

**Joint Press Statement by Mutare Civil Society Organisations on government ban on riverbed mining**

The Centre for Research and Development (CRD) in collaboration with Penhalonga Youth Development Trust (PYDT), Penhalonga Residents and Ratepayers Trust (PRRT), Penhalonga Service Delivery Committee (PSDC), Arda Transau Relocation Development Trust (ATRDT), Zivai Community Empowerment Trust (ZICET) and Chimanimani Development Trust (CDT) received government announcement on Tuesday 20 August 2023 to ban riverbed mining with skepticism. We are civil society groups and residents trusts working in resource rich communities in Manicaland Province such as Penhalonga, Odzi and Chimanimani where riverbed mining is taking place. We have strongly recommended against riverbed mining from its onset in the Province in 2010. Mining in the river degrades water sources, contaminates aquatic ecosystems with chemicals, destroys natural riverbanks and increases the risk of flooding and loss of properties among other adverse impacts. In 2014, we applauded government for positively responding to our call to suspend DTZ mechanized alluvial gold mining in Mutare river. We thought our right to environmental health had been upheld when government went further to enact statutory instrument (SI) 92 of 2014 that banned alluvial mining in rivers in Zimbabwe. In 2018, we were however taken aback when government issued SI 258 of 2018 that legalised riverbed mining by repealing progressive clauses in section 2 and 3 of SI 92 of 2014. We saw the resumption of riverbed mining activities in the Province characterized by opaque mining licensing that included granting of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) certificates without public consultation. As representatives of communities adversely impacted by riverbed mining, we continued to exert pressure on government to review its decision on mining in the rivers and also national parks. Again government responded by making a cabinet announcement on 8 September 2020 banning mining in parks and riverbed. However, government's commitment to the ban proved otherwise when it issued SI 104 of 2021 to confer responsible government minister powers to authorise alluvial mining on riverbed in exceptional circumstances.

Our communities have been witnessing worst riverbed mining practices following the alterations of the law such as allowing riverbed mining in "exceptional circumstances". Various syndicates of mechanised gold mining cartels that are fronted by Chinese persons have invaded sections of Muchira, Chisengo and Haroni rivers in Chimanimani. Their mining activities have been causing water pollution and destroying the rivers' ecosystem at a large scale, denying the right of thousands of people and livestock to clean water in communities such as Rusitu, Muchadziya, Hlabiso, Kurwaisimba and Botero in Chimanimani district. Similarly, in Mutare and Mutasa districts worst water pollution caused by mining cartels extracting gold in Mutare and Odzi Rivers has been deeply affecting communities in Penhalonga, Premier Estates, Odzi and others downstream. These cartels are law unto themselves. In Penhalonga riverbed mining for instance, we discovered that the cartels have frequently defied orders from regulatory authorities such as Environmental Management Agency (EMA) Ministry of Mines and Mutasa Rural District Council to stop their illegal mining operations from as far as August 2023. These cartels do not have mining licences and EIA certificates. Last month state security under Joint Operation Command (JOC) embarked on an operation code named "No to illegal Gold Mining" to flush out these illegal gold mining activities in Mutare River. A total of 90 accused persons were arrested and mining equipment seized according to Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) officer commanding Manicaland Province. The operation was in response to a letter of complaint by residents of Penhalonga Low residential area who feared losing their properties to potential flooding and ground collapse as a result.

of the mining impacts. The mining activities are establishing in sections of Mutare river that are in close proximity to their residential areas in violation of section 31 of the Mines and Minerals Act. Unbelievably, these criminal operations resumed 3 days later in flagrant violation of the law. Without state protection of their rights to property, dignity, privacy, personal security and right to environmental safety and health, residents of Penhalonga low residential areas have been fighting running battles with the miners to save their properties from harm. What is also worrisome to residents is that a lot of Chinese nationals fronting these illegal mining ventures do not have working permits and are always running away from immigration officials. In April 2024 Chinese nationals extracting gold in Odzi river were arrested in Odzi for working without permits. Some were deported according to reliable sources. Only this week 3 more Chinese nationals operating in Mutare river were raided by immigration officials at a hiding place in Penhalonga low residential area and arrested. Some are likely to be deported. The right of residents to demand accountability for property damage and environmental rehabilitation cannot be guaranteed after these miners have been deported.

We also discovered that government renewed Zimgold fields Special Grant to prospect and mine alluvial gold in Mutare River in July 2024. The special grant does not have an approved EIA for Zimgold fields to start mining operations in Mutare river. Some of these mining syndicates claim that they have been subcontracted by Zimgold fields to mine in Mutare. These claims have been refuted by Zimgold fields according to regulatory sources. We have also discovered that these mining cartels are not paying levies to local authorities since their operations are illegal. We also found out from the local branch of Fidelity Printers that there were not receiving gold from these miners. Sources close to these mining activities and affected residents have fingered political elites from the governing party, namedroppers, securocrates and political party activists to be behind these illegal mining activities. Some of these actors have been actively seen on these mining sites according to these sources. The continuation of these mining activities in Penhalonga with impunity have triggered other citizens to take law into their own hands by establishing illegal hammer mills along Mutare river where they are stealing gold ore from Redwing Mine and processing it. Some are also searching for the alluvial gold in these rivers or digging along river banks.

From our findings, we are concerned with what seems to be the manipulation of statutory instruments on control of alluvial mining regulations by powerful elites to allow these mining syndicates to prevail and plunder mineral resources for personal benefits. Needless to mention that there are some riverbed mining activities running under the banner of serving national interests to avoid public accountability.

Against this background we demand government to demonstrate its commitment to end river bed mining by:

- Strengthening existing legal provisions on riverbed mining ban by reenacting section 3 of SI 92 of 2014 to ensure just application of the law on riverbed mining.
- Undertake environmental audits to fully comprehend the scale of destruction in affected rivers and hold those responsible for environmental crime accountable for rehabilitation.
- End all forms of political interference in gold mining activities to allow regulatory authorities to enforce compliance without victimization.
- Implore on Fidelity Gold Refinery (FGR) to enforce its responsible sourcing and management policy to ensure transparent and accountable sourcing of precious minerals. FGR must also ensure that gold industry complies with Money Laundering and Proceeds of Crime act (Chapter 9:24) among other legal provisions that combat illicit financial outflows.

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