

Press Statement

For Immediate Release
To All Media Agencies

ATEWA RANGE FOREST RESERVE AT THE EDGE OF EXTINCTION

Accra, September 14, 2026 - One hundred years ago, on 5 January 1926, the Okyeman State Council, under the visionary leadership of Nana Sir Ofori Atta I made a decision that would echo through generations. They gazetted the Atewa Forest as a protected reserve, not for themselves, but for the future of Okyeman, for Ghana, and for humanity.

Today, that legacy stands on the tipping point of survival. We have reviewed the latest evidence from the Atewa Range Forest Reserve, including court records, operational reports, Forestry Commission correspondence, and on-the-ground documentation.

The unavoidable conclusion is that Atewa is under an unprecedented and escalating attack from illegal mining, while the institutions mandated to protect it are increasingly overwhelmed. We can lose the forest if we delay in taking very decisive actions as a matter of urgency.

This is not merely an environmental concern. It directly threatens the drinking water of over five million Ghanaians, our national climate commitments, biodiversity of global importance, and the cultural heritage of the Akyem Abuakwa Traditional Area.

1. Atewa is a forest of Irreplaceable Value

Atewa is not an ordinary forest. Gazetted in 1926, it rises to over 800 metres and covers approximately 26,300 hectares, representing 33.5% of the remaining closed forest in Ghana's Eastern Region. It is a Key Biodiversity Area and one of the most biologically important forests in West Africa. The forest and its surrounding landscape span more than 52 communities in the Eastern Region.

- **Water security:** Atewa forms the headwaters of the Ayensu, Densu, and Birim rivers, as well as over 99 streams, making it a protected area that provides water for millions of Ghanaians. A primary objective for reserving the forest in 1926 was to protect these headwaters.
- **Biodiversity:** Atewa is home to 239 bird species, 69 mammals, 40 amphibians, and 14 reptiles. It protects at least 78 species threatened with global extinction. A total of 969 vascular plant species have been identified, and an estimated 711 butterfly species occur there, which is equivalent to 77% of all butterfly species found in Ghana, making Atewa the most diverse location for butterflies in all of West Africa. It is among just 2% of the world's protected areas assessed to be resilient to higher levels of climate change impacts.

- **Climate resilience:** The forest withholds an estimated 3.6 million tonnes of climate change-inducing carbon. Protecting it could reduce emissions by approximately 200,000 tonnes of carbon per year. Removing the forest for mining would incur a carbon replacement cost of about US\$23.2 million.
- **Economic value:** A 2016 internationally led study demonstrated that effective protection of Atewa through a National Park and restoration of its surroundings yields the greatest economic value, at US\$1,157 million over a 30-year period, for local communities, downstream residents, and the national treasury, compared to scenarios that include mining. Non-timber forest products alone are estimated at US\$12.4 million per annum for 40 forest-fringe settlements with an estimated population of 75,000. Tourism potential is estimated at over US\$5 million per annum. The development of blended green development economic pursuits could yield about 1.3 billion dollars per annum, according to a study sponsored by the European Union.
- **Cultural heritage:** The forest was gazetted in honour of Nana Sir Ofori Atta I, whose famous declaration that “Land belongs to a vast family of whom many are dead, a few are living, and countless host are still unborn” underscores the intergenerational duty to protect Atewa. The Kyebi Declaration led by the Okyenhene of Akyem Abuakwa Traditional Area affirms this vision.

2. A Century of Stewardship Worth Securing

The Okyenhene has been unequivocal in his defence of Atewa. At the centenary celebration on 5 January 2026, he reaffirmed his personal commitment to the forest’s conservation, stating: *“Leadership is critical in protecting the forest. We have resisted the mining of bauxite. They should inform us how the flora and fauna would not be destroyed if that mining takes place. What is more worrying is the takeover of portions of the forest by foreigners. We do not have soldiers and guns to fight them, but we will not relent. I urge my chiefs to commit to protecting the forest. It is the most important thing we can do for the generations yet to come.”*

This is not a new position. As far back as 2024, in legal proceedings at the Accra High Court, it was confirmed that the Okyenhene, as custodian of the area, is opposed to bauxite mining in the Atewa forest. The Okyenhene’s stance reflects the overwhelming consensus of the people of Akyem Abuakwa and the broader Ghanaian public. Atewa Forest is too precious to be sacrificed for short-term extraction.

