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General News

2024 election calendar will be unveiled before February ends - EC

The Electoral Commission (EC) has assured the public and stakeholders that it will unveil the electoral calendar for the 2024 general elections by the end of February.

Deputy Chair of the Commission, Dr Bossman Asare, made this commitment during an appearance before the Public Accounts Committee on Wednesday, February 21. He stated, "We will certainly disclose it [the calendar] before the end of February. It should be out by the end of this month [February]."

This assurance follows criticism from the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC), which expressed concern about the

Commission's delay in releasing the electoral calendar, terming their focus on other matters as "unproductive endeavors."

Earlier, a controversy arose regarding potential changes to the 2024 election date, prompted by concerns from the Seventh Day Adventist Church about the election day coinciding with a Sabbath.

However, the Commission has affirmed its commitment to maintaining the original December 7 date for the general elections, dismissing previous discussions for a change.

Furthermore, the Commission has reversed its decision not to use indelible ink in the country's

elections. This decision was revised after facing strong criticism from both the Majority and Minority

Caucuses in Parliament.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Sebastian Akaho-Tay



Dr Bossman Asare, Deputy Chair, Electoral Commission, Ghana

Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu's resignation is a huge betrayal by NPP - Lecturer

Political Science lecturer at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Dr. Kwasi Amakye Boateng, has described the resignation of the New Patriotic Party's (NPP) Osei Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu as a betrayal by the party.

The Majority Leader is among the 18 ministers who voluntarily announced their intention to bow out of parliament in 2025.

In light of the substantial contributions the majority leader has made to the ruling party, the lecturer believes they should have given him the opportunity to leave Parliament with dignity.

Speaking on Adom FM's morning show, Dwao Nsem, on Wednesday, February 21, 2024, Dr Boateng asserted that "the NPP wants to remove people who have, for some time now, maintained independence on certain issues, and the key target has been the Majority Leader. The man has been terribly betrayed."

Dr Boateng's displeasure stems from the surprising resignation of the Kumasi Suame Member of Parliament during a meeting with the president at the Jubilee House

Banquet Hall.

The political scientist couldn't understand why President Akufo-Addo should be treated in this manner despite supporting him for so many years.

"Those of us in Kumasi know he supported Akufo-Addo even against Kufuor. Meanwhile, he is a Kumasi person, and this is what he has been rewarded with eventually? It's a crisis in the party that has manifested itself, and that's the effect we are seeing

today," he claimed.

Speculation has been rife regarding the possible ousting of Majority Leader Osei Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu.

The party's National Council and NEC meeting on Monday reportedly discussed this potential change, but no verdict was reached.

However, it was reported on February 21, 2024, that all Members of Parliament representing the New Patriotic

Party (NPP) have been summoned for an urgent meeting with President Nana Akufo-Addo at the Banquet Hall of the Jubilee House that evening.

Insiders revealed that among the topics to be discussed at the meeting was a dialogue aimed at reaching a consensus on the formation of a new leadership for the Majority Caucus in the current Parliament.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Abigail Twumwaa Ampofo



Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu, Majority Leader

General News

GMet warns public of hot weather condition, violent rains from now to April

The Ghana Meteorological Agency (GMet) has issued an alert, advising the public to prepare for extremely hot weather conditions.

According to the Agency, “the sun is on its apparent movement from the southern hemisphere towards the northern hemisphere and expected to be on the equator on March 20, 2024.”

In view of this, “an increase in temperature is expected from now through March to April 2024.”

The projected temperature ranges are significant, with the southern half expected to experience maximums between 33°C to 37°C, and the northern regions facing even higher temperatures ranging from 36°C to 42°C.

Simultaneously, minimum temperatures are anticipated to fluctuate between 22°C and 27°C nationwide.

The Agency clarified that this does not suggest the occurrence of heat waves, noting that “temperatures are normally high during these months.”

This period aligns with the transition from the dry season into the major rainy season for southern Ghana.

According to the Agency, rains during this period will be less frequent but quite violent, with occasionally strong winds.

