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# The criminal gold economy: governance, greed, and insurgency in Zamfara state

By Malik Samuel

March 2026



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## Executive Summary

This report examines how Zamfara State's gold resources have been integrated into a criminal political economy that sustains armed banditry, weakens governance, and deepens socio-economic and environmental vulnerability. Drawing on fieldwork conducted between September 2024 and February 2026 across multiple local government areas, the study analyses the evolution of the conflict, the structure of illegal mining networks, the role of state and non-state actors, and the effectiveness of government responses.

The findings show that artisanal mining began as a livelihood activity but expanded into a large, informal and largely unregulated sector due to poverty, unemployment, and state neglect. As gold prices rose and deposits were discovered in commercial quantities, armed groups moved to control mining sites, imposed levies on miners, and used the proceeds to finance weapons procurement, territorial expansion, and governance structures. This transformation coincided with a sharp increase in conflict-related fatalities in the state.

The case of Halilu Sububu illustrates the centrality of gold to the political economy of banditry. Control of mining sites provided revenue, authority over traditional institutions, access to transnational arms markets, and influence over other armed actors. Following his death, competition for control of mining assets generated violent succession struggles, after which new commanders re-consolidated the same resource-based system.

Despite the 2019 mining ban and the imposition of a no-fly zone, illegal mining continued. The ban primarily affected licensed companies while artisanal mining persisted because it remained the main livelihood for local populations. The policy also eliminated potential state revenue, strengthened informal actors, and enabled the capture of mining activities by bandits and politically connected individuals.

The research documents systemic corruption and collusion involving elements of the security sector, traditional authorities, and political actors. Security personnel were reported to tax illegal supply chains, participate directly in mining, or extort miners, thereby reinforcing the conflict economy rather than dismantling it. Traditional rulers were variously complicit, coerced, or incorporated into bandit governance structures.

The study also presents multiple testimonies suggesting interactions between helicopters and bandit-controlled areas, indicating the need for further investigation into possible external facilitation of the illicit gold and arms trade. However, these accounts remain evidentiary leads rather than conclusive proof.

Overall, the report demonstrates that the crisis in Zamfara is not solely a security problem but a governance and political-economy failure in which natural resources, illicit markets, and coercive authority are mutually reinforcing.

## Introduction

Zamfara State has become one of the most prominent theatres of Nigeria’s insecurity, not only because of the scale of violence but also because of the central role that natural resources now play in sustaining it. Over the past decade, the discovery and expansion of gold mining transformed what began as largely localised communal conflicts into a complex conflict economy in which armed groups, informal miners, political actors, traditional authorities, and transnational networks compete and collaborate for control of mineral wealth.

While the link between illegal mining and banditry is widely acknowledged in public discourse, there remains limited empirical analysis of how the gold economy is organised, who benefits from it, how it reshapes authority at the local level, and why state interventions have produced limited results. This report addresses these gaps by examining the governance structures, economic relationships, and coercive mechanisms that underpin mining in Zamfara.

The study situates the rise of banditry within the broader context of rural poverty, political neglect, the collapse of traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, and the militarisation of communal self-defence. It shows that the escalation of violence and the sharp increase in fatalities coincided with the period in which armed groups began to systematically capture mining sites and convert them into revenue-generating assets.

By combining field interviews with miners, community leaders, security actors, bandit associates, government officials, and gold dealers, the report analyses the interaction between livelihood imperatives, illicit markets, and patterns of authority. It also evaluates the impact of major policy responses – including the mining ban, the no-fly zone, military operations, and dialogue initiatives – on both the conflict and the mining economy.

Through this approach, the report argues that the Zamfara crisis is best understood as a governance and political-economy challenge in which gold has become a strategic resource for violent actors, rather than merely as a law-and-order problem.



A signpost discouraging illegal mining in Maru, Zamfara state.

Source: Malik Samuel – GGA Nigeria

## Methodology

This study is based on qualitative field research conducted by GGA in Zamfara State and complementary remote interviews carried out from Abuja. Fieldwork was undertaken during two periods – September to October 2024 and October 2025. Owing to security constraints and the inaccessibility of several remote and bandit-controlled communities, respondents from such areas were relocated to the relatively safer urban centres of Anka, Gusau, and Maru local government areas, where interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. This approach enabled access to a broad range of perspectives while minimising risk to both participants and the research team.

The research relied primarily on key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants were purposively selected to capture the diversity of actors involved in or affected by the gold economy and the conflict. These included artisanal miners, gold dealers, mining licence holders, community leaders and members, traditional authorities, journalists, security personnel, local, state, and federal government officials, former and serving bandits, relatives of bandits, and logistics operatives involved in supplying armed groups. Respondents were drawn not only from communities within Anka, Maradun, Maru, Talata Mafara, Tsafe, and Zurmi local government areas of Zamfara state, but also from Zuru in neighbouring Kebbi State and the Federal Capital Territory, reflecting the trans-local and networked nature of the illicit gold economy.

To deepen and validate field-based insights, additional interviews were conducted by telephone between November 2024 and February 2026. These follow-up engagements allowed for clarification of emerging themes, tracking of developments – including leadership changes within bandit groups – and triangulation of sensitive claims, particularly those relating to supply chains, security sector conduct, and cross-border linkages.

Given the fluid security environment and the sensitivity of the subject matter, the study adopted strict ethical and safety protocols. Participation was voluntary, and the identities of respondents were withheld to protect their safety. Interviews were conducted in locations considered secure by participants, and information that could expose individuals or communities to retaliation was anonymised.

