

ILLEGAL MINING AND THE ESCALATION OF INSECURITY IN ZAMFARA STATE AND ITS NEIGHBOURING STATES, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Illegal mining has emerged as one of the major drivers of insecurity in Nigeria's North-West region, particularly in Zamfara State and its neighbouring states. Although the state possesses abundant deposits of gold and other strategic minerals, weak regulation, porous borders, poor governance, unemployment, and organized criminal networks have transformed the mining sector into a source of violent conflict. This paper examines the nexus between illegal mining and insecurity in Zamfara State, focusing on how artisanal and unregulated mining activities contribute to banditry, kidnapping, arms proliferation, forced labour, environmental degradation, and economic instability. Using qualitative analysis based on interviews, government reports, media investigations, and secondary literature, the study finds that armed groups and bandit networks increasingly control mining sites and exploit mineral resources to finance violent activities. The paper further reveals that illegal gold trade across transnational routes extending to the Niger Republic, Mali, and the United Arab Emirates facilitates money laundering and the procurement of arms. The study also highlights the devastating effects of illegal mining on human security, including food insecurity, displacement, lead poisoning, environmental destruction, and community instability. The paper concludes that the persistence of illegal mining reflects institutional weaknesses and inadequate enforcement mechanisms within Nigeria's mining governance structure. It recommends strengthening regulatory frameworks, formalizing artisanal mining, improving border security, deploying forest guards and mining marshals, enhancing community awareness, and establishing transparent mineral-tracking systems to curb the financing of insecurity through illegal mining activities.

Keywords: Illegal mining, insecurity, banditry, Zamfara State, artisanal mining, money laundering, terrorism financing, gold smuggling.

1.1 Introduction

Nigeria is blessed with vast solid mineral deposits, and Zamfara State ranks among the country's richest in this regard. According to the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI, 2023), Zamfara contains nearly 32 of the 36 commercially viable minerals found in Nigeria, a staggering endowment that, in theory, should position the state as an economic powerhouse. Yet, paradoxically, Zamfara remains one of Nigeria's poorest and most volatile states.

The disconnect between resource wealth and human development stems largely from the fact that mining in Zamfara has remained informal, crude, and largely illegal. For decades, artisanal miners, many of them young men with no formal education or employment, have extracted gold and other minerals with rudimentary tools, operating outside any regulatory framework. Their work is dangerous, unregulated, and often yields meagre returns. But over the past decade, this already precarious situation has taken a darker turn.

Illegal mining has become intimately linked to the region's escalating security crisis. Armed groups, including bandits, kidnappers, and terrorist networks, have recognized the immense value of Zamfara's gold and have moved aggressively to control it. These groups now exploit artisanal miners through systematic extortion, impose illegal taxes, seize entire mining sites by force and trade gold for weapons across porous borders. As Amnesty International (2023) and Usman and Adebayo (2021) have documented, the scramble for gold has

become a primary driver of banditry and violence in the region.

The consequences are devastating. Villages near mining sites are frequently attacked, communities are displaced and young men who might have become farmers or entrepreneurs are instead recruited into armed groups or forced to labour under their control. Insecurity in Zamfara is no longer merely a security problem; it is deeply intertwined with the illegal economy of mining.

This study seeks to analyze how illegal mining aggravates insecurity in Zamfara State and to propose evidence-based policy responses that can break the vicious cycle of mineral wealth and armed violence. Without intervention, the gold beneath Zamfara's soil will continue to purchase the bullets that rain down on its people.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives are to:

- 1) Describe illegal mining operations and techniques in Zamfara;
- 2) Establish the link between illegal mining and banditry, kidnapping, and arms trafficking;
- 3) Identify bandit kingpins controlling mining sites;
- 4) Assess human security impacts (economic, food, health, environmental, community, personal); and
- 5) Evaluate government responses and propose evidence-based recommendations.

1.3 Scope and Limitations

Geographically, the study covers Zamfara State. Temporally, it spans 2011–2026, coinciding with the rise of illegal mining

and banditry. The study relies heavily on secondary and media sources, which may contain bias or unverified claims. However, triangulation across multiple sources (government reports, NGOs, video evidence, interviews) mitigates these limitations. The findings are context-specific to Zamfara and may not generalize to other regions without further research.

