

Ken Ashigbey's next fight

• As a greater-than-Galamsey threatens

By Enimil Ashon

GAMBLING is not a new phenomenon in Ghana: prostitution is older than it by only a few years. Both are evil. That is why most sane nations with responsible leadership stop at nothing to bring them under subjugation.

Without sounding preachy, I want to place on record that it is a lie that gamblers and prostitutes operate at their own personal (private) risk. There is evidence that gambling weakens the ethics of work by encouraging idleness and holding out the seductive lure of "something for nothing".

African and Asian nations that encourage sex tourism (an euphemism for prostitution by wealthy American and West European ladies who fly to Asia and Africa in search of sex) spend the tourism dollar, thus earned, to import anti-retrovirals.

Just in case you haven't heard or read about it, there are villages in our dear country, Ghana, where farmers no longer find farming attractive and where children abandon school, preferring, rather to make money gambling.

It is reported that in rural Ghana, Chinese slot machines have, over the past

one year or so, began appearing. An *LA Times* correspondent in Ghana reports that the machines have proliferated widely and "precipitated an epidemic of gambling addiction" that is getting difficult to quell.

In the Northern Region, it is reported that the machines are everywhere, in pharmacies and electronics stores, supermarkets and cafes. In a report filed a year ago, the

correspondent wrote: "Their lure was magnetic. Soon, villagers stopped farming, leaving their yam and cassava fields fallow. Children stayed home from school. Instead, they'd queue up at the slots and play all day, until their pockets were empty or the village ran out of change altogether".

A chief is quoted as pointing out: "It's going to bring (illicit) drugs, prostitution, robbery."

Down south, evidence of the evil has come from the mouth of Mr Alexander Afenyo-Markin, Member of Parliament for the Efutu, who says he knows of 15 of the slot machines in Efutu alone, run by several Chinese companies.

His worry is that "this has a lot of kids

out of school, and it is also encouraging stealing and robbery."

Last January, the media reported that officials in Kyebi, concerned about underage gambling, confiscated 40 Chinese-run slot machines.

Investigations by this columnist point to the fact that these machines are being operated illegally. The GAMBLING MACHINES ACT - 1973 (NRCD 174) is

categorical. In Section One, it says:

(1) "No person shall import a gambling machine into Ghana without the prior consent in writing of the Commissioner (Minister) responsible for Internal Affairs", and that

(2) "No person shall install or operate a gambling machine except in accordance with a licence granted by the Commissioner."

In Section 7, the law says "No person shall install or operate a gambling machine except at a place approved for that purpose by the Commissioner." It goes on to state expressly in Section 8 that "NO PERSON SHALL PERMIT ANY PERSON UNDER THE AGE OF 18 YEARS TO USE A GAMBLING MACHINE, OR TO ENTER ANY

PLACE IN WHICH A GAMBLING MACHINE IS USED".

So why are our assemblymen and women so impotent in the face of an obvious illegality?

Dear reader, I would have you understand that this is not an exercise in China-bashing. The Chinese government is doing a lot to help our economy, but what is a booming economy if the country's citizens dwell in the midst of crime.

It is instructive to note that the government of China is itself worried stiff over the effects of gambling within China.

Last month, the state-run *Xinhua News Agency* reported that China's Public Security Minister called for a strengthening of international cooperation in the fight against illegal gambling. At a special meeting of the country's top police officers, the minister promised "severe punishment" to anyone caught flouting the country's strict anti-gambling laws.

One report quoted the Public Security Ministry as saying it had shut down four online gambling sites and frozen over 1,100 bank accounts containing more than US\$10 million. The ministry's aim, it says, is to smash companies and individuals offering or marketing gambling to its citizens from abroad.

To Chinese authorities, these companies are "economic criminals" engaged in cyber fraud and gambling crimes and were working for a company offering online gambling to Chinese citizens.