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Burkina Faso's Gold Mines: Facing Internal Conflict And Regional Violence

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Ashton M. Callahan

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Conflict And Regional Violence**

Dorina A. Bekoe
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Executive Summary

- Burkina Faso is fast becoming one of Africa's leading gold exporters. The foreign-dominated gold mining industry holds the promise of employment in one of the world's poorest nations. It, however, has also resulted in inter-communal friction, intermittent protest by locals, and concerns over the harm to the environment and the exploitation of children.
- A close look at the government's response to the 2011 protests and the 1998 protests in the wake of the murder of journalist Norbert Zongo reveals a government that coopts and compromises its way out of difficulty. The gold mining industry will certainly produce many protests, strike actions, and hostile communities, but President Compoaré is unlikely to allow these activities to threaten the state.
- In light of the hostage-taking at the natural gas complex in In Amenas, Algeria, which Islamists claimed was launched in retaliation for French intervention in northern Mali, the Inata gold mine in Soum province in northwestern Burkina Faso may be at particular risk. Located near the northern Mali border, it can provide an opportunity for the Islamists to kidnap the gold industry executives in retaliation for a military offensive organized by the Economic Community of West African States, in which Burkina Faso is taking part.



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MINORITY GROUPS IN THE SAHEL

**BURKINA FASO'S GOLD MINES:
FACING INTERNAL CONFLICT AND REGIONAL VIOLENCE**

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MS. ASHTON CALLAHAN

JANUARY 29, 2013

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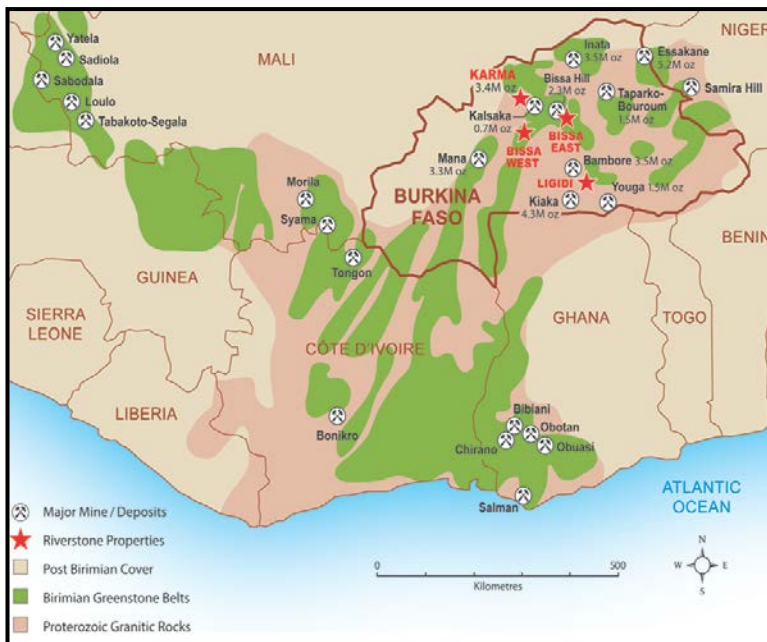
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Burkina Faso's Gold Mines: Facing Internal Conflict and Regional Violence

Burkina Faso's Gold Mining Industry

Burkina Faso is on pace to become one of the largest exporters of gold in Africa – behind South Africa, Ghana, and Mali.¹ In 2011, it produced 15 percent of West Africa's gold, behind Ghana (47 percent), and Mali (16 percent).²

Map 1. Gold Mines in Burkina Faso



Source: Riverstone Resources

(<http://riverstoneresources.com/s/Maps.asp>, accessed January 27, 2013).

The growth of the gold mining industry has given rise to a number of conflicts and communal tension. The issues have principally involved demands for more employment; allegations of broken promises by mining firms; and fights over which communities can serve as hosts to the mining companies, as the host communities are favored in local recruiting efforts and the designation of sacred sites. This paper examines these conflicts, and reflects on Burkina Faso's history of managing political conflict to determine their potential to threaten the stability of the state. It also considers the impact of the region's current insecurity on the safety of the gold mines.

