



Testimony of Anquan Boldin, Ambassador, Oxfam America, to House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights

“Is There an African Resource Curse?”

July 18, 2013
2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me here today. On behalf of myself and Oxfam America I want to thank you and the ranking member for holding this important hearing on natural resources in Africa. I believe the issues that will be discussed here are critically important to the future of Africa. The idea of a resource curse in Africa is extremely compelling. There are experts here today who can testify in much better detail about how the wealth of natural resources in Africa can be seen as both the proverbial blessing and a curse. I'd like to share what I learned about how this plays out in communities where these resources are extracted.

During my visits to Africa I promised the people I've met that I would do everything I can to bring their stories back the US and to the people that can help change things for them. That is why I am here today speaking with you. I believe you have the power to help my friends in Africa, and specifically Senegal.

Earlier this year I traveled to the small village of Sabodala in Eastern Senegal. I met many warm and wonderful people there. They opened their community to me and were kind enough to share their experiences with myself, my wife Dionne, and my friends Larry Fitzgerald and Roddy White.

Sadly, the community of Sabodala, and many others like it throughout West Africa, has been directly and severely impacted by large scale gold-mining operations in their backyards. Just a few years ago the people of Sabodala farmed their land and rarely worried about whether they would have enough food to feed their families. In their spare time many people in the community would mine for gold, just as their families before them, and their families before them, did for countless generations. They would use the gold they got from this extra mining to supplement their farming income, but they were never dependent on the gold they would find in the ground for their livelihood.

All that changed a few years ago. When the land they farmed was sold out from under them to a large mining company the community, which had been farming the same land for generations, suddenly had nothing. They had a choice between accepting new land to farm that was high up

on a hillside miles and miles away from their homes, or accepting a one-time cash buyout that could not sustain them and their families the way the land did.

Meanwhile, the community that lost its land sees little benefit from the enormous mine in what was once their backyard. No percentage of the revenue from the mine, which is bigger than several football stadiums and brings in untold revenues, ever makes its way back to the community.

The mining company did leave the community with one gift though. Because the mining company also took ownership of the community's water source, they built a brand new well in the middle of the community. They now have access to water whenever the company decides to turn on the water (which is rare), and assuming they've paid their monthly bill to the mining company. This is the definition of a raw deal.

During my visit I was blessed with the opportunity to learn the community's mining techniques. I will be honest with you, it was not easy. I have done many challenging workouts in my years as a football player and this work is just as hard. And they do it every day. They pull rocks from the roadsometimes miles away from where they live. They break them in bowls with metal poles. They grind up the rock into fine dirt. They sift the dirt to find gold dust. Then they use mercury to extract the gold by hand. It's a grueling, dangerous process, and it's absolutely no way to make a living.

I told the people of Sabodala that I would bring their stories back to the US. I believe the US Congress should call on Senegal's president Macky Sall to take action to improve the conditions of mining-affected communities in eastern Senegal. He should ensure that mining companies respect human rights, that mining revenue is managed in a transparent way, and that communities receive adequate compensation and have a meaningful voice in decision-making about where mining takes place.

The countries of West Africa, including Senegal, are considering adopting a regional mining code that would apply to 15 countries in the region. I believe that adoption of this code would help strengthen protections for the human rights of people in mining-affected communities like Kedougou. I call on the Congress to support this and other measures to strengthen human rights protections for communities impacted by the in the oil and mining industries in Africa

As a professional athlete, I believe strongly in fair play. I believe that the US Congress can play an important role in helping ensure fair play for Africans and that the money produced by the gold, oil and other resources that come out of Africa's ground are used to help all Africans prosper. I hope that you will join me in taking action to ensure that this happens.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and the members of the committee again for your attention to this issue.