

By Anas Aremeyaw Anas*

In Ghana, the powers that be are quick to say that road check points are few along the nation's borders. But these trading route check points, which aid in corruption, have caused unnecessary hurdles. When officials hear this, they respond by issuing statements that downplay the phenomenon.

The Economic Committee of West African States (ECOWAS) Treaty, signed by all West African countries, is supposed to allow the free movement of goods and services across the West African region. The delays and extortion from traders; however, are passed on directly to consumers, making prices of goods and services that should have been cheap more expensive.

The New Crusading Guide, a daily newspaper in Ghana, decided to tour the borders to document all acts of corruption and related practices, such as bribery (extortion) and road delays that hamper the smooth trade operations along the Tema (Ghana)-Ouagadougou (Burkina-Faso) corridors. Reporters wanted to find out: How many check points, both legal and illegal, exist along trading routes? How long does it take to move goods from one point to the other? How much is paid in cash as bribes (extortion) by the drivers on the roads?

The investigation focused on the activities of the Ghana Police Service, the Customs Excise and Preventive Services (CEPS), and the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS) and how they affect trading activities along the borders.

Tema, Ghana's leading port and an industrial hub, serves as the transit point for most commercial cross-border activities in the country. Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina-Faso, also serves as one of the largest centers of commerce in West Africa. The route between the two cities covers a distance of 992 km (616 miles), including 808 km (502 miles) in Ghana and 184 km (114 miles) in Burkina-Faso. There were over 30 check points on this route and Ghanaian CEPS officials at every one of them charged a fixed bribery rate of three Ghana cedis (US\$2.09). The police also charged two Ghana cedis (US\$1.40).

The investigation exposed that there were more stops in Ghana than there were in Burkina-Faso. Aside from the usual bribery and delays, some security officials slept while the reporters walked by. The hidden cameras of the investigative team also captured video evidence of policemen (after the Kunbungu first check point in Ghana)

sharing bribe money extorted from traders, while they still demanded more money from drivers.

These practices have become very common, to the extent that most drivers reserve extra money for bribes to border security officials because those who refuse payment are refused further movement. The reporters were charged 10 Ghana cedis (US\$7) each before they could finally get into Burkina Faso. Usually, travelers with passports are made to pay bribes of five Ghana cedis (US\$3.50) before their passports are stamped, and those with ID cards are also asked to pay a similar sum.

“Our master gives us 100,000 Burkina-Faso CFA (US\$2,138). With it, we buy our food and also pay bribes for the total journey. We are not happy about this, but we have no choice,” Osei Nimo, a driver, told the reporters.

The Gold Coast and the Gold Fraud

Known as the Gold Coast in the colonial days, Ghana is known for having large deposits of gold across the length and breadth of the country. Multinational corporations like AngloGold Ashanti and Newmont Ghana Ltd. have big mining concessions in Ghana and mine gold daily. Small-scale miners also operate in Ghana, performing illegal mining, popularly referred to as “galamsey.” For the past four years, unsuspecting investors have been lured into the gold business only to be swindled and fleeced out of millions of dollars.

There have been at least 15 media reports in 2009 alone about gold scams, despite persistent advice from the organized crime unit of the Ghana police to the effect that any investor who wishes to enter into the gold business must deal only with state-approved organizations like the Ministry for Mines and Energy or the Precious Minerals Marketing Commission (PMMC).

This reporter has been investigating an attempted 8.2 million Ghana cedis (US\$5.7 million) gold fraud scheme, where the suspects managed to get 2.7 million Ghana cedis (US\$1.9 million) from investors without producing gold. The suspects allegedly distributed the money among themselves and engaged in profligate expenditures. During the investigation, one of their masterminds, Mubaric Siedu, told this reporter that he has been bribing the police and the judiciary anytime he swindles investors.

Siedu also alleged that Mohammed Hafix, chief executive of Hafred Security and Touchouse Productions, in Ghana, is connected to the scheme. Siedu’s confession was

videotaped and later submitted to the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) of the Ghana police, leading to his arrest in Nima, a suburb of Accra.