Doubling in production since 2008,³ gold has surpassed cotton, becoming Burkina Faso's most valuable export. Currently, it accounts for approximately 12.2 percent of GDP.⁴ In 2013, gold output is expected to reach 42 tons (an increase from 40 tons⁵ in 2012, 32 tons in 2011, and 23 tons in 2010).⁶ Burkina Faso, considered by the industry as "mining friendly,"⁷ is also Africa's third biggest site for new gold exploration,⁸ with more than 30 gold mining companies holding exploratory permits.⁹

The growth of the gold mining industry has given

Curently, there are six industrial mining sites in Burkina Faso (all foreign-owned): Essakane, Inata, Kalaska, Mana, Taparko-Boroum, and Youga.¹⁰ Map 1, from Riverstone Resources, shows the locations of the industrial operational mines, as well as deposits, exploratory projects on future mines (such as Bissa and Karma), and relevant geological information. With the exceptions of Avocet and Amara, UK-based mining companies, all other industrial operational mines are owned by Canadian firms. In addition to these six industrial mines, there are approximately 800 small-scale (artisanal) mines.¹¹ The table below provides a profile of the gold mines and the Bissa exploration site, which is due to become operational in 2013.

Table 1. Gold Mining Companies, by Number of Employees

Company	Owner	Operation Start	Province	Est. Employees	2011 Production
Essakane ¹²	Iamgold	2010	Oudalan/Seno border	2,200	337,000 oz
Inata ¹³	Avocet	2009	Soum	500 nationals; 50 expats	167,000 oz
Kalsaka ¹⁴	Amara		Yatenga	350	71,000 oz
Mana ¹⁵	Semafo	2008	Balé	1,271	187,800 oz
Taparko-Boroum ¹⁶	High River Gold	2007	Namantenga	726	133,000 oz
Youga ¹⁷	Endeavour	2008	Boulgou	424, plus 291 contractors	87,264 oz
Bissa ¹⁸	High River Gold	2013 expected	Bam	500-700 expected	NA
Total Employees				6,462	

With the anticipated addition of the Bissa mining site in 2013, the gold mining industry in Burkina Faso is expected to employ 6,462 miners. The Essakane mine, which employs 2,200, is the largest private employer in Burkina Faso. Iamgold's plans to invest \$600 million over the next three years, as it expands its mine and doubles its processing capacity, are guaranteed to increase its importance to the economy and the government.¹⁹ Gold mine jobs are coveted, as an example from the Inata mine illustrates: a truck driver earns approximately 300,000 FCFA (\$608) a month, whereas an unskilled manual laborer in Ouagadougou earns 30,000 FCFA (\$61) a month. In a country that the United Nations Human Development Index ranks 181 out of 187 countries – placing it among the poorest and least developed in the world – a job at a mine can mean a life free from grinding poverty. Moreover, it can also eliminate the need to travel to Ouagadougou or even further south to Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire to earn a living.

In some cases, mine investments have brought real benefits to these Sahelian communities. Inata has paved the road from Djibo to Kongoussi, leading to Ouagadougou; built a new school and mosque; provided water pumps; and established a

philanthropic development foundation.²⁰ At Kalsaka, the mine built new classrooms and a maternity ward.²¹ But these goodwill actions, while appreciated, have not masked grievances over employment practices and environmental damage.

Protest and Conflict in the Gold Mining Areas

Most of the mines – Essakane, Inata, Taparko, and Kalsaka – and one exploration site – Bissa – have experienced some kind of protest by the local population in the past two years. The protests have centered on the lack of employment opportunities for locals, but there are also complaints about unfair labor practices and environmental degradation. In at least one case (Bissa), the opening of the mine pitted communities against each other, as they competed to benefit from the mine.

