Herder Mijiddorj Ayur’s granddaughter pumps water from a shallow well to the family’s herd of Bactrian camels in the South Gobi, near the Oyu Tolgoi mine in Mongolia. Herders in the area say their water level has been declining for the past few years and are worried about the future. Mongolia, the land of Genghis Khan and nomadic herders, is in the midst of a remarkable transition. Rich in coal, gold and copper, this country of fewer than 3 million people in Central Asia is riding a mineral boom that is expected to more than double its GDP within a decade.

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An overview of the mining roads and open pit mine in the distance at Oyu Tolgoi. The gold and copper mine will be the third largest in the world when complete. The rapid economic changes simultaneously excite and unnerve many Mongolians, who hope mining can help pull many out of poverty, but worry it will ravage the environment and further erode the nation’s distinctive, nomadic identity.

Oxidized copper, visible here in one area of Oyu Tolgoi’s open-pit mine, gave the mine in the southern Gobi region its name, which means “Turquoise Hill”.

Digging for gold is technically illegal. But many Mongolians do it anyway when they hear of a strike to supplement their incomes. Workers in the Gobi who can’t get hired by mining companies often strike out on their own. Mongolia has an estimated 70,000 illegal gold prospectors.