To protect against the heightened temperatures, the Ghana Meteorological Agency has advised the following; drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration, use umbrellas or hats, especially

between 11 am and 3 pm when the sun is strongest, choose lightweight, light-colored clothing to reduce heat absorption, and use sunscreen when spending extended time outdoors to protect your skin from sunburn.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Andy Ogbarmey-Tetty



File Photo

Chairman of Health Committee is obstructing COVID-19 expenditure investigation - Minority

The Minority in Parliament has alleged intentional obstruction by Dr. Ayew Afriyie, the chairman of the Health Committee, in the parliamentary inquiry into the government’s COVID-19 expenditure.

Parliament’s Speaker, Alban Bagbin, assigned the Finance and Health Committees to promptly investigate the use of COVID-19 funds following perceived irregularities presented by the Finance Minister on Wednesday, June 22, 2022.

On Wednesday, February 21, the Minority Leader, Dr. Cassiel Ato Forson, raised concerns on the Parliament floor, accusing the MP for Effiduase/Asokore of undermining the investigation.

“The chairman of the joint committee, Ayew Afriyie, has not called a meeting to sit on the matter. The ranking member cannot obviously call a meeting, and it is only the chairman who can call the meeting. So we are sensing

some form of sabotage.

“There was a sub-committee that the joint committee formed and developed a guideline, and

submitted it to the joint committee, which it accepted and as we speak, this matter has been delayed for almost eight months, and we

cannot continue like this.”

Source: The Independent Ghana / Phoebe Martekie Doku



Dr Cassiel Ato Forson, Minority Leader and other committee members

General News

Hajia4Reall pleads guilty to romance scam, set to pay over \$4m

Social media influencer and musician Mona Faiz Montrage, widely recognized as Hajia4Reall, has admitted guilt to receiving proceeds from a romance scam, as reported by the United States Department of Justice (DoJ).

A DoJ statement dated February 21, 2024, read in part: "Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced the guilty plea today of MONA FAIZ MONTRAGE for her role in laundering the proceeds of a series of romance scams."

Montrage has pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to receive stolen money, which could result in a maximum sentence of five years in prison under U.S. laws.

Additionally, she has agreed to forfeit \$2,164,758.41 and make restitution in the same amount.

The sentencing will be determined by U.S. District Judge Paul A. Crotty at a later date, raising questions about whether she will receive the maximum five-year sentence.

U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said: "Mona Faiz Montrage

knowingly received money stolen from older Americans through romance scams and was arrested abroad and now faces serious consequences for her actions. Romance scams such as Montrage's harmed her vulnerable, elderly victims not only in the cruel betrayal of trust in the realization that their online romantic connection was fiction, but by also callously stealing their money. This Office and our law enforcement partners are relentless in bringing fraudsters who target Americans to justice, no matter where they are."

As alleged in the Indictment and statements made in public filings and public court proceedings:

From at least in or about 2013 through in or about 2019, MONTRAGE was a member of a criminal enterprise (the "Enterprise") based in West Africa that committed a series of frauds against individuals and businesses in the U.S., including romance scams.

Many of the Enterprise's romance scam victims were vulnerable, older men and women who lived

alone. The Enterprise frequently conducted the romance scams by sending the victims emails, text messages, and social media messages that deceived the victims into believing that they were in romantic relationships with a person who was, in fact, a fake identity assumed by members of the Enterprise.

Once members of the Enterprise had successfully convinced victims that they were in a romantic relationship and had gained their trust, they convinced the victims, under false pretenses, to transfer money to bank accounts the victims believed were controlled by their romantic interests, when, in fact, the bank accounts were controlled by members of the Enterprise.

MONTRAGE is a Ghanaian public figure who rose to fame as an influencer through her Instagram profile under the username "Hajia4Reall," which at one point had approximately 3.4 million Instagram followers and was among the top 10 profiles with the most followers in Ghana.

MONTRAGE received money from

several victims of romance frauds who members of the Enterprise tricked into sending money. Among the false pretenses used to induce victims to send money to MONTRAGE were payments to transport gold to the U.S. from overseas payments to resolve a fake FBI investigation, and payments to assist a fake U.S. Army officer in receiving funds from Afghanistan.

