Clean Technology Hub
Energy Innovation Centre

Blood, Gold and Broken Livelihood:

What the Minna deaths reveal about Nigeria's Mining crisis

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The scene of the mining pit in Niger State. source: channels TV



Vanguard news

Introduction

Thirty-seven People died in a Nigerian security facility in 15 September 2026, they did not die because Nigeria lacks laws against illegal mining, they died inside a system that surges enforcement capacity to raid mining sites but cannot account for who profits from the ground it claims to police, cannot guarantee the survival of the people it detains, and has spent decades treating a livelihood crisis as a policing problem. The events in Minna between September 15 and 17 were not an aberration, they were the mining economy's unresolved contradictions arriving, all at once, inside a detention cell.

The immediate facts are already public, Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps Mining Marshals raided sites at M.I. Wushishi and Lukoto village, arresting 67 suspected illegal miners, several as young as 14 years of age. By the following morning 37 of these reported detained miners were dead, the official cause of death remains formally unconfirmed and is under forensic and autopsy review; the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) has pointed to a suspected disease outbreak, while an intelligence report shared with AFAN (All Farmers Association of Nigeria) and survivor testimony point instead to overcrowding and poor ventilation. That dispute matters and should be resolved by the investigation, not pre-judged by commentary, but its very existence, weeks after the fact, is itself an indictment of how little the state can currently say with confidence about conditions inside its own custody.

Governor Umaru Bago has since banned mining statewide, imposed and announced plans to recruit 10,000 government-sponsored community militia to protect rural mining areas. Security forces have also opened fire on protesters angered by the deaths. A federal investigation is underway, a state commandant and twenty other officers have been suspended, and multiple parallel inquiries are now running simultaneously. Procedurally, this is a fast response by Nigerian institutional standards, It is also, so far, a response built entirely around containment rather than the underlying question of why a livelihood crisis keeps producing security crises.

The ban is not a policy, It is an admission of failure.

Every response to Nigeria's illegal mining crisis eventually arrives at the same reflex: ban it. Zamfara did in 2019 for five years, only to lift the ban this January citing improved security, despite killings and kidnappings continuing unabated. Niger State has now done the same, and added a plan to arm 10,000 community militia on top of it. Arming more actors into an already crowded conflict landscape is not a neutral fallback while formal enforcement is rebuilt; it risks becoming the next generation of the same problem it is meant to solve, since

Nigeria's recent history with community-defence militias in the north-west has not been one of clean, accountable outcomes.

The deeper problem is that prohibition without formalisation does not remove the incentive to mine, it removes the incentive to mine legally. Miners returned to the M.I Wushishi and other sites while arrests were still underway. "We are ready to die here," some of them said, insisting they had no other means of survival. A ban that does not replace the income it destroys does not end illegal mining, It relocates it, deepens its criminality and pushes it further under the protection of whoever can defend it by force, which in this corridor increasingly means armed groups. The Nigerian Miners Association has warned exactly this: that blanket bans "deepen poverty and increase insecurity" rather than resolving either. Until policymakers build a licensing and buying structure that pulls artisanal miners into a formal, protected, taxable system, Nigeria will keep banning the same sector every few years and calling it a solution.

A fragile state, not a rogue unit

It is tempting to read the custodial deaths as a story about one commandant's negligence, a detention facility that could hold 67 people without adequate ventilation or medical oversight, and lose 37 of them within 48 hours, points to a capacity problem inside Nigeria's security infrastructure, not a single officer's failure. That the cause of death is still disputed weeks later, that burials proceeded before forensic results were available, and that the Mining Marshals unit itself has publicly clashed with police over jurisdiction during raids, alleging obstruction and even shootings, together describe an enforcement architecture that is fragmented against itself. A state that cannot coordinate its own security agencies in the field is unlikely to safely detain the people those agencies arrest. This is an institutional-capacity problem that will resurface in the next crackdown, on any sector, unless it is named and addressed as such.

Niger State's unmapped conflict economy

The scholarly and investigative attention to Nigeria's mining-banditry nexus has concentrated overwhelmingly on Zamfara and Katsina, where researchers have documented over 1,600 banditry incidents and more than 4,000 deaths linked to gold-mining competition since 2010. Niger State's own version of this story, concentrated in Shiroro, Munya and Rafi, has received comparatively little systematic mapping, despite carrying the same signatures: armed groups displacing entire communities to seize mineral-rich land, imposing levies on artisanal miners, and running informal markets that trade gold for weapons, motorcycles and food. A Shiroro resident's account of fleeing repeated raids three years ago and

resettling in Minna is not an anecdote; it is a data point in a displacement pattern that has not yet been rigorously tracked at the state level. If Niger State is to be understood as more than a footnote to Zamfara's crisis, that mapping work needs to happen now, while the Minna deaths have made the state legible to national attention it does not normally receive.

