SUPPORTING STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT ON THE MINING DISASTER IN PRESTEA-NSUTA BY HONOURABLE OSEI KYEI-MENSAH-BONSU, MP FOR SUAME - 6 JULY, 2017

Mr Speaker, I am moved to offer a brief comment, especially with respect to what my Hon Colleague, Hon Terlabi indicated when he told us that we would have to regularise galamsey because so many people’s livelihood depend on it. Mr Speaker, I believe that it is a very weak argument. A few years ago, when this House was about to craft the Forest Resources Management Act, this same argument played out when we wanted to ban illegal chainsaw activities. There was the argument that so many people had returned from Nigeria with chainsaws and so if we deprive them they would go underground and fell the trees in the course of the night. So, we should license them to that.

Mr Speaker, in 1989, when there was the talk about allowing for small scale operations came up — Of course the Parliament of the Fourth Republic had not been born and it was a Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) decision — The issue that came out was the potential employment that it had to generate. Mr Speaker, you made an intervention when my Hon Colleague, Hon Terlabi, was resorting to the same argument. When you entered the fray to ask whether indeed we should discount the illegality, the havoc it is causing and play to the argument that it has been offering some employment. So, we should allow it.

Mr Speaker, very soon or if it is today that we are going to enact legislation about robbery, we have people who say to us that, so many people depend on it, so let us firstly find them an alternative employment before we begin to talk about banning or applying sanctions on thieves or robbers. Mr Speaker, I cannot understand why these things are playing up every now and then. Mr Speaker, I cannot really appreciate the rationalisation that people provide for this. What is illegal is illegal. I believe that the time has come for us as a nation to determine for ourselves whether we should even allow for surface mining in the first place. It started in Australia; they banned them and all of a sudden, they have found their way into Ghana.

Those people who started the activities in Australia were driven out; they found themselves in Ghana to begin the operations of surface mining as opposed to pit mining or underground mining which obtained in Ghana in the days of old. This is not only contributing seriously to the degradation of our lands — we are talking about deforestation, the threat to food security, pollution of water bodies, introducing destructive chemicals into our environment, introducing diseases that were otherwise unknown in our environment. Mr Speaker, the tragedy is that, the guys who go into the waterbodies to do this — and because of the introduction of those chemicals —

Today, we hear that miners from Burkina Faso are introducing cyanides in refining the gold. Mr Speaker, they stay in these waterbodies and after three, four or five months, they would have sores all over their bodies. They do not recognise the fact that, it is the chemicals that they are using in those waterbodies that is affecting them and they begin to recline to witchcraft and say that their grandmothers and grandfathers in their houses are the ones afflicting them with those
diseases. Mr Speaker, we all know that, the cyanides and the mercury have the potential of causing cancer. I shudder to think what may happen to us as a country if we do not stop these illegal activities of galamseyers.

In the next 20 years, we would see the invasion of cancers in almost every home. Mr Speaker, in the Ashanti Region where I could attest to, and portions of the Central Region that feed on the Pra River and the Offin River — the application of alum would not be able to treat the mercury. So, after collecting those waters in the dams and in the water impoundments, they are piped to our various homes and we drink them. Mr Speaker, 20 years from now we would not know what would afflict this nation — and people are saying that we should find alternative employment before we begin to talk about banning galamsey activities.

Mr Speaker, I believe that we should be careful where we want to take this debate to. The Constitution is loud and clear in article 257(6) that all such minerals belong to all of us; to the State and they are to be vested in the President. Mr Speaker, what tax do these galamseyers pay to this country? They win, smuggle them out, many of the Chinese and Indians buy them and smuggle them out of the country without paying any tax. So, how does the country benefit from that even though the Constitution is loud and clear that all such minerals in their natural forms belong to the State and all of us should benefit from that. We are talking about solid minerals and if the argument is stretched, tomorrow, a private individual would bring some drills, mount it on the sea and say that he had discovered oil —galamsey in oil. Mr Speaker, what would we say? That we should provide that person with an alternative livelihood before we ban them. Mr Speaker, we should be careful where we are taking this argument.

I believe that unfortunate as this situation is — I hear people say that when we thought Hon Peter Amewu had declared war on galamsey, we thought that he would succeed in ridding the nation of galamsey activities overnight. So, people are saying that they woke up to the news of rude shock. Mr Speaker, I cannot understand this. Is anybody by any stretch of imagination saying that, these galamsey activities started yesterday? Mr Speaker, I believe that as a country we should wise up. What happened recently when we lost the life of Maj. Mahama — we thought that should help us to put these things behind us.

Unfortunately, we are all waking up to the reality that people are operating behind the curtains. We have heard that in some cases, the people decide not to operate in broad day light. They go there in the night fully armed and if anybody dares them, they shoot at random. What are we doing? We have District Assemblies operating in these areas and some of them are the people who have granted licenses to them. We have some Ministers who have granted licences without seeking ratification from Parliament. Mr Speaker, I believe we should look at this comprehensively and decide for ourselves as a nation. I would want to believe that, with these illegal mining activities, open cast mining, at the end of the day, if we do proper computation, it does not add value to our development in any way. I believe the earlier we stop it, the better it would be for us as a nation. Let us descend on them strongly, regardless of whatever anyone might say.
Mr Speaker, those days, I believe some ten to fifteen years ago, when we were dealing with the Forest Resources Management Act, we talked about illegal felling of trees, particularly, up country. People said that, already, the people there were impoverished, and if we stopped them from burning the charcoal, they would not have any meaningful livelihood. Burkina Faso has drier vegetation than the northern sections of Ghana, yet Burkina Faso has banned charcoal burning. We cut down the few trees that we have up North and ship them to Burkina Faso. What kind of havoc are we causing to our environment all in the name of providing employment?

Mr Speaker, so, I share the sentiments expressed by Hon Colleagues. This should be a wake-up call to all of us and strengthen our resolve as the Hon Inusah Fuseini said. It should strengthen the resolve of this nation to quicken our steps to completely ban these illegal activities of illegal miners and indeed, as I have said, have a second look at open cast mining, whether or not it is adding to the developmental agenda of this country.

Mr Speaker, I thank you for the space.