Protests criticizing inadequate employment of locals by gold mining companies took place at Essakane, Bissa, and Inata. At the Essakane mine, approximately 100 people set up a roadblock on March 21, 2012, to protest the lack of local employment at the mine. The protest came at a time when the mining company and residents were engaged in addressing similar grievances.²² In its defense, Essakane claims that it trained more than 1,000 locals in construction, as the mine was being built.²³ It is unclear how many of those were retained. In contrast to the protestors, the Burkinabè government views Essakane as a model company that contributes positively to Burkina Faso's development and enjoys good relations with the community.²⁴ Perhaps, in line with this view, it is not surprising that police were dispatched to disperse the crowd.²⁵ Months following the protest, Essakane donated a significant amount of foodstuffs to the host community, to alleviate its chronic food shortage – an action that was greatly appreciated by the villagers.²⁶

At Bissa, on November 9, 2012, between 100 and 200 youth blocked the main route to mine,²⁷ accusing the management of insufficient local recruitment. Specifically, the youth stated:

[We] were tired of the false promises made by Bissa Gold. The mine had given us hope. But now, we are discouraged. They took our campsites, our worksites, and all that was important to us in our lives. To our great surprise, instead of hiring young people from the village ... they secretly brought in others. Even for work that did not need qualifications ... How do you suppose we should resolve this?²⁸

It was the second such action by the youth: in September they demonstrated on the same grounds. In response, Bissa hired 50 local workers. But the November demonstrations suggest this was insufficient.²⁹ The youth finally agreed to lift the road blocks after long discussions with mining and local government officials that ended with the promise to re-examine the demonstrators' proposals.³⁰

There have also been problems at Bissa involving the host communities and surrounding communities. Because they are sprawling complexes, a mine could comprise many villages. But for simplicity and ease of community-mine relations, one community is designated as the host. Once chosen, the host community is the reference point for identifying sacred sites not to be harmed by the mining operation, local recruitment, and other community-mine issues. In Bissa's case, nearby (non-host) communities began to feel cheated – complaining about the lack of development and employment expected from the mine. There was also friction between the host community and Bissa when the mine executives reached out to other communities.³¹

The miners at Inata held work strikes several times in April 2011.³² At a press conference on May 11, 2011, the miners union, *Syndicat des travailleurs de la géologie, des mines et des hydrocarbures* (SYNTRAGMIH), highlighted the poor working conditions at the mine and voiced complaints by the affected community regarding their inability to obtain jobs.³³ Moreover, the miners argued, given the price of gold, they deserved a 100 percent increase in pay.³⁴ Management had a different view: “Mining is a risk ... [and only] those taking the [financial investment] risk ... should reap the rewards.”³⁵ In subsequent interviews, the director-general was less abrasive, acknowledging the social friction and pledging to work in a more consensual way.³⁶

Unfair Employment Practices

Some mining companies have been accused of abusive or unfair employment practices. During SYNTRAGMIH's general assembly on August 8, miners at Taparko complained of abusive working conditions and the unfair firing of approximately 20 workers. The 20 workers had decided to observe a weekend work stoppage, in protest of working conditions – even after Taparko management had invited them to discuss their grievances. Following the mini-strike, the workers met with the government of Centre-Nord, who proposed mediation between the workers and Taparko management. The mining company seemed to agree with negotiations, but before they could start, they fired the 20 workers – even as the workers were meeting with the governor, according to the union.³⁷

At the Kalsaka mine, workers blamed xenophobia for their working conditions. On May 24, 2011, the 350 workers of Kalsaka mine launched an “unlimited” strike to protest harsh working conditions; called for the departure of the mine's director general, Reynolds Anin Yeboah, a Ghanaian; and an 80 percent increase in pay.³⁸ The workers had first presented these conditions and grievances in October 2010.³⁹ From the workers' perspective, the response from management was poor. Mr. Yeboah had proposed just a 5 percent increase in pay. To the workers, the 5 percent proposal was not only meaningless, but also confirmed their assertion that Yeboah favored Ghanaian workers – who they claimed were paid 75 percent more in salary, despite a lack of education.⁴⁰ The

director-general fled the mine for a hotel in Ouagadougou a few days after the strike began.⁴¹