The analysis is based on triangulation of multiple sources, comparing testimonies across different categories of respondents and locations in order to identify patterns, corroborate accounts, and distinguish between verified trends and single-source claims. This approach was particularly important in assessing highly contested issues, such as the role of political elites, the conduct of security personnel, and allegations of external logistical support to armed groups.

While the methodology enabled access to otherwise hard-to-reach actors and provided detailed insight into the political economy of illegal mining, it also has limitations. Restricted access to some mining sites and forest enclaves meant that the research relied on mediated accounts from individuals with direct experience of those areas. In addition, the clandestine nature of illicit mining and arms trafficking makes quantitative estimation of production volumes, revenue flows, and the scale of external involvement difficult. Nevertheless, the breadth of stakeholders consulted and the consistency of narratives across independent interviews provide a robust qualitative basis for the report's findings and conclusions.

## Findings and analysis

### From resource-fuelled communal clashes to mounting deaths in Zamfara

The emergence of banditry in Zamfara state was tied to the socio-economic deprivation experienced in rural communities, exacerbated by political neglect. Until recently, the conflict was largely viewed as being fuelled by the animosity between the largely Hausa farming communities and pastoralist Fulani communities, especially over access to grazing and farming areas. The conflicts were historically managed and settled at community levels by community leaders, but over the years, community leaders increasingly were unable to settle these confrontations. As the conflicts escalated and the government was unable to stop them, communities resorted to arming their youths for protection. The activities of these vigilantes fuelled reprisal attacks, including the destruction of farmlands, rustling and killing of livestock, armed robbery, kidnapping and killing of people from rival communities, among others. Despite this escalation of violence, the rise in fatalities in the state has only been recent. For instance, between July 2011 and June 2017, insecurity in Zamfara state resulted in 802 deaths, according to the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker<sup>1</sup>. However, between July 2017 and July 2023, the state recorded 6,001 deaths, a 648% increase.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as global gold prices began to rise<sup>2</sup>, the focus of mining in Zamfara shifted significantly from tantalite to gold. Gold deposits in Zamfara state were discovered in significant quantities, and as the demand grew, informal mining practices became widespread. The rise in fatalities in the conflict in the state arguably coincided with the period (between 2017 and 2019) when armed groups began taking control of mining sites, imposing levies on miners, and controlling territories.

The government's lack of regulation and oversight during this period allowed for the proliferation of artisanal mining activities in the state, contributing to the emergence of a robust informal mining sector.



Source: Image supplied

Bandits working for Halilu Sububu oversee mining activities in Dan Kamfani, Zamfara state.

### Efforts in ending banditry in Zamfara state: kinetic versus non-kinetic approaches

The federal government and Zamfara state government have implemented both kinetic and non-kinetic approaches to address the conflict, with military operations targeting bandits and their hideouts being the most prominent approach. Two years after the state-wide ban on all mining activities in Zamfara, the federal government in 2021 declared the state a no-fly zone<sup>3</sup>. These measures were in response to allegations that private planes were ferrying gold out of the state and, in return, bringing in arms for bandits and other criminals.

1 Council on Foreign Relations: Nigeria Security Tracker: <https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>

2 Earn2Trade Blog: <https://www.earn2trade.com/blog/the-price-of-gold-over-the-years/>

3 Premium Times: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/446350-insecurity-buhari-declares-zamfara-no-fly-zone-restates-ban-on-mining-activities.html>

While the military action has not stopped the violence, it has succeeded in eliminating several notorious bandit leaders, with Halilu Sububu<sup>4</sup> the biggest casualty.

Non-kinetic approaches have largely been deployed by the state government, with dialogues and negotiations being the most used approaches. The first such effort was in 2016, when the state government and some bandit groups agreed to a ceasefire and the surrendering of arms in exchange for development<sup>5</sup>. The initial success was short-lived due to the breakdown of trust between the government and the bandits and the involvement of splinter bandit groups, who refused to be part of the peace process. The next effort and the most publicised was the 2019 process when the new state governor called for dialogue. This also failed reportedly because of a lack of trust, failure of the government to meet some demands from the bandits and the withdrawal of some bandit groups from the process, resulting in the escalation of attacks.

### Despite the ban, illegal mining continued unabated

Artisanal mining in Zamfara initially began as a livelihood activity. However, over time, as more gold deposits were discovered in the region, informal mining turned into a more profitable but unregulated industry. The transition to illegal mining activities was fuelled by socio-economic neglect and high unemployment rates, which prompted many residents to seek income through mining, especially with Zamfara ranking as one of the 10 poorest states in Nigeria<sup>6</sup>.

With respect to insecurity, the federal government first placed a ban on all mining activities in the state in 2019. Despite the ban, artisanal mining did not stop. The only people affected were companies and licence owners because the government could easily identify them and revoke their licences if they violated the order. For community members, especially young men, artisanal mining remains an essential source of income and means of livelihood, particularly in mining-rich local government areas such as Anka, Maru, and Bukkuyum. Miners explained that they depended on mining

because there were no other economic opportunities available. Many of them said they were unemployed, and mining was often the only means to support their families. All miners and state government officials who spoke to GGA said neither the state nor the federal government could stop mining without providing alternative sources of livelihood for the people.