1.4 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.4.1 Conceptual Clarification

Illegal Mining: Mining without legal authorization, permits, or regulatory approval (Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act, 2007), including unauthorized extraction, processing, and sale of minerals.

Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM): Informal mining using rudimentary tools. Not all ASM is criminal; some operators have partial registration but remain under-regulated.

Insecurity: Threats to lives, property, livelihoods, and state stability from banditry, kidnapping, arms proliferation, and organized crime. In Zamfara, this includes attacks, cattle rustling, abductions, killings, and displacement.

1.4.2 Review of Empirical Literature

Previous studies on farmers/herders' conflict have focused on environmental scarcity and land use (Moritz, 2010; Ojewale, 2020). However, the specific narrative linking illegal mining to banditry as a driver of insecurity has received limited systematic examination. Amnesty International (2023) reported more than 2,000 abductions linked to mining site

disputes in Zamfara between January and July 2023. Usman and Adebayo (2021) highlighted that illegal mining fuels rural insecurity, yet detailed case studies of kingpins and mining site controls remain scarce. This paper fills that gap.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the resource curse theory (Auty, 1993), which explains why Zamfara's gold wealth has intensified violent competition, weakened state authority, and fuelled conflict rather than prosperity. It also draws on the Political Economy Approach, showing how elite manipulation and criminal networks sustain a conflict economy where mineral resources finance armed violence (Rufa'i, 2024).

1.6 Methodology

Research Design: The study employs a "qualitative, interpretivist case study design" (Yin, 2018). This design is appropriate for interrogating a contested narrative where empirical field data are difficult to obtain due to insecurity. The study critically examines the security crisis in Zamfara State through interviews, observation and secondary literature.

Data Sources: Primary sources include observations in seven mining communities; audio/video interviews with bandits and physical interviews with experts, miners, and dealers (2024–2025); video clips (April 2026); a dissertation, newspaper articles, and a rejoinder critique. Secondary sources: peer-reviewed articles; reports from Human Rights Watch (2012, 2021, 2022), NEITI, International Crisis Group (2020), Nigeria Security Tracker (2025), Médecins Sans Frontières (2012), Amnesty International (2023); and

scholarly books on Northern Nigerian history.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to explore and interpret patterns of meaning across a dataset used in this work, which includes interview transcripts and secondary data. Some of the key themes identified are illegal mining techniques and locations; bandit kingpins controlling mining sites; gold-for-arms exchange; human security impacts (lead poisoning, displacement, food insecurity); environmental degradation; and government responses.

Ethical Considerations: This work is aimed at considering and incorporating research ethics at all stages, thus planning, data collection, data management, data analysis, interpretation and information sharing stages. The work attempted to observe all ethical standards of research, including informed consent of all the people or the audience involved. In other words, this work will do everything possible to ensure that the rights of all subjects/persons involved are protected

1.7 Illegal Mining Operations in Zamfara State

Illegal gold mining in Zamfara is so rampant in almost all the fourteen (14) Local government areas. The miners use unmechanized methods: shovels, hoes, explosives, petrol pumps, and local refining equipment (Federal Ministry of Mines and Steel Development, 2023). Extraction involves manual drilling, blasting, crushing, washing, and processing. Many miners use stimulants to endure labour.

In the northwest, especially in Zamfara, bandits and other marauders are fully

involved in this illegal mining of gold and other precious metals, using the proceeds to finance and sustain the heinous activities through the procurement of more weapons. In addition to gold mining, other minerals and industrial base metals found in Zamfara include iron ore, lithium, copper, lead, zinc, chromite, manganese, granite, limestone, kaolin clay, feldspar, and quartz (Samuel, 2025). Key mining communities where illegal gold mining is practiced include, but are not limited to: Bagega, Dareta, Tungar-Daji, and Duza in Anka LGA; Gidan-daji, Dandala, Tungar-kade, Hura and Gemawa in Maru LGA; Kaudari, Kanoma, Ruwan-dorowa, Karakai and Damaga in Maru LGA; Kaya, Gorgawo, Aljimma, Magamin-diddi, Gama-giwa, and Gilliba in Maradun LGA. Others are Moriki and Garbawa in Zurmi LGA; Gidan-gardawa, Kyambarawa, Kuryar-madaro, Kagara, Dogon-daji, Madira and Kagaera in Kaura Namoda LGA.