Livelihood collapse, banditry financing and elite protection are not three separate stories running in parallel here. They are one mechanism: poverty pushes households into informal mining, armed groups monetise that mining through levies and territorial control, and politically connected owners and financiers shield the most profitable sites from meaningful enforcement. Treating any one link in that chain in isolation, whether through a ban, a raid, or a militia, will not break it.

The ownership question the investigation must not avoid

A survivor's allegation that the mining site belongs to the high and mighty has been firmly and categorically denied and the claim itself has not been independently verified. What the episode exposes, independent of whether it is true, is that nobody, including the NSCDC and the state's own Commissioner for Information, has been able to say definitively who owns, financed or operated the site where the arrests occurred. That is a structural transparency failure, not a verdict on any individual. Nigeria's mining enforcement apparatus operates without functioning land and beneficial-ownership records in its most conflict-prone zones, and that gap will keep generating unverifiable allegations against powerful names precisely because there is no public record to settle the question quickly. Fixing that transparency gap, not adjudicating this one allegation, is the actual policy task.

Children in the pits are a fragility indicator, not a footnote

Among the dead were teenagers as young as 14. Farmer Governor Umaru Bago has himself acknowledged that federal intervention is needed to address the presence of minors at mining sites, effectively admitting that state authority has been unable to prevent child labour in one of its most dangerous economic sectors. This deserves to be treated as what it is: a coerced-labour and child-protection crisis embedded inside a conflict economy, not an unfortunate detail inside a policing story. One father, dependent on his two sons' mining income to afford his own medication, lost both of them in the custody deaths. Communities that have lost income to displacement or banditry send their children into the pits because the household cannot survive otherwise. A serious policy response treats child presence at mine sites as a livelihood and protection failure requiring social intervention, not merely a violation to be enforced against.

Where the gold actually goes

None of this stays local. A joint NEITI and ANEEJ investigation has found that Nigeria loses substantial mineral revenue to illegal trading networks dominated by foreign buyers, shell companies and armed groups, with an estimated 80 percent of mining activity in north-west Nigeria occurring outside formal channels. Most of the illegally mined gold is smuggled to a Middle East hub before entering global supply chains that reach Europe, the United States and Asia. This transforms Niger State's local tragedy into an international illicit-financial-flows and supply-chain-governance question, one that ESG-focused investors, donors and regional bodies increasingly have reason to scrutinise, and one Nigeria's policy conversation still treats primarily as a domestic security matter.

Two arms of government, working against each other

The Federal Ministry of Solid Minerals has spent the past two years trying to grow formal mining revenue, helping push it from roughly ₦6 billion to ₦38 billion partly through the same Mining Marshals unit now at the centre of the Minna deaths. At the same time, governors and traditional rulers from nineteen northern states have called for a six-month suspension of mining activity nationwide, and Niger State has banned mining outright while asking the Presidency for an executive order to formalise that ban. A federal government trying to expand a sector that state governments are simultaneously trying to shut down, using an enforcement unit that cannot coordinate with the police, is not a minor coordination gap. It is a policy contradiction that guarantees confusion for miners, opportunity for the armed groups who profit from regulatory vacuum, and repeated cycles of ban lift and crisis.



What authority on this issue actually requires

The easy commentary on Minna will focus on the custodial deaths, extract outrage, and move on by next month's news cycle. The harder and more consequential work is to hold the whole chain together: a livelihoods crisis that produces informal mining, a security vacuum that lets armed groups tax and control it, a state enforcement apparatus too fragmented to safely detain the people it arrests, an ownership structure opaque enough that even government cannot say who runs a site under national scrutiny, a child-labour dimension the state itself admits it cannot control, a transnational market absorbing the proceeds, and a federal-state policy contradiction that guarantees none of this gets resolved coherently. Nigeria does not need another ban, and it does not need another armed militia layered onto an already crowded conflict landscape. It needs a formalisation and protection framework built for the people already in the pits, land and beneficial-ownership transparency for the sites they work, and a federal-state mining security strategy that stops working against itself. Until that framework exists, Minna will not be the last cell where this crisis becomes visible.