In total, MONTRAGE controlled bank accounts that received over \$2 million in fraudulent funds from the Enterprise.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Andy Ogbarmey-Tettey



Mona Faiz Montrage Aka Haiia4Reall

NHIS 'useless' in Ashanti Region - Patients express concern

The National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) has experienced a significant surge in registrations, with a confirmed 61% increase since 2017, according to Vice President Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia.

However, the rising numbers are now raising questions about the effectiveness of the scheme, particularly in delivering quality healthcare services.

Complaints have emerged regarding NHIS subscribers purchasing medications that should be covered under the scheme.

Reports of underfunding have forced healthcare facilities to charge additional fees, burdening patients who rely on the scheme for financial support.

Beyond the statistics, the true

impact of these issues is felt on the ground.

Outside hospital gates in the Ashanti region, a distressed crowd gathers, not just as concerned visitors, but as patients and family members grappling with mounting medical bills.

Gifty Boakye, whose mother is unwell, expressed frustration, describing the NHIS as 'stale.'

She lamented the current state of the health insurance scheme, emphasizing that quality healthcare is increasingly inaccessible for those without sufficient funds.

"The health insurance scheme has become stale. Now, if you don't have enough money, you won't receive quality health care. Why should we suffer like this?" she quizzed.

Reports from various health facilities in the Ashanti region reveal long delays in treatment due to the absence of health insurance cards.

Essential medications are reportedly unavailable due to insufficient coverage, compelling subscribers to purchase drugs that they anticipated would be included in the NHIS.

Subscribers also highlighted instances of undisclosed fees for services supposedly covered by the scheme.

"This small illness. Look at the number of drugs they have prescribed for me. The health insurance is not working. Why will we be buying all sorts of drugs if it's working?" a subscriber said.

"They took 20 cedis before giving me a bed in the ward here in

Kumasi South Hospital, and this was without receipt. I don't even know what the scheme covered," said another subscriber.

A lack of transparency and clarity regarding coverage has left many questioning the functionality of the NHIS.

As voices of discontent grow, individuals like Kwame Dawu shared his experiences of paying unofficial fees to secure hospital beds and purchasing expensive drugs out of pocket.

"I brought my mother, but we have

Continued on page 5



General News

NHIS 'useless' in Ashanti Region - Patients express concern

Continued from page 4

paid a bribe of 100 cedis before getting a bed, and I could see people in wheelchairs receiving treatment in their chairs. The health insurance is not working here. I have bought all sorts of drugs for about 2,000 cedis."

For many, the struggling health insurance scheme is not merely an

administrative obstacle but a stark representation of systemic issues within the healthcare system, disproportionately affecting the less privileged.

Among the dissatisfied subscribers is Samuel Tei Wayo, who points out the unnecessary waiting period for the health insurance to take

effect, leading to financial strain and delays in receiving essential medical care.

"The ones I have been given for free are not expensive, but the expensive ones are the ones we have to buy. The waiting period for health insurance to take effect is long and unnecessary."

As the NHIS faces criticism on multiple fronts, the surge in registrations appears to be overshadowed by the pressing need for reforms to address the reported shortcomings and ensure that the healthcare system meets the needs of all citizens.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Sebastian Akaho-Tay

People don't elect us here to waste time - Ablakwa fumes over 700 unresolved cases by parliamentary committees

North Tongu MP, Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa, has expressed his displeasure over 700 unresolved cases referred to various parliamentary committees for investigation.

Speaking on the floor of Parliament, Mr Ablakwa voiced concerns about delays in determining the members of the ad-hoc committee responsible for investigating various issues, including the halted National Cathedral Project, which has been pending for some

time.

The Speaker of Parliament, Alban Bagbin, and other Members of Parliament have consistently expressed frustration regarding extended delays in submitting committee reports on critical national issues for deliberation during plenary sessions.

In response to these delays, Mr Ablakwa urged the Speaker to take decisive steps against the leadership of such committees

to ensure the swift resolution of pending cases.

"We are either taking our constitutional mandate seriously or not. The people don't elect us to come to this House to waste time and not attend to matters urgently and to derelict on our constitutional mandate, and so I think it is time to crack the whip," he stated.

During a workshop, the clerk reported that there were

approximately 700 referrals that have not been covered, a situation Mr Ablakwa finds unacceptable, stating, "it doesn't speak well of us."