At the time of filing this report, Siedu had been before the court along with Hafix. The suspects had allegedly spent most of the 2.7 million Ghana cedis (US\$1.9 million) they had received from investors, and the police froze the remaining 435,000 Ghana cedis (US\$300,000 dollars) sitting in the bank, while the court case continued.

The British Bribery Scandal

Civil society in Ghana has shown a lot of interest in September 2009, unraveling the mystery surrounding a British construction firm, Mabey & Johnson, which pleaded guilty in a London court to charges of corruption and violating sanctions.

The company acknowledged it had paid Ghanaian government officials a total of £470,000 (US\$761,725) in bribes during the 1980s and 1990s. It first started paying “backhanders” in Jamaica in 1993 and continued that “culture” with other countries, including Madagascar, Angola, Mozambique, and Bangladesh.

People are curious as to why full-blooded Ghanaian nationals, who swore an oath before the nation to serve the people in accordance with the laws of the country, betray the public’s trust by taking bribes.

As part of the Mabey & Johnson scandal, two ministers of state in Ghana, Dr. George Sipa Yankey, minister of health, and Amadu Seidu, minister of state, had to resign. And other politicians (who had no public positions when the scandal started) were mentioned in relation to the case.

Despite the resignations of the two ministers, the government has been under serious pressure from Ghanians to do more. In response, the president of Ghana ordered Attorney General Betty Mould Iddrisu to go to London to look into the details of the case. The president also invited the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) to look into the matter.

CHRAJ says it has delivered letters to some of the implicated public officials as a first step towards a full-scale investigation. Mr. Emile Short, the CHRAJ’s commissioner, said that a preliminary investigation was underway to

gather evidence to determine whether there was substance in the allegations.

“If satisfied, we shall conduct a full investigation that would involve setting up a panel to investigate the allegations,” he told the national newspaper, the Daily Graphic.

Meanwhile, members of the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) have accused the ruling party of benefiting from the bribes, even though they have provided no evidence to back their allegations.

The ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) has vehemently denied knowledge of the Mabey & Johnson bribes to party officials. The denial was contained in press statement signed by the party’s national chairman, Kwabena Adjei, and said, “Records available to the party do not reveal receipts of any such funds from the said company or its agents.”

Musah Mohammed, a diehard NPP supporter with no official position in the party, said in an interview, “The ruling party should sack all those mischievous individuals who devised tricks to get rich quick in this Mabey & Johnson case. The perpetrators of this heinous crime against mother Ghana should bow their heads in shame for taking those bribes, (and) they must ask for forgiveness for their disgraceful and humiliating conduct which is now tarnishing the image (of) mother Ghana.”

Kojo Mawuto, an NDC member, said, “President Mill’s intervention and the promptness with which he waded into the scandal shows his commitment to rid corruption in Ghana. The government has put the national interest first. Members of the opposition should channel their energies into something better than criticizing government,” he said in anger.

Under Pressure

During his swearing-in on January 2009, President John Atta Mills promised to keep his government free of corruption, but has been under pressure over the corruption allegations against his newly-appointed ministers. The first to be hit was his minister of foreign affairs, Alhaji Muhammad Mumuni, after an audit report determined he had received unapproved payments. The allegations against him came up during his vetting hearings, prompting the opposition to stage a walkout.

However, Parliament ended up approving his appointment with the justification that the audit report's findings aren't equivalent to those of a court of law, and his lawyers were already challenging the report in court. He had also sued a newspaper for alleged defamation after it published the report's findings, but lost the case after the court said there was basis for further questioning.

Even though the president invited the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) to investigate the matter, after the resignation of the ministers of health and state, over the Mabey & Johnson scandal, the debate is still on whether or not President Mills' government is honoring his campaign promises. While some applaud him for inviting CHRAJ into these cases, others say he was slow in acting and should have sacked the ministers instead of accepting their resignations.

**Anas Aremeyaw Anas is an undercover journalist working with the New Crusading Guide daily newspaper in Ghana. He has gone undercover to expose several trafficking rings in Africa and has won several local and international awards. In 2009, he was mentioned by President Barack Obama as a courageous journalist who risks his life to tell the truth.*