Miners recounted how artisanal mining was once highly profitable, with some claiming they earned up to ₦200,000 per day (\$547 by the exchange rate then) before the proliferation of banditry in 2019. However, the situation has drastically changed, with miners now earning significantly less, often due to the demands made by bandits who control the mining sites. Many say they now struggle to make ₦20,000 per day (\$12)

In parts of Maru and Talata Mafara, where bandits do not control all mining, miners operate independently or under informal employment arrangements with influential individuals. Before the ban, in Maru, for example, those interviewed said around 80% of miners were independent, while 20% worked under informal employment arrangements with companies. Under this arrangement, the employer provided all the necessary mining equipment and, in return, took a significant share of the finds. Typically, arrangements with companies involved a sharing formula, where the companies took 70% of the output while the miners received 30%.

In some cases, the miners were allowed to sell their 30% to any dealer, while in other instances, they were obligated to sell exclusively to their employers but at the prevailing and verifiable market rate. With the ban, the role of companies was taken over by wealthy individuals who operated covertly.

In Anka, according to the miners, it was an open secret that during the ban all major mine sites in the local government were controlled by bandits. Respondents detailed how the bandits forced miners to work for them, collecting 90% of the gold-bearing gravel and leaving the miners with only 10%. The practice has continued even with the lifting of the ban in December 2024<sup>7</sup>.

4 Punch: <https://punchng.com/naif-kills-terrorist-kingpin-halilu-sububu-38-others/>

5 International Crisis Group: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>

6 Punch Newspaper: <https://punchng.com/10-poorest-states-owe-over-n1tn-provide-govs-jumbo-package/>

7 Good Governance Africa: <https://gga.org/can-nigeria-stop-bandits-from-exploiting-zamfaras-minerals/>

The presence of security forces in communities during the ban did little to deter mining activities; in fact, the enforcement of the ban was highly inconsistent, often influenced by sporadic and intermittent raids by security agents<sup>8</sup> and accusations of corruption and informal arrangements between miners and security agents. Those interviewed even mentioned how soldiers at checkpoints would allow gold-bearing gravel to be transported in exchange for N2,000 (\$1.5).

**Illegal gold mining and insecurity: following Halilu Sububu’s footsteps**

Around 10 September 2024, Nigerians were greeted by the news of the death of the most powerful and most influential bandit leader, Halilu Sububu, in Zamfara state. With many bandit leaders killed previously and afterwards, perhaps not even the military knew the extent of Halilu’s influence on the banditry landscape in Northern Nigeria.

The 38-year-old terrorist’s operations exemplified the linkages between illegal gold mining and insecurity in Zamfara state. His control over mining sites provided him not only with financial power but also significant influence over local communities, traditional authorities, and other bandit leaders. His ability to access international markets for gold and arms showed that the implications of illegal mining extend beyond Zamfara or northwest Nigeria, impacting security across the Sahel region. Miners, community leaders and community members told GGA that Halilu controlled virtually all the major mining sites in Anka local government – Dan Kanfani, Kawaye, Bagega, Daretu, Tamani, and Mai Galma. Young men from different communities were forced to work for him, while some willingly participated because they had no other livelihood options.

Halilu’s rise to power was deeply rooted in three factors. He “inherited” criminality, as he was born into a family with a legacy of banditry<sup>9</sup>. His father and grandfather reportedly were bandits. Secondly, he ran a major arms trafficking business that placed him as the source of weapons for other bandits, including the notorious Bello



Source: Idris4Peace / x.com

Notorious bandit leader Halilu Sububu, who was killed by the Nigerian military in September 2024.

Turji. Third, Halilu possessed vast wealth got from his illegal mining and gunrunning.

GGA interviewed Halilu’s uncle, Shehu, best known as Usmanu, who came to Anka from Maradi in Niger Republic to commiserate with the family following his death. According to the uncle, under whom Halilu grew up and had his Tsangaya education in Borno state, the family’s origins traced back to Mali, from where Halilu’s great-grandparents migrated to Maradi. His parents eventually migrated and settled in Zamfara, where he was born in 1986. This transnational heritage provided Halilu with extensive cross-border connections, which he leveraged to further his criminal activities.

“Sometimes I heard him speaking with his boys and they would talk about which weapons they got from Algeria and which ones they got from Libya. I know that he took gold

<sup>8</sup> The raids were usually not deep in the forest where bandits controlled mining sites, but in areas dominated by youths and other community members.  
<sup>9</sup> Premium Times: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/653658-investigation-inside-illegal-mining-operations-of-notorious-nigerian-terrorist.html?tztc=1>

to Algeria and Libya, which he exchanged for weapons or money”, Shehu told GGA. Other miners said it was normal to hear bandits, who guarded the mines, also talking about Halilu’s trips to Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.

After completing his Koranic education and returning to Zamfara, Halilu, then in his early teens, learnt of the death of his father, who had been killed by local vigilantes. According to the uncle, he was a normal kid until hearing news of his father’s death. “(Halilu) swore in my presence that he would become a bandit and also vowed that people would pay for his father’s death”<sup>10</sup>.

As a bandit leader, Halilu operated initially in the Shinkafi local government area, but around 2018, he became aware of gold mining in Anka and moved first to Wuya district. In 2020, he overpowered and displaced the bandit leaders in Bagega and Kawaye, effectively taking control over all the lucrative mining sites in the local government area. Bagega also provided him with a major market for the sale of rustled livestock and the sourcing of supplies<sup>11</sup>. A community leader and researcher, who interviewed Halilu in 2023, said Halilu expressed regret for wasting his time and efforts on kidnapping and cattle rustling when he could have made more money from mining. According to the community leader, Halilu had just returned from Libya two days before their meeting. In addition to marrying from Mali, Halilu reportedly recruited men from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Once he took control of mining in the local government, Halilu used force and threats to ensure miners handed over a significant portion of their findings. In many instances, he mandated that miners worked exclusively for him for entire days, with everything extracted during that time belonging to him. On other days, he took nine in every 10 ‘solo’<sup>12</sup>, leaving the miners to share a solo. He had his men who would wash the crushed gravel to extract the gold. The gold was then melted into different shapes for him. These mining operations provided Halilu with the

revenue necessary to build his influence and power across northwest Nigeria. The proceeds were not merely for personal enrichment; they played a crucial role in funding his criminal enterprise.