Source: The Independent Ghana / Jessie Ola-Morris



Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa, MP North Tongu

Stop contacting MoMo vendors to access our services – ECG warns customers

The Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG) has issued a warning to customers, cautioning them against making payments to specific mobile money accounts falsely claiming association with ECG services.

ECG management disclosed that certain individuals have been reaching out to customers, requesting payments to a designated MoMo number, falsely implying that it facilitates access to ECG services.

In response to this issue, ECG released a disclaimer on Thursday, February 22, 2024, urging customers to disregard such calls.

The organization emphasized that it does not require payments for its services through phone transactions. "The attention of the Electricity Company Ghana (ECG) has been drawn to activities of fraudsters who call ECG customers in the name of ECG to

make payments to certain mobile money accounts to access.

Customers should please note that ECG does not demand payments for services through phone calls. Customers are strongly advised," parts of the disclaimer added.

ECG explicitly cautioned customers against responding to these solicitations and strongly recommended making payments exclusively through the official ECG Power app or the provided short code.

Concurrently, ECG management is

actively addressing the situation and encourages customers to report any such incidents to the nearest security agency or ECG office for appropriate action.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Phoebe Martekie Doku



General News

Majority Leader was not forced out as being speculated - MP

Member of Parliament for Oda, Alexander Akwasi Acquah, has debunked claims that the Majority Leader, Osei-Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu was forced to relinquish his position.

Speaking to journalists, Mr Akwasi Acquah clarified that the Majority Leader, who doubles as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Suame, willingly gave up his position after the party reached a consensus with him on taking up his new role as the chairman of Dr Bawumia's manifesto committee.

"Osei Kyei Mensah Bonsu has been given a very important role. Drafting the manifesto of Dr Bawumia is a very tedious work and so it is going to be a bit difficult

to combine the two - leading the majority and doing that.

"So some of us are at peace that he voluntarily decided to give up the position so he can concentrate on the new one. Well, I was in the meeting and he said he was voluntarily, because there was some form of consensus, there was a crunch meeting and he agreed that he was going to take up the position of the chairman of the manifesto committee which is another serious schedule. So it's a fallacy and we don't have to place a premium on the fact that he was forced out," he said.

Earlier this week, reports circulated about an impending reshuffle in the leadership of the Majority Caucus in Parliament.

Details from the report indicated that the reshuffle was being pushed by the national executives of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and that the Majority Leader, Osei Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu, was in line to be replaced.

Subsequently, members of the caucus held a press conference on Tuesday, February 20, 2024, rejecting the reports of any impending reshuffle in its leadership.

However, the Majority Leader reportedly resigned from his position barely 24 hours after the press conference.

His decision is said to have been communicated to President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo during a meeting with the membership

of the majority and leaders of the NPP at Jubilee House on February 21 to discuss the way forward.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Jessie Ola-Morris



Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu, Majority Leader

Fire Service threatens to blacklist Konongo, Nkawie, others over attacks against its officers

Konongo, Nkawie, and similar areas, including Ahafo, face the risk of significant property damage in the event of a fire outbreak.

This follows a warning from the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) threatening to boycott or blacklist certain areas due to persistent attacks on their firefighters.

The statement comes in the aftermath of an incident on Saturday, February 10, in Konongo, where residents alleged that fire officers responded late to a fire outbreak, leading to an attack on the officers and damage to a fire tender.

During a media briefing on Thursday, February 22, GNFS Public Relations Officer (PRO) ADO 1 Alex King Nartey highlighted that outdated equipment contributes to response delays.

He emphasized that many fire tenders are between 15 and 20 years old, posing a significant concern.

"The unfortunate thing is that we always say that our logistics are very lacking. Most of our fire tenders are between 15, getting

to 20 years old, a very worrying situation. As I speak to you now, Kasoa and Weija, their tender fighting is out of commission, so if there's any fire at Kasoa, the appliance will either have to move from Anyaa or Budumburam, that's very bad.

"So it means that if there is any fire within the Budumburam area, and one of the Budumburam probably attended to that fire, it means we have to call a much further appliance, probably from Dansoman, to attend to it. So you see the little appliances that we have left, we are trying to salvage

them."