Burkina Faso's Conflict Resolution Practice

Understanding how the Compaoré government has dealt with conflict and public protests in the past provides insight to how it will manage growing friction between the gold mining companies and the communities that host them. Public protests to Compaoré's rule occurred in 1998, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2007, and 2008. Generally, Compaoré negotiated his way out of conflict and appeared conciliatory,⁴² without necessarily weakening his position. Two episodes are illustrative: the 1998 protests against the killing of journalist Norbert Zongo and the 2011 protests against the rising cost of living, among other issues.

Norbert Zongo

Norbert Zongo, founder and editor of *L'Independent*, a weekly newspaper in Burkina Faso, was murdered, along with three colleagues in December 1998. It has been widely presumed (though denied by the government) that Zongo was murdered because he was investigating the involvement of the murder of David Ouédraogo, the driver of Francois Compaoré, the president's brother. His investigation seemed to implicate the presidential guard and others close to the presidency. Many consider the Zongo murder the spark for Burkina Faso's civil society activism.⁴³

The murder resulted in massive civil society demonstrations and activism to protest not just Zongo's murder, but also the government's record of human rights abuse, corruption, and political violence to silence the population.⁴⁴ The protests weakened Compaoré's legitimacy with Burkina and internationally as well.⁴⁵ When the May 1999 Independent Inquiry Commission concluded that the presidential guards were "serious suspects," demonstrations and violent clashes with state security forces began anew. Compaoré's solution to resolve the conflicts and reduce tension was to bring together community and national leaders to discuss a wide range of issues. The effort resulted in a limited government of national unity, a set of electoral reforms, and a documentation of unsolved crimes since 1960. The electoral reforms actually resulted in a significant parliamentary victory for the political opposition in the 2002 elections; they went from holding just 9 percent of the seats to 49 percent of the seats. Compaoré had managed to save himself and reaffirm the power of the presidency, even at the expense of his own party.⁴⁶

The 2011 Protests

Compaoré's practice of cooptation was visible in the management of the March – June 2011 protests. The protests included soldiers unhappy with pay; students supporting

their teachers' strike;⁴⁷ and business representatives and ordinary people demonstrating against the high cost of living, police brutality, and crime.⁴⁸ The protestors called for Compaoré to step down,⁴⁹ and there were fears that the military would organize a coup d'état.⁵⁰ Compaoré responded by dismissing his government and appointing a new prime minister. The actions seemed conciliatory and they quelled the protests, but there was no chance that Compaoré would step aside.⁵¹

Implications for Managing Mine Conflicts

As the gold mining industry becomes a larger part of Burkina Faso's economy, more communities will vie to serve as hosts, demands to employ the local population will increase, and groups will rise up to protest environmental degradation. In some cases, where these tensions result in violent confrontations between the mining companies and the workers, the government may be sought to mediate the conflict. In weighing its intervention, the Burkinabè government will try not only to placate the mining companies, in relation to their importance to the country, but also to prevent the protests from escalating. One of the dangers of public protests is their ability to transform into multi-issue movements drawing in several, unrelated sectors of society. In time, they can become a very real threat to a regime's survival. Burkina Faso faced this possibility in the Zongo affair and the 2011 protests.

If the price of gold continues its dramatic rise, the Burkinabe government is likely to send it security reinforcements to quell labor actions, in a bid send a message to the mining about the government's commitment to their security. Indeed, mining companies might demand government to send security reinforcements. But these deployments would need to be carefully calibrated to prevent the situation from escalating. As such, past practices suggest that the Burkinabè government would reach out to community leaders and work with local entities (as in the Bissa and Taparko cases), somehow isolating the protestors. A plausible agreement could include investments in development projects by the mine, in an effort to redistribute the mine's lucrative returns. The Compaoré government is not expected to allow disagreements and protests rise to a level where they can threaten the state.

