

The safety factor

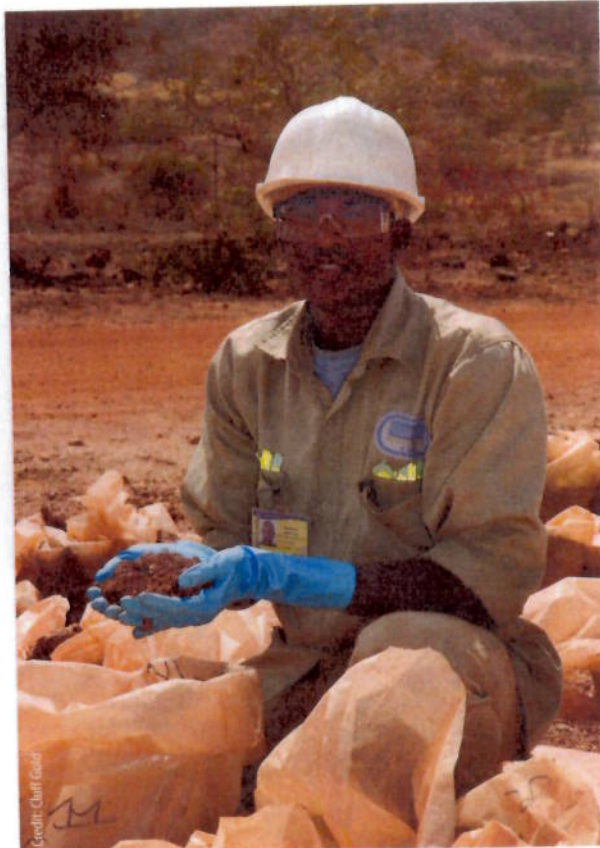
Mining companies venturing into West Africa

■ Alexandra Lopez-Pacheco

When Charles Taschereau worked on various mining projects in West Africa, including four years as vice-president and general manager of development and construction at IAMGOLD's Essakane Gold Mine in Burkina Faso, he quickly noted a lack of safety awareness among the workers. "Often, the workers hadn't worn shoes before – they wore flip flops – and they'd never worn hard hats or gloves," he says. "So, unlike in Canada where most of the employees have already worked in the industry and know the rules, you start with the basics: making sure they wear safety boots, gear and glasses."

Although there has been improvement in safety awareness with the rise in the number of large mining projects in West Africa, it remains an issue in the region. "In the past, there was very little focus on safety," says Chris Fell, regional manager – West Africa, for environmental and ground engineering consulting firm Golder Associates in Ghana. "I think that this was largely due to local people not having worked on large development and/or mining projects in the past. They were thus not exposed to safety issues and this did not really come into their day-to-day thoughts on how to conduct their work."

In theory, the lack of a culture of safety, combined with the fact that labour and safety standards vary across the region, could set off alarms when it comes to safety in West African mining operations. According to Paulo De Sa, manager, oil, gas & mining unit at The World Bank, to make matters worse, some



Examining samples of ore from crusher at Kalsaka

governments lack the capacity and willingness to carry out the necessary inspections and monitoring to enforce existing standards. But, for the most part, the reality on the ground is a very different narrative than what the alarms would indicate – at least when it comes to Western mining companies.

"Large companies that are listed on stock markets have to be careful," says De Sa. "They cannot be exposed to human rights complaints or labour law violations, because it will affect the performance of their stock. To a large extent, they impose the same standards everywhere in the world they work. They no longer limit themselves to complying with local laws and standards. But, the problem is with smaller

companies that don't have big pockets that cut corners because they're short of cash or under pressure to deliver returns to shareholders," De Sa adds. "But then, they suffer the consequences stemming from conflict situations with the workers and local populations."

At Canadian mining companies such as IAMGOLD, which has a zero harm vision, the perspective is not as much about self-regulating as it is about avoiding injuries and accidents. "If I were following all the best laws and rules in the world and injuring people, that wouldn't be acceptable," says Ross Gallinger, IAMGOLD's senior vice-president, health, safety and sustainability. "We don't want anybody hurt – that's really our objective. Whatever it takes to get to that zero harm aspect, we'll go over and above what's

there. But the true measure of your safety performance is whether people are getting hurt or not."

As a result, when it comes to the learning curve at its West African operations, which include the Essakane Mine in Burkina Faso and the Sadiola and Yatela mines in Mali, IAMGOLD puts considerable effort into safety training and awareness. "First of all, you need to have people understand what the hazards are and what the protection aspects are for those hazards, and try to get people to identify those themselves," says Gallinger. "It starts with a lot of supervision – helping them understand the hazards and the processes. That's what we would expect in a North American culture."

Training session: Dicko Abdoulaye (left) and Celestin Yameogo during a firefighting drill



Interestingly, says Taschereau, his experience in Burkina Faso was that in many ways, the workers were eager to learn. "It's easier than you would think to get buy-in, if you explain things very clearly, give the reasoning behind what you're saying and provide the training," he says, "there's no push-

back like you get in Canada when trying to implement a new rule."

Security, on site and off

If West African countries have a learning curve when it comes to safety, newcomer Canadian mining companies, with no experience in

volatile parts of the world, might have their own learning curve when it comes to security. "Most of the mines in northern Canada don't have fencing; they're very low security," says Taschereau. "Sometimes you'll see Canadians going into West Africa unaware of security needs."

Professional Master's Program in

MINERAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT



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Queen's Initiative

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Enrolment & Format

Class size will be capped at 50 students to foster a collaborative atmosphere and ensure a world-class learning experience. The program will be delivered in a modular format, divided into 3 two-month terms with breaks for major holidays. Classes will be taught by subject matter experts from around the world in 4 or 8-week modules within the term. Topics include surface and underground mine design, geology & deposit modelling techniques, mineral economics, mineral development management, environmental management and others, all with an unwavering focus on the safety & business concerns of the global mining industry.



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Golder ecologists, wearing the required protective equipment, undertaking an electrofishing census, as part of an EIA in West Africa

UK-based Cluff Gold, a pioneer in West Africa with mining operations in Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast, has on-site security at its operations. "You will need security on site in all of these countries, especially in the Ivory Coast with the recent political turmoil," says the company's spokesperson Carrie Lun.

Although IAMGOLD'S operations are in some of West Africa's most stable countries, the reality is that worker safety and security includes keeping a watchful eye on political stability. "We're constantly monitoring what's going on in the country in terms of what's happening," says Gallinger. "Again, we have procedures and infrastructure in place so that if there are demonstrations, riots, etc., we have a means of protecting our employees and crisis plans to deal with them if they do occur."

Creating the culture

In the meantime, Western mining companies are actually playing a role in creating a culture of safety in the region. "From my experience in mines in West Africa," says Fell, "the health and safety standards seem to be pretty high. Mining companies are using state-of-the-art equipment, which helps to ensure a better and safer working environment, and they are putting a lot of money into health and safety programs for their mines."

Because of this, countries such as Ghana, Botswana and South Africa which have a long history of attracting international investment into their mining sectors tend to have higher safety and labour standards, says Avril Cole, an associate in the mining and private capital groups at Macleod Dixon LLP's Toronto office. "The mining sector in Ghana, for example, has been the recipient of significant foreign investment over the years, particularly from Australian and Canadian companies that have introduced Western mining standards," she says. "In fact, what we are seeing now is mining professionals from Ghana exporting the skills they have picked up from international mining companies to other parts of West Africa." This trend will no doubt have a positive effect on existing and future business ventures in that part of the world. **CIM**