He operated with impunity, commanding loyalty from at least 15 district heads in Anka and Maru local government areas. As shadow rulers in these local governments, the district heads prioritised his orders over those of the emirs because if they disobeyed his orders, the emirs could not protect them from him<sup>13</sup>. He would send messages to district heads or village heads, ordering them to send certain numbers of young men who would work in the mine sites or his farms<sup>14</sup>. If the number of those sent fell short of his demand, he could execute any of those sent and then send a message and warning to the community leader to make up the numbers.

After Halilu’s death, a power vacuum ensued, which led to bloody and deadly infighting among his commanders vying for control over his criminal empire, including his possessions and the lucrative mining sites<sup>15</sup>. Influential bandit leaders from northwest Nigeria led by Ado Alero waded in to prevent the infighting from escalating. Ali Kwale, popularly called Najaja, was given interim control of operations, pending the audit and distribution of his possessions, while Halilu’s younger brother, Mati, was placed in charge of his assets – gold, cattle, cash, and weapons. Another commander called Dullu, who refused to accept Najaja’s installation, was allowed to carve out his own group and location. After six months, around March 2025, Najaja was relieved of his control and Mati was installed as Halilu’s successor<sup>16</sup>. With the position came the control of one of the most lucrative gold mining sites in Dan Kamfani, deep inside the forest. Shortly after his installation, Mati reestablished connections with Halilu’s gun suppliers from Algeria<sup>17</sup>.

Mati himself would later be displaced by Muhammad Gwaska, the current most powerful bandit in Anka.

10 GGA interview with Shehu ‘Usmanu’ in Zamfara, October 2024

11 GGA phone interview with local researcher based in Anka, December 2025

12 A term used by miners to describe a 100kg sac containing the gold-bearing gravel.

13 GGA interview with a palace official in Anka, October 2024.

14 Most of these farms were confiscated from villagers

15 Sources close to the commanders jostling to succeed Halilu all said he left behind enormous wealth – cash, livestock, grains, and gold. According to one source, he, the source, was aware of three 5-litre containers all filled with melted gold that Halilu left behind. This was separate from the more-than 2,000 unprocessed solo he also left behind.

16 This did not sit well with Najaja, resulting in bad blood between the two. Mati had Najaja killed after a couple of months when Najaja tried to take control of mining activities in Bagega.

17 During a visit to Bawar Daji, GGA Nigeria’s local fixer saw two visitors, who Mati confirmed were from Algeria and were part of Halilu’s weapons supply contacts, and he had only recently been reconnected with them. They brought him weapons, which value was paid in gold.



Source: supplied

Gold nuggets and gold bars found at Halilu Sububu's residence.

Gwaska, a militant figure originating from Dan Gulbi in Maru LGA, now exercises significant control over mining activities in Anka<sup>18</sup> on behalf of Ado Alero<sup>19</sup>, consolidating his authority over villages spanning at least six of the local government's 14 districts – Bagega, Kawaye, Wuya, Yar Matankari, Bawar Daji, and Sabon Birni – and making him the most influential bandit actor in the area. Other commanders such as Mai Doguwa and Kolo overseeing territories including Makakari, Krisa, Tamani, Gargam, Tarinjaya, Kwanar Maje, Galadi, and Gadar Manya villages, report directly to Gwaska, who in turn reports to Ado Alero. Gwaska has maintained a continuous presence in Anka since September 2024, when he accompanied Ado Alero to pay condolences to the family of the late Halilu.

### The mystery helicopter 'supplying' bandits in Zamfara's gold-rich forests

When, in March 2021, Nigeria's National Security Adviser, Babagana Monguno, announced the enforcement of a no-fly zone in Zamfara state, it was in response to allegations that private aircraft, mostly helicopters, and foreign nationals were involved in the illegal gold mining trade and the supply of weapons to bandits<sup>20</sup>. The National Security Council meeting where the decision was taken was presided over by the late former president, Muhammadu Buhari, underscoring the significance of the decision.

Despite these allegations and the government's decision, there was never any proof or corroboration of the sighting

<sup>18</sup> His involvement in banditry dates back to 2011 in Dan Gulbi under the command of Dogo Gide, who jointly dominated the Dan Gulbi and Dansadau areas with Buharin Daji during a period when banditry largely revolved around cattle rustling and the destruction of farmlands. At the time, rustling initially targeted Hausa-owned cattle – based on the notion that the Hausa had no right to large herds if they were not Fulani – before expanding to include Fulani cattle. Over time, Gwaska aligned himself with Ado Alero, with whom he has remained closely connected. Following the death of Halilu, Ado Alero deployed him to his current area of operation, where he now effectively oversees mining on Alero's behalf. Alero is widely believed to have acquired vast wealth through these activities, and Gwaska maintains networks of loyal fighters across Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, Niger, and Kwara states.

<sup>19</sup> A bandit leader, who, since the death of Halilu Sububu, has risen to become a rallying point for bandits in northwest and parts of northcentral Nigeria.