Nartey reported further assaults on fire officers in Ahafo and Nkawie, leading to injuries requiring hospitalization. Given these ongoing challenges, the GNFS is considering the possibility of boycotting areas where their personnel are at risk of assault.

"So it becomes very appalling when they turn to put their frustration on us. So what we are deciding to do is embark on a boycott on areas that are known to always want to attack our men because, as we speak, a few

days after this report was made, another attack happened to our men at Ahafo. Three or four have been hospitalized, and I'm even hearing at Nkawie, another issue has happened."

To salvage this, Mr. Nartey called on the government to ensure timely procurement and supply of new equipment, as well as construct more fire stations nationwide.

Assembly leaders were also called on to educate their residents about fire safety.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Abigail Twumwaa Ampofo



File Photo



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Business

NPA suspends approval for certain products from Sentuo Oil

The Association of Oil Marketing Companies (AOMC) has urged the National Petroleum Authority (NPA) to tackle concerns regarding the quality of petroleum products supplied by Sentuo Oil Refinery. Numerous oil marketing companies have flagged issues regarding the quality and viscosity of products from the refinery.

"The complaints situate the inability of their petroleum service station pumps to efficiently dispense Sentuo products as well as other quality issues resulting in a significant number of customer complaints effective 1st February, 2024", a statement from the AOMC said.

The statement emphasized how important petroleum product quality and dependability are to both consumers and the oil industry.

"The reported issues at Sentuo Oil Refinery have the potential to not only affect the operational efficiency of oil marketing companies but also negatively impact customer satisfaction".

"Our members have conducted meticulous inquiries and concluded that no internal malfunctions or procedural errors are to blame for this matter for this matter.

Therefore we firmly believe that the root cause of this concern lies with the products supplied by the Sentuo Oil Refinery and BEST Kumasi Depot", the statement said. Looking ahead, the association called on the NPA to perform a comprehensive examination of the company's refining procedures and quality control measures to ensure compliance with industry standards.

Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of reviewing received complaints and, if deemed necessary, taking appropriate action against the refinery to uphold the integrity of the petroleum supply chain.

"Collaborate with oil marketing companies to identify specific areas of concerns and develop strategies to mitigate the impact of the reported issues."

"Publicly communicate the findings of the investigation and any actions taken to address the situation to enhance transparency and restore confidence in the industry", the associated appealed to the regulator.

The National Petroleum Authority (NPA) has suspended its approval for the sale of certain finished petroleum products by Chinese company Sentuo Oil Refinery in the market.

This suspension specifically targets certain finished petroleum products, particularly petrol, due to disputes over their compliance with industry specifications.

The NPA initiated this action last week following its own investigations, which revealed that Sentuo Oil Refinery had been selling petrol with slight variations from the originally approved specifications.

This move by the NPA comes in response to allegations made by two energy think tanks, the Institute of Energy Security (IES) and the Chamber of Petroleum Consumers (COPEC), accusing the authority of permitting Sentuo Oil Refinery to distribute sub-standard fuel to some Oil Marketing Companies. This alleged sub-standard fuel was purportedly causing significant damage to vehicle engines.

In an interview with Joy Business, Ubeidallah Saeed, the Head of Quality Control at the NPA, clarified that the products in question failed to meet the required standards and specifications. He emphasized that this issue does not involve unsafe products but rather products that do not meet the necessary specifications.

"This is not due to the fact that the products were unwholesome but rather, the pressure, is two

points higher than maximum requirement", he stressed.

He added that the situation was compounded by the fact that pressures are mixed at the OMCs and this sometimes delay in checking the specification.

"...because products are co-mingle at the retail outlet at point, where the pressures were low at these services stations resulting in this challenge", he said.

He assured that strict measures have been put in place to check the system to avert the situation where such products will hit the market.

"We have now reviewed the monitoring regime, and going forward, we will be counter testing all the quality certificate that will be sent to NPA from Sentuo Oil refinery" he added.

Source: The Independent Ghana | Amanda Cartey



File Photo

Contractors rubbish govt's GHS150m budget to resolve pothole challenges

The Ghana Chamber of Construction Industry has called on the Ministry of Roads and Highways to allocate a minimum of GH¢2 billion to compensate road contractors for their completed projects.