3. Unprecedented assault on Atewa Forest

Despite its legal protection and national importance, Atewa is being systematically plundered.

Evidence from illegal mining hotspots inside the reserve, including the Wankobi Stream headwaters on the left arm road of the Y Junction (coordinates 0.568W 6.235N), shows excavated pits, stripped forest cover, muddy and polluted streams, makeshift miner camps, and abandoned equipment. This is not a historical problem. It is happening now.

Court records from the Kyebi Forest District reveal a deeply troubling pattern of arrests followed by repeated adjournments and bail. Between 2021 and 2026, numerous cases against illegal miners in Atewa Forest Reserve have been adjourned multiple times. For example:

- A 2021 case involving six suspects was adjourned to 14 August 2026.
- A 2023 case involving ten suspects was adjourned to 25 July 2026.

- A May 2026 case involving 24 suspects saw all suspects granted bail and the case adjourned to 2 August 2026.
- We acknowledge that in a particular case, a suspect was convicted and sentenced to 20 years, and in another, three suspects pleaded guilty and were sentenced to 15 years with hard labour. These convictions show that justice is possible, although they remain the exception, not the rule.

The Forestry Commission itself has warned that arrest alone cannot solve the problem. In a letter dated 2 March 2026, the District Manager for Kyebi Forest District, Owusu Ameyaw, informed the Abuakwa South Municipal Chief Executive of the influx of illegal miners into the Sagyimase/Asikam portion of Atewa Forest Reserve. The letter states that 60 people had been arrested in that portion alone, yet illegal mining continues. On 20 February 2026, an operation involving 55 police officers was compromised by an apparent leak of information. Despite the scale of the operation, only five people were arrested. The suspects were remanded in prison custody, but the mining did not stop. The District Manager further reported that illegal miners have become “very aggressive and combative,” and that two forest guards were held hostage and had to be rescued by a police reinforcement team.

NAIMOS operations in the Kyebi and Atewa Forest area confirm the scale of criminality: arrests of 19 suspects on 6 July; seizure of an excavator, two drilling machines, dynamite, and destruction of generators, water pumps, chanfang machines, and makeshift structures on 8 and 10 July; further seizures and arrests on 16 and 19 August, including a pump-action shotgun, ammunition, a police pepper spray, machetes, and suspected narcotics. These are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of an organised, armed, and entrenched illegal mining economy inside a protected area.

4. Management of Atewa Forest overwhelmed by current pressure

The challenges facing Atewa are not merely operational. They are systemic.

- The Forestry Commission lacks adequate personnel, logistics, protected camps, and enforcement capacity to secure the reserve alone.
- Judicial delays and repeated bail grants undermine deterrence. Illegal miners return to the forest while cases drag on.
- Inter-agency coordination is weak. Information leaks, selective enforcement, and complicity at local levels allow illegal mining to continue.
- The Government’s own commitment in the 2016 manifesto to convert Atewa into a National Eco-Tourism Park remains unfulfilled, leaving the forest in a legal and management limbo that favours destruction over protection.

5. Unimaginable Potential, If Protected and Properly Developed.

There is a better path. The Concerned Citizens of Atewa Landscape, with the endorsement of the Okyenene, have proposed the Atewa Centenary Celebration and Green Atewa Forest Festival, a dual programme designed to honour 100 years of the forest’s gazetting and to unite all 52 communities surrounding the Atewa Landscape under one cultural, environmental, and spiritual banner.