<sup>20</sup> The Nation: <https://thenationonline.net/helicopters-dropping-weapons-food-for-bandits/>

of a helicopter in bandit-controlled forests. The arrests of Chinese<sup>21</sup> and other nationals, notably from West Africa, operating illegally in the mining sites in Zamfara, have been the only evidence and indication that gold was being smuggled out of the state and the country.

This was not the first time an allegation was made of the presence of helicopters supplying non-state actors with weapons and other support. Similar unproven allegations were made with the Boko Haram conflict in the Northeast<sup>22</sup>. So, when it was repeated in the Northwest, there were scepticisms<sup>23</sup>.

This author previously heard these allegations, particularly in Zamfara state, but the information was from victims of banditry. So, the author assumed they mistook military helicopters on official assignments for helicopters supporting bandits.

However, following interviews with bandit logistic operatives, members of a bandit gang, a senior bandit leader, soldiers engaged in the fight against banditry, and a local researcher who has interviewed several bandit leaders, GGA strongly believes there may be some truth worth further research into the allegations of helicopters interacting with bandits, especially in the gold-rich forests of Anka local government area. During these separate interviews, there were overwhelming confirmations of the presence of helicopters on multiple occasions in Anka forest and along the border between Kebbi and Zamfara states.

A bandit logistics operative, while responding to a question about the challenges of working for bandits, explained an experience with a helicopter that left him sick and bedridden for a week. According to the man, he was summoned from Makakari village by Halilu Sububu's men<sup>24</sup> in 2023 and sent to go pick up some items somewhere in Unashi, a community in Danko Wasagu local government area of Kebbi state near the border with Zamfara. As usual, he was not told what he was picking up or from whom. He was simply given a motorcycle, with three bandits as escorts<sup>25</sup>. He explained that when they arrived at the

location, there was a green helicopter. The helicopter did not land because there was no place to do so. So, items were dropped from the helicopter using a rope. He would untie the rope from the items, and the rope would be pulled back up to offload more. The bandit-escorts waited from a distance. When he was done, the helicopter left, and he loaded the items on his and the bandits' motorcycles and returned to Anka. Among the items were 20-litre jerrycans containing ammunitions, and cartons with rifles.

"There was so much dust (caused by the propeller), and this affected me. I spent one week sick because I bled from the nose and had difficulty breathing. They (bandits) kept me in a hut and brought a doctor who treated me," he explained, adding that he was also often sent to pick up items from individuals in other locations and was usually paid a fixed fee of N15,000 (\$11) per rifle and N200 (2 cents) per bullet if the items were weapons. Two members of a bandit group interviewed by GGA both said they had seen helicopters landing in their areas inside the forest in Anka, with one saying the helicopter also came two days before our interview, bringing fuel in jerrycans, food items and cooking gas, with all the items meant for their boss. This individual had worked for Halilu and said he started seeing helicopters during his time with the late bandit leader, adding that he had seen helicopters more than seven times in the forest, with the passengers usually covering their faces.

"Sometimes when we see it (helicopter), we run away, and our friends would laugh at us, calling us cowards. Sometimes we run because of the dust it causes," one of the men stated, describing the helicopter as having a green colour.

In interviews with GGA's local fixer, a top bandit leader both confirmed his interactions with a helicopter and suggested that the aircraft is flying from within Nigeria. In three of the five short interview sessions, the bandit leader talked about the helicopter. In the first session, he was surprised by the question, especially coming from the fixer, if an aircraft had ever come to the forest. "Why are you asking me if an aircraft had come here? Were you not here

21 Punch: <https://punchng.com/police-arrest-illegal-chinese-gold-miners-in-zamfara/>

22 Daily Trust: <https://dailytrust.com/investigation-no-evidence-planes-drop-arms-for-gold-in-zamfara/>

23 Ibid.

24 While he worked for Sububu, the man claimed never to have spoken to him or got instructions directly from him. He said Halilu's men would call him to the camp and give him instructions from "Mai Gida" (the boss)

25 Those assigned to escort him, according to the man, were Dan Duna, Bakin Mallam and Jiji. While the last have been killed, Dan Duna now operates in Dansadau local government area in Zamfara state.

one time when the aircraft was here, and I told you that those two people in the aircraft were from Illela<sup>26</sup>? So, what sort of question are you asking me?” the bandit leader said, with the fixer responding that he had to ask because it was part of the interview questions given to him<sup>27</sup>.

In the second session, the bandit leader refused to be specific about what the helicopter came to do, what it brought or where it came from. Instead, he simply referred to *kaya* (goods in Hausa) as what the helicopter brought. In the third session, he was pressed again about the origin of the aircraft, if he paid for the deliveries and how much, and how he was able to tell if the aircraft did not belong to security forces.

He appeared uncomfortable with these questions and threatened to end the interview if the fixer focused on the issue of aircraft. The fixer reminded him that he had promised to speak more during the last session. So, it was agreed that his responses to these questions would be the last on the issue of aircraft.

“What business do I have with paying for the aircraft. The only thing I give them is meat. I have never thought of paying them. I can’t tell you where the aircraft is coming from, but you know that this type of aircraft cannot travel very far. So, you know it must be coming from Nigeria”, he explained, adding, “I had never been near an aircraft before the day it came to our area, and I do not know where it comes from, let alone how I would locate or pay those who operate it. The aircraft that comes to our area is different from those used by the security agencies, and we can recognise this from its appearance. The military’s aircraft, which bombs our location, has the colour of khaki, while that of the police is very neat and clean and is painted blue. The one that comes to us, however, has no such paints at all. It has long blades and two engines. When we see that the aircraft coming is not the one that we know, we run and hide”.