While acknowledging the government's allocation of GH¢150 million for engaging and compensating road contractors to address potholes nationwide as a positive step, the Chamber emphasized that this amount falls significantly short of the GH¢15 billion owed to its members.

Emmanuel Cheery, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Chamber, highlighted in an interview with the Daily Graphic that the

government's allocation of GH¢150 million is grossly inadequate to tackle the pothole situation in Accra, let alone the entire country.

"In as much as we commend the government for releasing such an amount, we are pleading that the money should be increased in view of the nature of the work," Mr Cheery said.

He continued by saying that the money was not enough to complete the job, especially since some of the potholes had become gullies and manholes as a result of months of disuse.

"They are manholes and some of them are gullies.

"If they were to be these normal potholes that we see, they could be

treated differently, but the current ones have been left unattended to for so long and so they have deteriorated into manholes and gullies," the CEO emphasised.

His statement follows the announcement by the Ministry of Roads and Highways regarding the allocation of GH¢150 million for repairing potholes nationwide.

In a press release, the Ministry outlined that the Department of Urban Roads would initiate routine pothole patching operations on major roads, capitalizing on the dry season.

The Ministry's objective with this initiative is to diminish the risk of accidents and extend the longevity of our road infrastructure.

In light of this, Mr. Cherry expressed confidence that the minister-designate for Roads and Highways would take into account the concerns raised by the public and industry stakeholders, by allocating further funds for road construction.

Additionally, he urged the government to prioritize settling its outstanding debt with contractors, which currently exceeds GH¢15 billion.

Source: The Independent Ghana



File Photo

International

Kenya scraps entry fee for South Africans and several other foreign nationals

Kenya has exempted passport holders from South Africa and six other countries from paying an unpopular entry fee introduced last month.

The government scrapped visa requirements for all foreign passport holders last month.

The move was seen as an attempt to promote Kenya as a tourist destination and to attract business travellers.

But a \$30 (£23) entry fee was introduced, including for some visitors who previously did not require visas.

The decision caused a huge backlash, with critics saying that it could lead to countries with which Kenya has visa-waiver

agreements introducing a similar fee, making travel more costly and bureaucratic.

Only travellers from the East African Community (EAC) regional bloc were exempt from paying the money.

In addition to South Africa, the exemption has been extended to passport holders from five other African states - Ethiopia, Eritrea, Congo-Brazzaville, Comoros and Mozambique.

San Marino, Europe's third-smallest nation, is the only other country on the exemption list.

A memorandum from Kenya's interior ministry and immigration department said the exempted countries had entered "visa

abolition agreements or signed bilateral visa waiver agreements" with the East African state.

However, travellers from these countries would still need to get an electronic travel authorisation (ETA) document in advance

to enter Kenya, and submit information such as flight details and proof of accommodation.

The ETA is for single entry and is valid for 90 days.

Source: BBC



File Photo

At least 23 dead after open-pit gold mine collapses in Venezuela

At least 23 people have died in central Venezuela after a wall of earth collapsed at an illegally operated gold mine while dozens of people were at work.

Yorgi Arciniega, a local official, told the AFP news agency on Wednesday that about 23 bodies had been recovered from the open-pit mine known as Bulla Loca in the jungles of the state of Bolivar. The accident happened on Tuesday.

Deputy Minister of Civil Protection Carlos Perez Ampueda published a video of the incident on X, and referred to "a massive" toll, though he provided no numbers.

The video showed a wall of earth slowly collapsing upon people at work in the shallow waters of an open-pit mine.

Some managed to flee while others were engulfed.

Some 200 people were thought to have been working in the mine, which is a seven-hour boat ride from the nearest town, La Paragua, according to officials.

Edgar Colina Reyes, the Bolivar state's secretary of citizen security, said the injured were being

transported to a hospital in the regional capital Ciudad Bolivar, four hours from La Paragua, which lies 750 kilometres (460 miles) southeast of the capital Caracas.

In La Paragua, desolate relatives waited on the shores for news of the miners.

"My brother, my brother, my brother," cried one as he saw a body being taken off a boat.

"We ask that they support us with helicopters to remove the injured," a woman waiting for news on her brother-in-law - a father of three - told AFP.

Reyes said the military, firefighters and other organisations were "moving to the area by air" to evaluate the situation.

