

Community Protests in Sudan's Gold Mining Sector: Peaceful Resistance and Repressive Responses

Suliman Baldo



Photo credit: Organizing committee of El-Ebeidiya sit-in

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Inhabitants of al-Fida'a in Abu-Hamad locality in Sudan's River Nile state closed down the operations of seven gold tailing processing companies operating in their area in late October. They insisted that the companies would have first to phase out the use of banned substances in their operations,¹ strictly comply with prescribed environmental codes, and stop expanding into residential areas before they could resume operations. In August, a three-week sit-in organized by activists and the community in the town of El Ibeidiya, which is one of Sudan's largest service and supply centers **for the gold mining business**, locally known as the "gold market," also demanded the protection of people from toxic materials used in traditional and industrial mining and greater investment of government revenues from the industry in improving services in the area.

In both instances, protesters prevented the Ministry of Mineral's Sudan Mineral Resources Company (SMRC) from collecting revenue. They also disrupted corporate gold production by blocking the supplies of mineral waste and water that are essential for these operations. Among the companies affected by the blockade was a Russian company known as Merowe Gold, of which the beneficial owner is the Russian mercenary force the Wagner Group.² In both instances, the protests succeeded in extracting some significant concessions from the government and production companies, such as the affirmation of the entitlement of local communities to social responsibility funds (calculated as a percentage of the income of companies instead as a voluntary contribution by the companies). Local community groups in some localities have also asserted their entitlement to oversee environmental protection practices and protocols for the safe handling of toxic materials by companies.

The protests in al-Fida'a and El Ibeidiya were just the latest in a long list of similar manifestations of deep anxiety among local communities adversely affected by the uncontrolled use of mercury and cyanide in Sudan's sprawling Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining (ASGM) sector and worried about the encroachment of production companies, both local and foreign, on the areas that they have traditionally mined using rudimentary and dangerous techniques.

Sit-ins and other forms of community protests, such as blockades of national highways and stoppage of pumping to Sudan's oil refinery, have become a common, and increasingly frequent, feature of civic opposition to the capture of local resources by a powerful and kleptocratic central state and its commercial partners, including private companies linked to Sudan's security forces and their commercial foreign allies. Demands for government investment in the revival of collapsed public health and education sectors, and the provision of other services, such as regular clean water supply and electric power, are central demands.

Most of the sit-ins in recent years have extracted promises to meet their demands by officials who unfortunately rarely follow up on their promises once the sit-in is lifted. Local communities have forced the closure of processing factories that directly threaten their health, such as the Al-Dawliya factory in Sawarda in the Northern State which is linked to Sudan's General

¹ Facebook post,

<https://www.facebook.com/100083223286770/posts/pfbid02fL7rBQRrC216JJ9dHR9turcAHgLBKNq6E95SdHreVroRK6h2Dx7aBzNUZYW15fhHl/>.

² Simon Marks and Mohammed Alamin, "How a Sanctioned Russian Company Gained Access to Sudan's Gold," Bloomberg, April 30, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-30/how-a-sanctioned-russian-company-gained-access-to-sudan-s-gold>

Intelligence Services (GIS), Um Bader in Northern Kordofan, and in Al-Tatar, Talodi and Kalluqi in South Kordofan.

These forms of protest are mainly organized by community-based local youth associations, rights and environmental activists, and farmers and business owners' groups concerned about the threats to the collective welfare and rights of their communities. In many instances, these organizations operate under the loose umbrella of "demand groups." Each of these groups has a general assembly at the local level that elects an executive secretariat of ten members and convenes quarterly. Most federal states have coordination bodies of such demand groups, and the latter converge in an annual national meeting of all state representatives. Demand groups are highly organized and well-networked associations resisting central government-approved, large-scale development projects that ignore the rights and interests of communities, such as dams, mechanized farming projects, and allocation of mining concessions without consultation. They often turn the anger and frustrations of their communities into positive energy, awareness raising, and advocacy.