After the interview, the fixer was taken and shown a place in the forest where the bushes and trees were cleared for the landing of the helicopter. The bandit leader’s response to the question of payment, whether in cash or gold, raises

further questions, especially as he refused to say if other people were paying for it to bring whatever it brings to the forest. If the only thing that he gives the helicopter operators is meat, then who funds and sends the aircraft? How is it paid for and why?

It is obvious that the bandit leader has another person(s) above him, who does not reside in the forest. He referred to this when asked in another interview if bandits were willing to engage in a peace process with the government. When asked if he would surrender his weapons as part of a peace process, he said that the decision was out of his hands. “You know that we are the leaders here (forests), right, but we<sup>28</sup> also have leaders ahead of us”, he noted, while also refusing to say who these leaders were or where they were based.

His response about payment to the helicopter operators fits with the response of the logistic operative that was sent by Sububu to Unashi. He too said he was not given any money to deliver to the helicopter operators but simply asked to go pick up the supplies. This suggests that prior arrangements must have already been made before the helicopter made the trip to Unashi.

A top military source reported receiving intelligence in 2021 that helicopters were delivering arms and other supplies to bandits in Northwest Nigeria. The source, who was deployed in Zuru, Kebbi State, at the time, stated that the information was provided by a top repentant bandit who became a military informant. According to this account, the deliveries occurred in the Unashi area of Kebbi State and in the Bagega forest in Zamfara State.

However, the unit commander declined to incorporate this intelligence into the formal situation report submitted to the Commanding Officer (CO). The source attributed this decision to concerns that formally reporting the claim would trigger follow-up directives from the CO requiring the team to verify the information through additional surveillance and ground operations in Unashi to obtain identifying details, including tail numbers of the aircraft. The unit commander reportedly said he was not willing to undertake such an “operationally high-risk” task.

<sup>26</sup> Illela is a local government in Sokoto sharing borders with Niger Republic.

<sup>27</sup> The fixer had told GGA Nigeria before the interview that he had seen a helicopter in the forest in Anka and that the bandits loaded plenty fried and roasted meat for the people in the helicopter.

<sup>28</sup> He was referring to other bandit leaders as well. The question asked him was if bandits, not just his group, would be willing to participate in the peace process.

### The challenges of curbing illegal mining and the role of security forces in banditry

Stopping illegal mining in Zamfara presents significant logistical, socio-economic, and political challenges. The remote and often inaccessible locations of mining sites make it extremely difficult for government officials to enforce any form of regulations. Several mining sites are spread across different local government areas of the state, with major mining activities concentrated in Anka, Bukkuyum, and Maru. Many of these sites are in areas plagued by insecurity, making regulation more challenging.

Furthermore, the economic importance of mining to the local population presents a major hurdle. Illegal mining is often the only source of livelihood for many individuals and households, as emphasised by miners from both Anka and Maru who noted that they mine because they are unemployed and need to support their families. A senior state government official also pointed out that mining is the only livelihood that many people in these areas know; even if they are chased away from one site, they will often return or find another place.

Security forces deployed to curb banditry in Zamfara have, in many cases, become complicit in the illegal activities they are supposed to prevent. Multiple accounts from miners, community members and logistics operatives for bandits indicate that security personnel, including soldiers and police officers, often exploit mining operations for their own benefit, contributing to the cycle of corruption and insecurity in the state.

Miners from Anka reported that soldiers who were deployed to prevent mining often ended up participating in the illegal activity themselves, either by taking over mining sites or forcing miners to dig for them. In one instance, the miners recounted that in July 2024, soldiers chased away bandits from a mining site in Abare in Anka, only to then compel the miners already working at the site to dig for them and at the end, giving the miners a meagre share of what they dug.

“(After chasing the bandits away), the soldiers asked six of my friends and me to mine for them. At the end of the day,

we got four solo. The soldiers gave us seven shovels (of gold-bearing gravel), so I complained that it was too small for us, who did the hard work. I explained to them that the bandits would give us 10% of whatever we dug, but one of the soldiers got angry and hit me in the head with the butt of his rifle”, one of the respondents explained before revealing a healing wound on the side of his head to the author.

Allegations of corruption are not limited to individual soldiers; it is a systemic issue that involves various security actors, including police and other security personnel. During a focus group discussion in Maru, miners accused the police of raiding mining sites, confiscating the gold and money they find and then accusing miners of collaborating with bandits. They added that those arrested and accused of supporting banditry are usually those who refuse to surrender their finds to the police because the policemen don’t declare or submit the seized gold or money at the police station.

Bandit logistic operatives explained that paying security forces at checkpoints makes it easy for them to get supplies to bandits – fuel, drugs, alcohol, food, and drinks.

“When I get to a checkpoint, the soldier there knows how much I pay him. If it is N5,000 (\$3.7), I give him, and he lets me pass. If it’s a police checkpoint, I pay N10,000 (\$7.3), sometimes N20,000 (\$14.7). I either pay or they seize my goods. At the vigilante checkpoint, I pay N10,000 (\$7.3),” one of the logistic operatives stated.

### Traditional rulers’ role in banditry

Influential political figures and traditional rulers have been accused<sup>29</sup> of deep involvement in illegal mining operations, making illegal mining more challenging to deal with. Some traditional rulers in Zamfara are believed to play significant roles in perpetuating illegal mining and, by extension, banditry. These rulers, who are supposed to act as custodians of their communities, have often found themselves complicit in illegal mining activities, either through direct involvement or by cooperating with bandit groups.