1.7.1 Kwallin Kura Mining

One important metal recently observed to be mined in Zamfara is Kaolin or black soil, locally known as Kwallin Kura. Local communities from far and near are scrambling for the extraction of this God-given resource. The metal is extracted from sandy and clay soil found at the riverbanks. The players are mainly unregulated community members and artisans, including youth and women in the community, perhaps because it is largely found along the riverside, not in forests where bandits control mining activities. This mineral-rich sandy clay contains chemical compounds, metals and minerals such as mica, iron, monoxide, zircon, and gold (personal communication with N. Danbaba, 9th June 2025)

In three or four visited LGAs, the discovery of Kwallin Kura has drawn many youths and women into resource extraction. During the rainy season, many local farmers switch to this artisan mining for quick cash. In Bungudu LGA (20 km from Gusau, the state capital), people scramble into the river banks to collect this mineral-rich sand containing mica, iron, monoxide, zircon, and gold.

While most artisans use basic tools (shovels, fans) to extract minerals and filter minerals from sand, some miners connected to larger operators, such as Alhaji Naziru Danbaba, have imported machinery for local refining. Danbaba now runs his own mini-factory, exporting monoxide, iron ore, zircon, and limestone to China via Lagos. Over 20 trucks leave Zamfara weekly, and Danbaba recently shipped over 100 tons of mica and zircon (personal communication with N. Danbaba, 9th June 2025).

1.8 Chinese Partnership and Financing

Inquiring into how Danbaba acquired the machinery revealed that his Chinese clients (one Mr. Wan) provided it free of charge, requiring only that he sell those precious minerals directly to them. Through a phone call, Danbaba connected me with his Chinese client, Mr. Wan and Mr. Wan corroborated what Danbaba said that his Chinese clients bought the machinery for him. Mr. Wan said, *“we bought this machinery worth hundreds of millions for Mr. Danbaba. He does the job for us, and we pay him on every single mineral he produces.”* He continued, *“Zamfara has the best iron, zircon, and monoxide...”*

1.9 Nexus between Illegal Mining and Insecurity

1.9.1 Armed Groups and Bandit Kingpins Controlling Mining Sites

An interview with Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, a counterterrorism expert, revealed that non-state actors and bandit kingpins, including Bashari Maniya, Halilu Sububu (deceased), Bello Bagega, Baba Adamu (arms supplier, leader of Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah (JAS) in the North-West and IED expert), Kachalla Haruna, Ardo Nashaware, Umar Sanda, Kachalla Abu, Dan-Sa'adiyya, and Abubakar Kawaje, are simultaneously involved in banditry, terrorism, kidnapping for ransom, illegal arms dealings, cattle-rustling, and illegal mining. Each kingpin controls mining sites within their sphere of influence (personal communication with M. A. Rufa'i, July, 2024).

Armed groups initially hired to protect mining sites evolved into dominant actors. They use forced labour, intimidation, and violence to sustain mining operations. Interviews with artisanal miners revealed that many of them work under coercive conditions, temporarily abducted and compelled to mine under armed surveillance (personal communication with S. Mamman, June, 2025). The reason people are being chased out of their villages isn't random. It's a plan. Armed groups want those lands empty so they can dig for gold without anyone getting in their way. And they aren't doing it alone, they have rich and powerful people backing them from the shadows, helping them profit from it all.

In Maradun, Anka, Bukkuyum and other places where mining is taking place, every day, you see number of motorbikes riding

deep into the bushes. According to an interview with a community member (personal communication with Halliru, 10 May, 2026), they are going to buy gold and other precious metals straight from these fighters.

Despite the humongous ransom money a notorious bandits' leader, Kachalla Dansa'adiyya is making from his kidnapped victims, he also controls mining activities in his area of influence which extends in Maradun, Bungudu and Kaura Namoda. An artisanal miner who used to mine gold in Dansa'adiyya's controlled fields, but later transferred his business in Karshi, Abuja, told me that, Dansa'adiyya used communities and artisanal miners as force labourers to extract gold and other precious metals for him, for onward sales to unknown buyers (Personal communication with Sani Mamman, 15th May, 2025).

