having a waste dump of a height between 68m-104m high as well as the nearness of the dump to New Abirem, the capital of the Birim North district have also sent shock waves through officials of the country's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The EPA has accordingly communicated to the company to redesign certain aspects of the proposed project, particularly the size of the open pit and its post reclamation plans and the height of the waste dumps.

The instruction from the EPA asked the company to take into consideration the urgent need for partial post closure backfilling to reduce the spatial requirement of the waste rock dump and also to reduce the height of the waste rock dump to improve the aesthetic view of the area as well as to avoid the extensive diversion of the public road network in the area.

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Company officials however appear adamant and have so far failed to heed to the EPA's request to them to revise these aspects of the project design.

Addressing a group of journalists recently at the third quarter media briefing, Appiah Kusi Obodum, Co-ordinator of the Environment and Social Responsibility Unit of Newmont Ghana Gold Limited said the costs involved in EPA's recommendations will be too prohibitive.

He defended the company's proposed project design including the size of the pit and its post reclamation plans adding that the company will properly and responsibly manage the impacts of its operations.

Appiah Kusi Obodum accused the EPA of delaying the project and told the journalists that the agency's "stalling tactics" have led to the suspension of further employment of workers.

He also told the Journalists that Newmont Ghana Gold Limited had decided to re-assign some of its expatriate staff to its Ahafo and Australia mines as a result of the EPA's delays in granting the environmental permit.

Mounting evidence uncovered by this writer however contradicts the statement made by Appiah Kusi Obodum that EPA is delaying the environmental permit.

Rather, the process seems to have been delayed because of Newmont's unwillingness to comply with Ghanaian environmental standards.

Available information indicate that Newmont Ghana Gold Limited submitted an application to the Environmental Protection Agency in Ghana on 4th July 2002 to enable it obtain an environmental permit to develop and operate its proposed open pit mine at New Abirem in the Birim North District.

The EPA informed Newmont to commence the environmental impact assessment process on 8th July 2002. The company submitted the scoping report on the project to the Environmental Protection Agency on 22nd July 2004, two years later and on 30th July, the EPA begun the review process without delay.

In accordance with LI 1652 and Ghana's environmental impact assessment procedures and in line with its legal mandate of ensuring that projects are sustainable in their design and take into account the necessary socio economic and cultural impacts and mitigation in the medium to long term, a public hearing was organized on 2nd November 2004.

The review of the project and compilation of public concerns were completed and submitted to Newmont Ghana Gold on the 8th March 2005. These documents reflected concerns about the size of the proposed open pit of dimensions 2.65kilimetres long and 0.9kilimetres wide and 0.465 kilometres deep.

The spatial requirements of the waste rock dump with a height of 0.104 metres as well as the implications and effects of the pit and generated waste rock on the environment and socio economic resources were also questioned.

In view of the sensitive nature of the location of the proposed open pit mine, the Environmental Protection Agency organized a second public hearing on the 28th June 2005, and again stressed the need to address the same issues regarding the size of the open pit and its reclamation plans, the spatial requirements of the waste rock dump including the proposed height and the impacts of the waste rock dump.

Newmont Ghana Gold however submitted a second draft in November 2005 without addressing the issues that the EPA had consistently raised with regards to the size of the pit and its post mining reclamation and the height of the waste rock dumps.

The EPA in turn sent similar comments to Newmont Ghana Gold limited on 17th of February 2006 hammering on the need to redesign the facilities but this also did not yield any favourable response from Newmont Ghana Gold limited.

When this writer contacted Appiah Kusi Obodum, Co-ordinator of the Environment and Social responsibility Unit of Newmont Ghana Gold to find out whether Newmont will revise the project design in line with the EPA'S recommendations, he maintained that the initial project design and mitigation plans will provide enough protection to the environment and ensure the safety of the surrounding communities.

He however, declined to comment further, explaining that he had to seek permission from his boss to talk about the issue but his boss was not available.

At the Ministry of Mines, Land and Forestry, Samuel Dechie, Assistant Director in Charge of Mines said he was aware of the unfolding tango between the EPA and Newmont. "A committee of which I am a member has been

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Akyem mining project located at New Abirem in the Birim North District", he said.

At the Minerals Commission in Ghana, James Adjei, Principal Mining engineer of the commission and member of the committee said "The place where the company intends to mine is a forest reserve and if a pit of that size is constructed and not filled after closure of the mine, you deprive farmers in the area of land forever. We are convinced that the partial back filling that we suggested is the best option"

He indicated that due to the fact that the area is a forest reserve the committee would closely monitor the mine from inception to decommissioning.