The festival, aligned with World Water Day and the International Day of Forests, will elevate Atewa onto the national and global platform as a candidate for a National Park, revive intergenerational pride, promote environmental education, tourism, cultural heritage, and sustainable development, and

celebrate the rivers, the forest, and the memory of Nana Ofori Atta I and the nananom who made this sacrifice.

This celebration is not merely symbolic. It is grounded in a rigorous, evidence-based alternative to mining: the Transformational Development Agenda for Atewa National Park. Under this agenda, Atewa National Park would become a catalyst for green development in the landscape. It would:

- Protect the water sources for over five million Ghanaians.
- Safeguard biodiversity of global significance, towards Ghana's Kumming-Montreal global biodiversity framework targets.
- Create direct and decent jobs, including not less than 3000 associated jobs in tourism facilities and services.
- Generate potential income of over US\$5 million per annum from tourism.
- Support a vibrant cocoa processing industry: a 50,000-tonne processing factory would generate more than 1,000 direct jobs, building on the 3,500 jobs already supported by cocoa farming in the landscape.
- Develop high-end green value chains for Afromomum, Voacanga, Bitter Cola, Griffonia, and Avocado.
- Unlock climate finance through REDD+, the Green Climate Fund, voluntary carbon markets, and Payments for Ecosystem Services. Atewa is already identified as a prioritized Hotspot Intervention Area for Ghana's REDD+ programme.
- Support circular economy initiatives, land restoration, and "Life After Gold" for degraded mining sites.
- Attract international support. Diplomatic missions and international partners are ready to support this initiative.

This is not a dream. It is a practical, economically superior, and climate-resilient alternative. It requires political will and decisive action.

6. Why Government Must Prioritise Atewa Now

Atewa is a national security asset. Its water sustains millions. Its forests regulate climate. Its biodiversity is a global treasure. Its cultural value is irreplaceable. Mining, legal or illegal in Atewa is incompatible with all of these values.

7. Our Demands

We call on the President, the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, the Forestry Commission, the Ghana Police Service, NAIMOS, the Attorney-General, and all relevant institutions to take the following urgent actions:

1. Make Atewa a National Park immediately. Honour the 2016 manifesto commitment and the Kyebi Declaration. Rescind all plans for bauxite mining in Atewa. Provide the highest legal protection for the forest.
2. Deploy a permanent, well-resourced joint security task force to secure the entire Atewa Range Forest Reserve. Stop all illegal mining. End ad hoc raids that allow miners to return.
3. Empower the Forestry Commission with adequate officers, protected camps, vehicles, equipment, and intelligence capacity to enforce the law.
4. Fast-track prosecution. Establish a dedicated court for illegal mining cases in the Eastern Region. Publish the status of all pending cases. Ensure that bail conditions are deterrent and that kingpins and politically exposed persons are prosecuted without fear or favour.

5. Investigate and sanction complicity. Investigate information leakages and allegations of selective enforcement in Atewa operations. Sanction any official found complicit or incompetent.
6. Implement the Atewa Green Option. Fund and coordinate the Transformational Development Agenda for Atewa National Park, including eco-tourism, agroforestry, climate finance, and green value chains.
7. Work with communities and traditional authorities. The people of Akyem Abuakwa and forest-fringe communities are allies, not obstacles. Their consent and participation are essential. The Okyenene's leadership must be respected and supported.

Conclusion

One hundred years ago, our forebears made a choice. They chose to protect Atewa not for themselves, but for us. They could not have imagined the pressures we face today, but they knew that some things are too precious to be sacrificed.

We either deal with this menace or we perish. Without clean water, clean air, and standing forests, we are done as a people. Atewa is the test of our collective resolve.

Finally, we believe the government can still get this right by protecting Atewa Forest and leaving a legacy that future generations will thank us for. At a moment when forests across the country are vanishing at an alarming rate, securing Atewa is a chance to show leadership and to prove that Ghana can choose lasting prosperity over quick profit, and stand as a model for what real environmental stewardship looks like.

Signed:

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