<sup>29</sup> According to respondents, a particular emir operated mining sites in his emirate with the help of foreign nationals, mainly Chinese. They claimed that a previous state governor wanted to dethrone the powerful emir for his link to banditry but could not because the emir was a friend of the late former president Muhammadu Buhari, who was then in power.



Source: supplied

GGA focus group discussion in Maru, a prominent Local Government Area (LGA) in Zamfara state, in October 2024.

The state government in 2021 suspended three popular traditional rulers – emirs of Maru, Dansadau and Zurmi<sup>30</sup>. In 2019, the state government, under the leadership of then-governor and current minister of state for defence, Bello Matawalle, set up a committee to investigate the root causes of banditry in the state. The 279-page report submitted by the committee was called *Security Report on the Root Causes of Armed Banditry in Zamfara State*. The report was neither made public nor implemented. According to state government officials who spoke to GGA, the report was a damning indictment of influential figures in the state, including the majority of the 17 emirs in the state.

Several respondents for this report mentioned a particular traditional ruler with an expansive palace built from the proceeds of illegal gold mining. According to the respondents, the Emir is so powerful that the former governor, with all the information at his disposal, could not sanction him. “He was a personal friend of former President Muhammadu Buhari, who even once facilitated access

to the president for a former governor of the state,” one respondent noted. Another respondent, a security agent, confirmed the involvement of the emir in illegal mining.

However, not all traditional rulers collaborate with bandit groups willingly. In Anka, for instance, miners mentioned that traditional leaders are sometimes forced to collaborate with bandits, especially when the bandits demand labourers from the communities to work in the mines. The leaders, fearing for their own lives and those of their community members, comply with these demands and select young men to work for the bandits.

Gifts of gold from bandits to traditional rulers further strengthen these alliances, creating a cycle of dependency and mutual benefit. These gifts are often presented after community leaders have complied with bandit demands for labour or other forms of support. Rejecting such gifts is not an option, as it could be perceived as disrespectful and provoke violent retaliation from the bandits.

30 Premium Times: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/467679-banditry-zamfara-set-to-implement-report-indicting-traditional-rulers-governor.html?tztc=1>

### The ban on illegal mining enriches individuals at the expense of the government

“Foreign entities abetted by local criminals who aspire to be petty warlords have drafted thousands of people into servitude to illegally mine gold and other resources. Billions of dollars meant to improve the nation now fuel violent enterprises. If left unchecked, they will threaten peace and place national security at grave risk” – President Bola Tinubu, September 2023<sup>31</sup>.

The above statement by President Tinubu at the 2023 United Nations General Assembly in New York showed the government’s concern about illegal gold mining fuelling insecurity in the country, notably in the northwest. This concern was what led his predecessor, Muhammadu Buhari, to ban all mining activities in Zamfara and also declare the state a no-fly zone because of accusations that illegally mined gold was being ferried out of the state.

The ban notwithstanding, insecurity in Zamfara state did not abate, nor did gold mining. The only difference was that license owners were the ones who bore the brunt. The license owners were the only ones who complied with the government’s ban because of fear of losing their license and possibly prosecution. Respondents confirmed that since the ban was placed, mining companies stopped operating in the state.

As already shown in this report, mining in Zamfara state is dominated by artisans, who all say it would be impossible to stop artisanal mining, because it is their major source of livelihood. Being unable to access their farmlands because of insecurity, they claim that engaging in mining is the only choice they have.

Illegally mined gold and that mined by artisans is usually bought by local dealers. The dealers are in different categories, depending on their resources. The first set is the small dealers, who are either based in the communities where the mining takes place or in the state capital, Gusau. One of these small dealers, who interacts directly with the miners, explained how the relationship works: “Sometimes,

the miners collect money from me before they head out to the mine sites. They usually spend days or weeks at the sites, and they need to give their families money before they leave. They also need money to feed themselves at the sites. So, they collect money from me with the understanding that the money will be deducted when we calculate the value of the gold they get before I pay.”

When the miners return from the sites, they notify their dealers and transactions are done. These dealers then sell to bigger and wealthier dealers, who are mostly indigenes of the state, with a few coming from other states and neighbouring countries, especially the Niger Republic. The big dealers take the gold to Sokoto, Kano, Maiduguri, or Abuja, from where it is sent on to either the Middle East or North Africa.

During the ban, the federal or state government may not have made any money from all the mining activities that took place in the state because, officially, mining did not take place in the state. This aligns with the allegation that 95% of gold is illegally mined in Nigeria, with the government not benefiting from the revenue accruing from it<sup>32</sup>.

“The loss of revenue to the state because of the ban is enormous. If mining were allowed and companies came in, you know they would have to register with the state revenue service, employ locals, pay income and other taxes and also empower the communities they would operate in. None of these exists because of the ban,” a senior state government official lamented before the lifting of the ban.

The Nigerian House of Representatives put the country’s losses from the mining sector at an estimated \$9 billion annually due to illegally mining<sup>33</sup>, while it is also reported that \$1.8 billion worth of gold in Nigeria is mined into private pockets<sup>34</sup>.