1.9.2 Gold-for-Arms Exchange and Transnational Trafficking

Illegal gold from Zamfara is smuggled through porous borders into the republics of Niger, Chad, and Mali in exchange for illicit arms. A video interview given by Basharu Altine Guyawa, a security expert noted that bandit kingpin Halilu Sububu (killed in 2025) likely traded illegal gold in the Republic. Sububu and his commanders, Shehu Rekep and Abubakar Kawaje transported arms from North Africa via Chad and Niger using camels (Rufa'i, 2024).

1.9.3 Use of Explosives and Community Complicity

A video clip posted on A. Rabo Multimedia Facebook page, dated, 18th April 2026 shown a commuter arrested by

the Zamfara State Community Protection Guards (CPG) carrying money and dynamite, an explosive used by bandits to blow up vehicles and in mining to fracture hard rock. The recovered items were destined for bandits and illegal miners in exchange for gold. This confirms the allegation of a nexus between banditry, illegal mining, and local informants. Insecurity persists despite government efforts because of such collusion.

1.10 Human Security Implications of Illegal Mining

1.10.1 Economic Security

Although illegal mining provides income for some artisanal miners, Nigeria loses substantial revenue through tax evasion and illicit mineral trade. The Federal Ministry of Mines and Steel Development (2023) estimated annual losses of approximately \$2 billion.

1.10.2 Food Security

Zamfara's slogan "Farming is Our Pride" has been undermined. Persistent insecurity around mining areas has displaced thousands of farmers; many have abandoned agriculture due to repeated attacks. Consequently, food shortages and rural poverty have intensified.

1.10.3 Health Security

Illegal mining has caused serious public health crises. The 2010 lead poisoning outbreak in Bagega and surrounding areas resulted in hundreds of child deaths. Médecins Sans Frontières (2012) reported that at least 4,000 children suffered lead poisoning from artisanal gold mining. Exposure to dust, chemical spills, heavy metals, and radiation continues to poison

workers and cause lifelong health problems.

1.10.4 Environmental Security

Illegal mining results in deforestation, land excavation, erosion, water pollution, and abandoned mining pits. Large pits left unfilled have caused deaths of humans and livestock. Human Rights Watch (2012) noted that the Nigerian government pledged nearly US\$5 million to clean up lead-contaminated areas. However, environmental rehabilitation costs remain a burden.

1.10.5 Community and Personal Security

Mining communities experience recurring attacks, kidnappings, sexual violence, forced displacement, and extortion by armed groups. Amnesty International (2023) reported over 2,000 abductions linked to mining site disputes in Zamfara (Jan–July 2023), as militants impose levies, seize sites, and buy arms. The proliferation of SALW further fuels inter-ethnic conflict, political instability, and national insecurity.

1.11 Illegal Mining, Money Laundering, and Transnational Crime

Illegal mining in Zamfara fuels transnational crime and money laundering. Conflict gold is laundered via informal trade, black-market dealers, and foreign markets. UNODC (2023) links illicit gold to terrorism financing and corruption. Dubai remains a key destination, where weak verification and Hawala systems hinder financial tracing.

This aligns with 2021 government findings that some BDC operators engaged in structured cross-border cash and gold

trafficking. The illicit network operates through a structured, end-to-end process as elaborated below:

1. Gold and Currency Smuggling Route
2. BDC operators used agents in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad.
3. These agents scavenged gold (raw and scrap) and also carried undeclared funds (usually CFA francs).
4. They transported the gold and CFA through those countries to the gold souk in Dubai, UAE.
5. Conversion in Dubai
Upon arrival in Dubai, the gold and CFA were converted into US Dollars and UAE Dirhams. These were then handed over to other agents of the same Nigerian BDC operators at the Dubai Gold market.
6. Domestic Transaction Arrangement (Without Travel)
7. From Nigeria, BDC operators scouted for Nigerian merchants travelling to Dubai who needed dollars or dirhams.
8. They exchanged the foreign currency for Naira (settling between them).
9. Some merchants were already in Dubai; transactions were done via phone.
10. The BDC operators instructed their local staff to receive cash or bank transfers in Naira from the merchants' Nigerian representatives.
11. Delivery of Foreign Currency in Dubai
12. Once the Naira payment was confirmed in Nigeria, the merchants in Dubai were directed to the BDC operators' agents to collect their Dollars or Dirhams.
13. The merchants that travelled to Dubai and collected these dirhams/dollars

would further transfer funds to various accounts of companies in Dubai, China and India in exchange for goods and services, which will subsequently be shipped to Nigeria. The circle, therefore, is complete.