Rescue teams were also being flown in from Caracas to aid in the search, he said.

The Bolivar region is rich in gold, diamonds, iron, bauxite, quartz and coltan. Aside from state mines, there is also a booming industry of illegal extraction.

"This was bound to happen," resident Robinson Basanta told AFP of the unsafe working conditions of the miners, most of

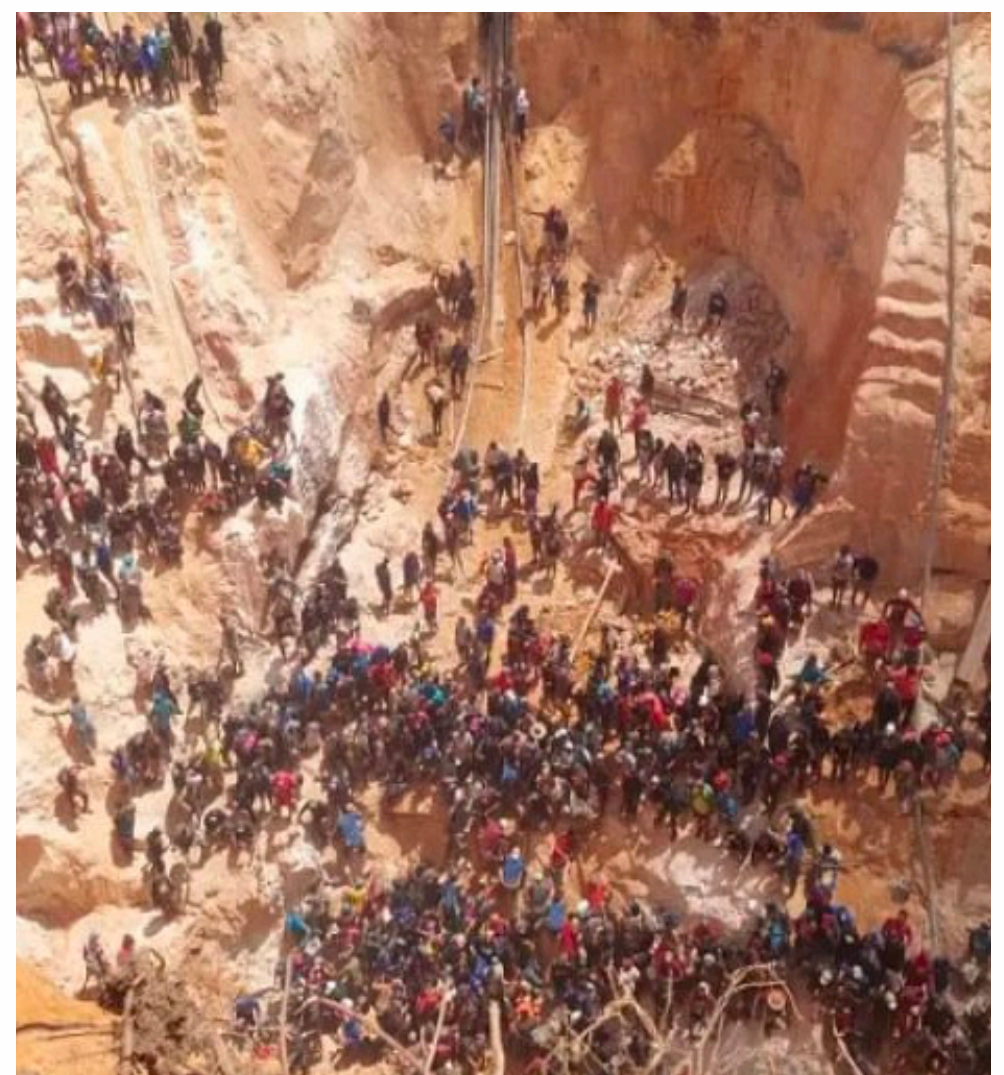
whom live in extreme poverty.

"This mine has yielded a lot of gold ... People go there out of necessity, to make ends meet," he said.

In December last year, at least 12

people were killed when a mine in the Indigenous community of Ikabaru, in the same region, collapsed.

Source: Al Jazeera via News Agencies



File Photo

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