Information reaching this writer indicates that recently some chiefs from the communities around the proposed project site stormed the offices of the EPA to impress and questioned why Newmont had been given the green light to proceed with the proposed Akyem Gold mine project.

But when the environmental and social implications of operating the mine with the company's designs for the open pit, the waste rock dumps and their reclamation plans were explained to them, they left very convinced that the size of the pit, the reclamation plans and the height of the waste dumps had to be revised immediately.

Some youth leaders in the communities also told this writer that they will also not give in to the mounting pressure from some company officials, asking them to write letters to the EPA urging them to grant the company the environmental permit without any changes to the initial project design.

With an annual output of 500,000 ounces, the project with its 8.5 metric tonne processing plant is expected to cost around 600 million dollars. The 2.65 Kilometre pit would also become the biggest open pit mine in the country.

Construction of the proposed mine and related facilities at Akyem would directly affect 1,216 hectares through removal of vegetation, soil and subsoil. Of this total area, approximately 74 hectares would be removed from the Ajenjua Bepo Forest reserve which covers an area of 569 hectares.

Eighty-three bird species can be found in the area, but it is feared that a removal of forest habitats to make way for the project will adversely affect these species that are listed by IUCN as having special status because of rarity and the risk of extinction.

These species which have been found exclusively in forest habitats of the proposed project area include; Pohle's fruit bat which is endangered, Zenkers's fruit bat, near threatened and Pel's flying squirrel also endangered.

Environmental and human rights groups who have long argued that the comparative value of preserving the Ajenjua Bepo Forest Reserve and its unique ecosystem is greater than the value of the gold to be extracted by Newmont Ghana Gold Limited

The environmental groups denounced the attempts by the company to use the youth and Chiefs in the area and threats of suspension of further employment of workers and the re-assignment of its expatriate staff to its Ahafo and Australia mines to push the EPA to relax existing laws and regulations that protect the environment and communities and ultimately grant them the environmental permit.

Voicing fears ranging from acid mine drainage, ground and surface water pollution to the incalculable and irreversible damage to the forest reserves and all its treasures, the environmental groups who have been mounting steady pressure on Newmont Ghana Gold Limited since it started operating in Ghana, said the environmental impact assessment for Newmont's proposed Akyem Goldmine project had grossly underplayed the hazards posed by the huge open pit and the waste rock dump to the bio- physical environment.

They expressed great concern about proceeding with the Akyem project before problems related to the environmental, social and human rights impacts of the mining operation were resolved.

They further cautioned the EPA not to approve the proposed open pit mine if the initial project design is not revised and the Environmental Protection Agency's recommendations incorporated into the project design.

According to Third world Network's Dramani Abdulai "If the Environmental Protection Agency is convinced that the project design particularly the size of the open pit and the proposed reclamation plan as well as the height of the waste dump falls below their standards, then they should not flout their own guidelines by granting Newmont the environmental permit"

Joshua Appau of the Earth Science, an environmental group in Ghana pointed out that "Unless environmental and social safeguard measures are in place before production starts, it will become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to reverse negative impacts on the ground.

For the local communities in the catchment area of Newmont's proposed Akyem mine, an ancient West African proverb which says "filthy water cannot be washed, neither can filthy air" sums up their feelings.

Residents interviewed by this writer in the communities around the proposed mine such as Afosu, New Abirem, Yaayaaso, Ahausena and Hweakwae said they were worried that Newmont's Akyem gold mine will be a death warrant for the streams and rivers in the area "from whence they draw life and sustenance"

"Our fears keep mounting every minute; we are disturbed; we know that the mine will cause irreversible harm to the streams and rivers in the area. These water bodies are our lifeline, they support the livelihoods of hundreds of people here" said Kofi Ansah a fifty year old farmer at Yayaaso.

Akosua Nsia also of Yayaaso told this writer that she was worried about the impact of full-fledged mining operations in the area.

"We have been spending sleepless nights thinking about the trauma of relocation, loss of farmlands and livelihood, new diseases especially the upsurge in malaria cases as a result of the open pits and other stagnant pools of water in the open trenches that will be created in the area by Newmont Ghana Gold Limited.

We know this will happen here, our friends at Ahafo, where Newmont is also operating a gold mine have told us all about it. For us here the forest reserve that Newmont wants to mine is far more important to us for its ecological values in the long term than for the short-term profit of this mining company" she said.

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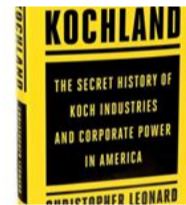
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