Insecurity in the Sahel

Burkina Faso's gold mines face threats not only internally, but also externally, as well. In late January 2013, Burkina Faso sent its first deployment of troops into Bamako as part of the Mali intervention force agreed to by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This could prove costly to Burkina Faso, in light of the kidnappings by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) of workers at Algeria's In Amenas natural gas complex; AQIM attacked In Amenas ostensibly in retaliation for Algeria's decision to allow French military planes into its airspace, en route to launching

military strikes against the Islamists that have seized northern Mali. Burkina Faso's participation in the ECOWAS force could place it at risk to similar terrorist actions.

Map 2. Northern Mali-Burkina Faso Border



Source: *Political Geography Now*
(<http://www.polgeonow.com/search/label/africa>, accessed January 16, 2013)

To date, there have been no terrorist threats or strikes against Burkina Faso, but its participation in the ECOWAS force, the country's porous borders, and the easy flow of weapons from Libya in the region increase its vulnerability. Because of its economic importance to Burkina and the location of mining facilities in remote parts of the country, the gold mining industry presents a potential target. Among the mines, the Inata mine might be particularly vulnerable because of its location close to the border with Mali.

A possible mitigating factor might be Compaoré's role as the mediator between

the Malian government and the Islamists. Since the start of the crisis, Compaoré has met with the parties regularly, which might have built up a measure of good will and trust among the Islamists. He could leverage his position as both a mediator and a member of the intervention force to reduce the threat to Burkina Faso. Alternatively, Compaoré's decision to join the ECOWAS security could completely undermine any existing good will or trust.

Conclusion

Burkina Faso's gold mines are destined only to grow and become more important stakeholders in local communities and the national government. Although many will benefit, many more could feel excluded and ill-treated. With nearly 30 exploratory contracts in the hands of gold mining companies, the potential for constant small to medium protests is high. Even if the protests manage to draw in other stakeholders and

broaden the issues, the manner in which Burkina Faso has dealt with widespread discontent in the past suggests that the protest cannot threaten the state.

Far more destabilizing might be the vulnerability of the gold mining industry to the regional insecurity in the Sahel. Given the high probability of a long military campaign in Mali involving ECOWAS and French forces, the potential for retaliatory strikes within Burkina Faso are high. One mitigating factor could be Compaoré's mediation efforts between the Islamists and the government; his position might reduce the threat to Burkina Faso. It is not clear, however, how the Islamists view his decision to join the ECOWAS security force; it might have undermined any good will or trust developed during the mediation. In the context of these uncertainties, the recent attack in Algeria, and the important role that the mining industry plays in its economy, the government will likely need to review its security support for the mining industry at a time when its forces will be stretched to support operations in Mali.

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14. ABSTRACT Burkina Faso is fast becoming one of Africa's leading gold exporters. The foreign-dominated gold mining industry holds the promise of employment in one of the world's poorest nations. It, however, has also resulted in inter-communal friction, intermittent protest by locals, and concerns over the harm to the environment and the exploitation of children. A close look at the government's response to the 2011 protests and the 1998 protests in the wake of the murder of journalist Norbert Zongo reveals a government that coopts and compromises its way out of difficulty. The gold mining industry will certainly produce many protests, strike actions, and hostile communities, but President Comporé is unlikely to allow these activities to threaten the state. In light of the hostage-taking at the natural gas complex in In Amenas, Algeria, which Islamists claimed was launched in retaliation for French intervention in northern Mali, the Inata gold mine in Soum province in northwestern Burkina Faso may be at particular risk. Located near the northern Mali border, it can provide an opportunity for the Islamists to kidnap the gold industry executives in retaliation for a military offensive organized by the Economic Community of West African States, in which Burkina Faso is taking part.					
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