It is no wonder that the most visible and vocal community protests are occurring today in gold mining areas. Mortal dangers are threatening communities in mining areas as a result of their long-term exposure to toxic materials. Sudan's gold production has been dominated by the ASGM sector since the beginning of a massive gold rush around 2008-09, with more than a million Sudanese toiling in remote areas in fifteen of the country's eighteen states, and sending remittances to their families when they strike gold. In most mining zones, the entire local community is engaged in artisanal mining, including women and children, using rudimentary tools, and exposed to the harsh elements. Economic migrants from the across the country and neighboring states of the Sahel Region to the west dominate the mining population in the arid and sparsely populated Red Sea, Northern, and River Nile states.

Of the officially acknowledged 689 tons of gold produced in the whole decade 2011-2020, reporting by the Ministry of Minerals indicates that artisanal miners have produced an average of 80%. Artisanal miners use mercury for gold extraction through panning and amalgamation. According to a World Bank report,³ Sudan had the unenviable distinction of being the largest importer of mercury in sub-Saharan Africa between 2010-2015, importing 38% of the mercury that came to the sub-region per the global trade statistics reported to the UN's Comtrade database. However, Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker (STPT), a local anticorruption watchdog, raised the alarm in a recent Mercury Alert⁴ that officials of the Ministry of Minerals had authorized a number of companies, politically connected to the leaders of the October 2021 military coup, to import a staggering 4,000 tons of mercury into the country, representing 450% of the volume of global trade in mercury in 2020 at 891 tons.

At the same time, Sudan has encouraged the expansion of treatment plants that process millions of tons of mineral waste left behind by ASGM miners through the use of cyanide. In effect, mercury is known to extract only about 30% of the gold content in the ore, leaving behind

³ Carsten Lassen, Marlies Warming and Jakob Maag, COWI Denmark, "Mercury Trade and Use for Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Sub-Saharan Africa," World Bank, 2022, <http://cegem.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Mercury-Sub-Saharan-Africa-Trade-Report-12-December.pdf>

⁴ Mohamed Salah Abdelrahman, "How Mercury is Poisoning a Nation: and gross mismanagement is aggravating the problem," Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker, October 2022, https://mcusercontent.com/b3101ea3866029414729ab5e5/files/c3415b2d-bfee-b662-9d0a-16bff2d0a8d8/MercuryBrief_FINAL.pdf.

70% of gold particles in mineral waste. Much of this remaining gold can be extracted with cyanide, but many tailings processors ignore industry protocols for handling cyanide in their operations, in the absence of government oversight and enforcement mechanisms.

Aggravating the problem further, many artisanal miners have in recent years increasingly preferred to process their mineral waste themselves using the toxic substance thiourea instead of selling it to tailings processors. To give an idea of the gravity of this problem, a January 2022 report by the Sudanese Environmental Conservation Society, the Higher Council for the Environment and Natural Resources, and Nilein University identified the existence of no less than 700 heaps of mineral waste in homes and farms in a number villages in River Nile State over a distance of less than 65 kilometers along the Nile through satellite imaging. The researchers estimated the contents of the heaps at 450,000 tons of mineral waste, contaminated by 1.9 tons of mercury. Locals brought the waste from mining areas further afield, and were using some 7,000 rudimentary mixers employing thiourea to extract the gold.

Local demand groups have made lax government oversight of the use of these toxic materials a battle cry, amplifying the protests to demand the protection of the public health and the environment in their areas. The vision of the local communities was crystallized in the first mining conference in December 2019 from which a comprehensive map of solutions to these problems emerged, based on the fact that local problems are linked to the overall vision and the treatment lies in a change in policies and management structures. The conference approved many recommendations, foremost of which was giving the right of environmental oversight to local communities. Due largely to the instability in Sudan, the government did not endorse and implement the vision of these demand groups.

Grassroots protests by communities seeking to defend their rights to resources in their areas and the protect their health, environment, and livelihoods from the reckless use of toxic materials are a regular occurrence in Sudan today. The protests represent a facet of popular resistance against the capture of the country's natural resources by its ruling elites, the security forces protecting them, and their foreign allies and enablers. However, it will take more than sporadic eruptions of grassroots resistance to put an end to Sudan's kleptocratic capture of natural resources. Artisanal miners and local communities have come to accept their exposure to mercury with fatalism in the absence of better alternatives to make a living. Only a reform-minded, civilian-led government, freed from the interference of the military in the political and economic spheres, has a chance to tackle the enormous challenges crushing the people of Sudan.