This scheme bypassed formal financial channels and facilitated illicit cross-border

1.12 Government Responses and Policy Interventions

Nigeria launched initiatives and policies, including the Presidential Artisanal Gold Mining Development Initiative (PAGMI, 2021), Mining Marshals, a temporary ban on mining activities, mineral buying centres, a strengthened Mining Cadastre Office, and Forest Guards to reclaim the vast forests used by bandits as hideouts. However, weak enforcement, corruption, inadequate funding, and poor coordination undermine their effectiveness (World Bank, 2022).

1.13 Findings of the Study

Based on thematic analysis and the evidence presented, the following findings emerged:

1. A strong correlation exists between illegal mining and insecurity in Zamfara State.
2. Armed groups and bandit kingpins (e.g., Halilu Sububu, Dan-Sa'adiyya, Shehu Rekep, Abubakar Kawaje) actively participate in illegal mining and control mining sites.
3. Illegal gold trade is a major source of financing for banditry, terrorism, and arms trafficking (gold-for-arms).
4. Licensed big-term miners (with federal/state registration, paying royalties)

value transfer. Possible predicate offences involved in this chain of transactions include, but are not limited to, money laundering, terrorist financing, round-tripping, tax evasion, trade-based money laundering, illicit financial Flows, illegal mining, illicit cross-border value transfer, and unlicensed BDC operations.

sometimes employ non-state actors as security guards to protect their operations, thereby strengthening criminal networks.

5. Artisanal miners fall into three categories:

- i. Illegal/unregulated miners motivated by poverty, unemployment, and lack of economic opportunities (including educated graduates).
- ii. Unregulated but legally registered miners (e.g., Alhaji Naziru Danbaba, Sani Mamman, etc.) who hold licenses but operate with minimal oversight.
- iii. Opportunistic seasonal miners (farmers, women) who shift to mining during the rainy season for survival.

6. Weak regulation and poor enforcement enable criminal exploitation of the solid mineral sector.

7. Illegal mining has devastating human security consequences: displacement, food insecurity, environmental degradation, lead poisoning, and violence.

1.14 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following evidence-based policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen enforcement of the Nigerian Mining Act (2007) and prosecute illegal mining operators and sponsors.
2. Formalize artisanal miners through cooperatives and integrate them into legal frameworks under PAGMI, providing training and alternative livelihoods.
3. Deploy Mining Marshals and Forest Guards to vulnerable mining communities and forest reserves.
4. Establish mineral buying centres and processing facilities to improve transparency and traceability.
5. Enhance border surveillance and customs monitoring to curb gold smuggling and arms trafficking (collaborate with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon).
6. Investigate illicit financial flows linked to the gold trade and money laundering networks (NFIU, EFCC, Egmont Group of FIUs and Interpol).
7. Conduct public awareness campaigns about the dangers of illegal mining and environmental degradation.
8. Create employment opportunities and economic empowerment programmes to reduce youth involvement in banditry and illegal mining.
9. Implement environmental remediation and rehabilitation programmes (e.g., back-filling mining pits, lead clean-up) in affected communities.
10. Deepen regional cooperation with neighbouring countries to disrupt transnational smuggling networks (UNODC, 2023).

1.15 Conclusion

Illegal mining has become a major driver of insecurity in Zamfara and neighbouring North-West states, fuelling banditry, arms trafficking, environmental damage, and humanitarian crises. It is now a critical national security challenge, as armed groups control mineral resources to finance violence. Addressing this requires stronger regulation, security reforms, economic inclusion, accountability, and regional cooperation. Without decisive action, illegal mining will continue to undermine peace and development in Nigeria.

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