IMPACT: Kids Working In African Gold Mines

A reef of gold buried beneath this vast, parched grassland arcs across some of the world's poorest countries. Where the ore is rich, industrial mines carve it out. Where it's not, the poor sift the earth.

These hardscrabble miners include many thousands of children. They work long hours at often dangerous jobs in hundreds of primitive mines scattered through the West African bush. Some are as young as 4 years old.

In a yearlong investigation, The Associated Press visited six of these bush mines in three West African countries and interviewed more than 150 child miners. AP journalists watched as child-mined gold was bought by itinerant traders. And, through interviews and customs documents, The AP tracked gold from these mines on a 3,000-mile journey to Mali's capital city and then on to Switzerland, where it enters the world market.

Most bush mines are little more than holes in the ground, but there are thousands of them in Africa, South America and Asia. Together, they produce a fifth of the world's gold, according to United Nations reports. And wherever you find bush mines, these reports and mine experts say, you also find child labor.

If you wear a gold ring on your finger, write with a gold-tipped fountain pen or have gold in your investment portfolio, chances are good your life is connected to these children.

One of them is Saliou Diallo. He's 12 years old and less than 4 feet tall.

Saliou and his friends, Hassane Diallo, 12 (no relation), and Momodou Ba, 13, dropped out of school about three years ago when the village's only teacher left. They were living in mud huts with their families in Guinea, and went to work in their fathers' fields.

Last year, as the price of gold hit a 26-year high, a thin stranger approached. The boys say he offered to take them to a place across the border in Senegal, where money hid inside the ground.

The spike in gold prices over the past seven years has lured increasing numbers of poor people, including child recruits, to bush mines. The United Nations labor agency estimates there are now 100,000 to 250,000 child gold miners in West Africa alone.

Saliou and his friends say the recruiter promised them $2 a day. It sounded like a lot of money to children who had none.

In a region where 4-year-olds haul water and tend goats, boys of Saliou's age are expected to earn money for their families. Senegal prohibits anyone under 18 from doing hazardous work, and mining is among the most hazardous of jobs. However, the laws are seldom enforced.

Saliou packed his clothes, hoisted the bundle on top of his head and slipped away before daybreak. The recruiter led the three boys on a weeklong walk of over 100 miles. The straps of their plastic sandals dug into their heels until their feet swelled.

The boys heard the mine before they saw it, the sound of hammers pounding rocks into dust. The tall grass had been cut away. In its place rose hundreds of cone-shaped huts with roofs of brown grass. Tenkoto, once a pinprick on the landscape, had swelled into a mining village of 10,000. The AP found the boys there, living in huts where they slept squeezed between adults on bare mattresses.

Each night before falling asleep, Saliou struggles to remember a verse from the Quran. He doesn't know what the words mean, but he had been told they would protect him.

Six miles from the village, men and teenage boys, some as young as 14, clamber down mine shafts 30 to 50 meters deep. The shafts are as narrow as manholes. Younger teens yank the rocks up with a pulley.

Saliou's boss buys bags of dirt from these men. The men have already combed it for gold, but usually a few crumbs remain. Boys like Saliou and his friends take turns at different jobs to coax the crumbs out.

They steer wheelbarrows of dirt over rutted paths. They pound the dirt with wooden posts for hours

until it is as fine as flour. They wash the dirt in a large sieve-like box. Then they squat next to a plastic tub, pour mercury into their bare hands, and rub it into the mud like a woman scrubbing laundry on rocks.

Mercury attracts gold like a magnet. But it also attacks the brain and can cause tremors, speech impediments, retardation, kidney damage and blindness.

Saliou's tub of dirt yields a silvery ball the size of an M&M. He hands it to his boss, who lifts up his shades to eye it. The man heats the ball over a charcoal fire to make the mercury evaporate, leaving behind a fleck of gold.

Just handling mercury is treacherous; breathing its fumes is worse. The children don't know that. They crowd for a glimpse of the gold as its silvery husk slowly vaporizes.

At mealtime, Saliou rinses his hands in water from a muddy pool where the mercury run-off was dumped. He scoops a mouthful of rice and licks his hand clean.

Evenings, Saliou's boss weaves his way between huts where women boil cabbage and nurse sweaty babies. The speck of gold the boys squeezed from the dirt is in the pocket of his jeans.

The trail of gold that begins in Saliou's mercury-tainted hands ends with bullion in bank vaults and with necklaces, rings and bracelets sold by jewelry retailers all over the world.

Precisely which products contain child-mined gold, no one can say for sure. Unlike a diamond, gold does not keep its identity on its tortuous journey from mine to market. It passes through 10 or more hands. And when it is melted, usually several times, and mixed with gold from other sources, its address is effectively erased.

Jewelers and retailers that buy gold through UBS include Compagnie Financiere Richemont SA, the firm that makes Montblanc pens, Piaget's luxury watches and the jewelry of Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels. Gold processed by Metalor has been used by these brands as well as in discount jewelry sold at Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and luxury jewelry sold by Tiffany & Co.

These companies expressed concern about child labor and frustration that they can't certify their products are free of it. Because bush mines, where child labor is ubiquitous, supply a fifth of the world's gold, the companies realize their supply lines may well be compromised.

"I can't overemphasize how complex this problem is," said Michael Kowalski, Tiffany's chairman. "There is a desire to deal with this. But the question is how?"

Tiffany joined with other jewelers and mining companies in 2005 to create the Council for Responsible Jewellery Practices, which forbids child mining. Major refiners, including Metalor, have signed on, as has Cartier. But to date, the council has found no way to enforce compliance.

"Home Depot can track every 2-by-4 to its forest of origin," said economist Michael Conroy, who has written a book on industry supply chains. "You can track every bag of coffee, every diamond to a specific diamond field. But for gold there's nothing."

After six months of work, Saliou is paid $40. He was promised $2 a day, which would come to $360. But his boss deducts money for tea, rice and rent, and Saliou doesn't know how much these things cost.

"If I have one wish, it's that I might someday have a little bit of money," he says. "Sometimes I dream that one day I'll own something made of gold."

He and the other children scour the ground for mud spilled by the adults. It has already been processed for gold once, but they wash it and pour mercury over it again, hoping to find some gold they don't have to give their boss.

They find a flake. It weighs 0.2 grams. They will get $1.95 each.

The boys spend their money on packets of paracetamol, a painkiller sold at the village market. They pop the drug after 10-hour work days to ease the ache in their backs and chests.

The dirt floors of their huts are littered with pill wrappers.

Questions for Discussion *(typed; 3 sentences each)*

1. What is the main point of the article? What are "bush mines" and how much gold actually comes from these mines?

2. After reading this article, what things stand out to you about the gold trade? Did anything surprise you? Explain.

3. What do you think can be done about this problem? Is there anything that governments, businesses, or individuals can do to change this? Explain.