Nigerian private companies operating in Zamfara took a hit during the ban, with investments lying in ruins while the companies continued to bleed revenue. One such

31 Premium Times: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/627048-foreign-entities-illegally-mining-nigerias-gold-other-minerals-tinubu-tells-unga.html?tztc=1>

32 Presidential Artisanal Gold Mining Initiative (PAGMI): <https://nsia.com.ng/portfolio/presidential-artisanal-gold-mining-initiative-pagmi/>

33 Punch: <https://punchng.com/nigeria-losing-9bn-yearly-to-illegal-mining-reps-cttee/>

34 The Guardian: <https://guardian.ng/news/nigerias-1-8b-gold-reserves-mined-into-private-pockets/>

company is Cometstar Manufacturing Company Limited, which owns a mining licence to operate in Zamfara state. The company, according to its owner, Chief James Uduji, invested over N40 billion (\$29,350,280) to set up its mining operations in the state, and it was yet to commence operations when the ban took effect.

Despite the ban, Chief Uduji claimed that his company continued to pay the federal government an annual fee of N13 million (\$9,538) to retain his licence in the state. With the loss of revenue due to the lack of operation, and the pressure from the bank to service the loans collected to set up the operations, Chief Uduji considered moving his mining business out of Nigeria.

“If I had gone to Congo or any of the other African countries, by now the company would know how far it had gone (in operation) ... I will give the government till the end of this year. If nothing is done, I will relocate,” Chief Uduji complained two months before the ban was lifted. A year after the lifting of the ban, residents of Anka said the company has yet to restart operations.

## Recommendations

### For the federal government of Nigeria

- Immediate elevation of Zamfara to a priority state for the Presidential Artisanal Gold Mining Development Initiative<sup>35</sup> (PAGMI), ensuring its accelerated and fully-funded deployment. This requires establishing secure and accessible licensed buying centres in key local government areas like Anka, Maru, and Bukkuyum, while integrating a dedicated anti-corruption and security task force directly into PAGMI’s operations to shield the legal gold supply chain from bandit extortion and corrupt officials.
- Strengthen border security to limit the smuggling of gold and arms, ideally in collaboration with neighbouring countries.
- Crack down on corruption within security agencies, ensuring accountability for those found complicit in illegal mining operations.

### For the state government

- To dismantle the crisis, the state government must immediately release the report of the 2019 MD Abubakar’s ‘Security Report on the Root Causes of Armed Banditry’, act on its findings against complicit elites, and dedicate mining revenue to public works and retraining programmes that provide alternative livelihoods.

### For the private sector

- Licensed mining companies should prioritise ethical business practices for sourcing gold by establishing “Contractor-to-Partner” models with local artisanal mining cooperatives, providing them with equipment, safety training, and fair purchase agreements to legitimise operations, enhance safe productivity, and undermine the control of bandits.
- Concurrently, as a mandatory condition of their operational license, these companies must co-fund essential community development projects, such as clinics, schools, and water systems, in partnership with the government, directly remedying the systemic neglect that fosters local resentment and drives recruitment into criminal activities.

### For security agents

- The security strategy in Zamfara’s mining regions requires a complete transformation to dismantle criminal networks and state complicity. This demands a strict, enforced rotation of all security personnel to break corrupt local ties, and a shift in military doctrine from simple clearance operations to a sustained “Clear, Hold, and Develop” model. Under this model, clearing bandits must be immediately followed by securing the area with vetted units to facilitate the entry of government-led formalisation and livelihood programmes, preventing instant criminal recapture.
- Accountability must be enforced through transparent audits and prosecutions of complicit officers, while concurrently improving troop welfare to remove the economic incentives for corruption.

<sup>35</sup> State House: [https://statehouse.gov.ng/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-presidential-artisanal-gold-mining-development-initiative-pagmi/#:~:text=The%20Presidential%20Artisanal%20Gold%20Mining%20Development%20Initiative%20\(%E2%80%9CPAGMI%E2%80%9D\),deeper%20into%20the%20informal%20economy.](https://statehouse.gov.ng/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-presidential-artisanal-gold-mining-development-initiative-pagmi/#:~:text=The%20Presidential%20Artisanal%20Gold%20Mining%20Development%20Initiative%20(%E2%80%9CPAGMI%E2%80%9D),deeper%20into%20the%20informal%20economy.)

## Conclusion

The Zamfara conflict has evolved from communal disputes and livelihood insecurity into a complex resource-driven system in which gold functions as the financial backbone of armed banditry and a key mechanism of local power. The persistence of illegal mining despite bans and military operations underscores the structural nature of the problem: as long as mining remains the primary source of income for large segments of the population and governance remains weak, coercive actors will continue to dominate the sector.

Kinetic operations have succeeded in eliminating individual bandit leaders but have not disrupted the underlying economic networks that sustain violence. Leadership decapitation has instead produced cycles of succession, fragmentation, and reconsolidation around the same mining assets. Similarly, dialogue initiatives have failed due to mistrust, fragmentation among armed groups, and the absence of credible implementation of agreements.

The mining ban illustrates the unintended consequences of poorly sequenced policy: it removed formal operators, reduced state revenue, and strengthened criminal control while leaving the livelihood drivers of artisanal mining unaddressed. At the same time, the involvement or coercion of traditional authorities and the complicity of some security personnel have eroded public trust and blurred the distinction between state and non-state authority.

The evidence indicates that the gold economy in Zamfara is embedded in transnational supply chains for both minerals and arms, linking local violence to wider Sahelian illicit networks. Addressing the crisis, therefore, requires more than military action; it necessitates restoring regulatory governance over the mining sector, creating alternative livelihoods, dismantling protection networks, improving accountability within the security sector, and integrating local communities into formal economic structures.

Without restructuring the political and economic incentives that currently reward illegality and coercion, leadership changes among armed groups or periodic security operations will continue to produce only temporary and reversible gains.





Photo: Alexis Huguet / AFP

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