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ACHIMOTA'S PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS: AN OPEN LETTER TO GHANA'S LEADERS

An Intolerable Situation

An intolerable situation has developed at Achimota School. The school's antiquated sewer system has collapsed. Raw sewage—including human excreta—can be seen leaking from cracks in the main pipes. This is especially true around the sewage treatment plant, where all the pipes converge. According to reports, some gutters have excrement in them. Others have noted an overpowering stench in the area surrounding the sewage treatment plant.

When a sewer system used by more than 5000 people malfunctions, you don't have a problem—you have an emergency. Indeed, AMA health inspectors have found the situation so unsafe that they have issued Achimota an ultimatum: solve this public health disaster, or shut down.

Potential Nightmare

In a boarding-school environment, where disease transmission is typically high, the current situation could easily trigger an outbreak of cholera, dysentery or even typhoid. Flies leaving an excrement-filled gutter could alight on food, for example. The school's water supply, partly sourced from groundwater, could also become contaminated.

The legal ramifications are just as frightening. This is not the first time the AMA has told Achimota to close for failing health standards. It is also reported that a student died allegedly from food poisoning. Many at the school attributed the death to contaminated food from a street vendor. With tensions still high over that incident, all it would take is for one more student to fall victim to this latest crisis, and school and government authorities could have a legal nightmare on their hands.

In response, a groundswell of support and concern has surged among parents, alumni, teachers, students and even parliamentarians. Indeed, an online petition to urge a resolution of the crisis garnered more than 800 signatures from all over the world in the first four days.

So What Happened?

Achimota's sewer system has been difficult to maintain because the maintenance funds the school receives from the Government fall far short of Achimota's actual needs. The 1300-acre campus is in reality more like a small town, and its maintenance needs reflect this. Despite alumni donations, Achimota's entire infrastructure is in severe disrepair. Additionally, since the sewer system was installed in the 1930s, the number of users has risen dramatically. Result: The treatment plant's efficiency has significantly deteriorated.

Land Encroachment

Recently, a more formidable development has sharply accelerated the sewage system's decline: land encroachment. Private developers have erected more than 400 buildings on the school grounds, leading to cracks in the sewage pipes. In other cases, houses have been built over sewage channels that should be open. Experts say that, unless the buildings closest to the plant are demolished, it may be impossible to rebuild or replace the plant. The school won a court case authorizing it start demolitions, but the

encroachers got a court injunction to halt all demolitions. Even as you read this, the construction is continuing.

The encroachment problem has expressed itself in other ways. Because the campus has no perimeter fence, outsiders have overrun the school. Speeding buses, *tro-tros* and taxis use its internal roads to avoid traffic. The games fields have become home to squatters who sleep there at night, hang their washing on the bushes, and sometimes sell illicit drugs during the day.

Who Should Fix It?

To have a working sewage plant, the school needs two things: enough unencumbered land around the plant to fix it, and enough money to finance the rehabilitation. Presently, neither is assured. The encroachment matter is under litigation. Second, the school lacks the money to undertake as complex a project as re-engineering a 5000-user sewage plant that is three-quarters of a century old, part of which now lies under encroachments.

Achimota's PTA and alumni have offered significant assistance in the past and will continue to support the school. Indeed, they have their hands full with several pressing projects: given the school's decay, a functioning sewage plant is only one of several upgrades it needs. Let us, however, be clear: Achimota's major infrastructural needs go well beyond alumni goodwill. This is a *government-owned* school. As such, it falls squarely under the Government's legal responsibility. The bulk, if not all, of the financial commitment must come from the Government.

Why? As a government school, Achimota cannot raise its fees to finance anything. Virtually all of its income is fixed by external authorities. A government school cannot be denied the ability to raise fees, *and at the same time* be informed that the Government will not fund crucial projects—even when the school has been told to close down by the Government itself!

This is a matter of a state's duty to safeguard the wellbeing of its citizens. Clearly, the Government has many pressing commitments and it cannot do everything. But Achimota's crisis can only worsen over time, and a disease outbreak could come with an unacceptably high price tag.

What Achimota needs is a cost-effective, low-maintenance, environmentally-friendly, gravity-fed sewer system. True, it will cost a substantial amount, but what realistically is the alternative? Close the school? Abandon the sewage treatment approach altogether and have an endless procession of latrine trucks bearing down on the campus to haul away the waste of more than 5000 users?

The Way Forward

Encroachment, undoubtedly, is not an Achimota-only issue. Other schools too face similar challenges. But to address any problem, one must start from somewhere. Unless the encroachers at Achimota are held accountable, those encroaching on other school lands—not to mention state and stool lands—will only be more emboldened. How Achimota's situation is handled may therefore set a national precedent.

At bottom, Achimota's sewage crisis is a human rights issue. It centres on the right of Ghana's youth to be able to learn in a hygienic environment free of extraordinary and unusual risks. Achimota may once have been the pride of Ghana, but that was then. Today the school is not asking for special treatment. We are simply requesting that the Government restore Achimota's status to that of a sanitary, habitable institution, if nothing more.

What We Urge

For these reasons, we firmly but respectfully urge the Government and the Parliament

- I. To approve enough funds to enable Achimota to rebuild its collapsed sewer system and thereby stave off the possibility of water supply contamination or disease outbreaks;
- II. To assist the school in its legal case to halt all encroachment activity;
- III. To support the school's efforts to clear land around the sewage plant to enable rehabilitation;

IV. In the longer run, to draw up a comprehensive policy for the sustainable maintenance of the assets of government-funded schools.

Sincerely,



Kingsley Orraca-Tetteh, President, Achimota School Foundation



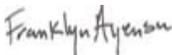
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- To find out more about the Achimota public health crisis or to donate to the Achimota cause, please visit www.ac2010.org/health-crisis/main.html.
- To join the hundreds from all over the globe who have signed the petition urging action on the Achimota matter, please visit the GoPetition website at <http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/achimota-school-health-crisis.html>.
- For further information about the positions and perspectives taken in this letter on the issue, please contact:
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