

The Congo Still Ravaged by U.S.-Funded Conflict and Plunder

Genocide and Rape Stain Companies' "Blood" Mineral Profits

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In November 2013, the army of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), bolstered by United Nations forces, claimed to have defeated M-23, the most powerful supposedly rebel militia in the Eastern Congo. This was the first time that the army (known by the French acronym FARDC) was thought to have scored a major victory over a significant "rebel" group.

But in fact M-23 is not a rebel organization. It is composed of Rwandan government soldiers, and its military activities have been funded by Rwanda and Uganda, the DRC's neighbours. M-23 members were warned in advance of the FARDC/UN offensive, and managed to escape to Rwanda and Uganda, where they are now regrouping.

About 40 other such militias remain in the Eastern Congo, making the achievement of peace there unlikely any time soon.

The United States instigated the invasion of the DRC by its proxies Rwanda and Uganda in 1996 and 1998, and the subsequent slaughter of 6.9 million Congolese has devastated the country. Washington's goal was to plunder the enormous mineral riches of the Congo through the proxy use of Rwanda's and Uganda's troops. These two states formally withdrew their forces from the Congo in 2003, but continued looting its minerals through their puppet militias, including the M-23

"The U.S. has financed and given overall direction to the worst genocide since World War II," says Glen Ford, editor of the Black Agenda Report, the leading website on U.S. policy towards Africa. "Since 1996, Washington has drenched Congo's eastern provinces in the blood of over six million people. The governments of Rwanda and Uganda, the direct perpetrators of this holocaust, are in every sense of the word agents of U.S. foreign policy, who operate with impunity under the imperial umbrella.

"For 18 years, Uganda and Rwanda have done the bidding of their pay-masters and arms suppliers, the American and British governments. If the Nuremberg rules of international justice were in force today, the highest officials in Washington and London would face death by hanging for their monstrous crimes - and only later would Presidents Kagame of Rwanda and Museveni of Uganda take their walk with the executioner."

The Congo War is considered the deadliest and one of the most prolonged conflicts since the Second World War, and the massive looting of its mineral resources that has accompanied the warfare has converted the DRC into the second poorest country in the world (after Niger). This is appalling, given that the Congo is probably the richest country in the world in terms of mineral resources.

Congo's simultaneous wealth and poverty, according to Jeffrey Gettleman writing in National Geographic, "doesn't make any sense, until you understand that militia-controlled mines in Eastern Congo have been feeding raw materials into the world's biggest electronics and jewellery companies... Turns out your laptop — or camera or gaming system or gold necklace — may have a smidgen of Congo's pain somewhere in it."

The Rwandan/Ugandan invasion has opened up the DRC's wealth to unlimited plunder by Western mining companies, including Canada's Banro Corporation. Canadian mining investment in the Congo is estimated to be as much as \$3 billion. A 2002 UN report accused eight Canadian mining companies, including Banro, of "pillaging the Congo." As reported in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Banro and Barrick Gold (the biggest Canadian mining company) have been accused of "funding military operations in exchange for lucrative contracts" in the Congo.

According to Maurice Carney, co-director of the NGO "Friends of the Congo" which is based in Washington D.C., "Banro has a sweetheart deal under which it got 100% ownership of gold concessions in the east of the country, complete with a 10-year tax holiday. Banro's concession is estimated to be worth over \$10 billion."

"Multinational corporations operating in Eastern Congo," says Congo expert Keith Harmon Snow, "are soaked in Congolese blood. They include Banro Gold, Casa Mining, Randgold, Mwana Africa, Loncor, Anglo-Gold Ashanti, Kilo Gold, and Moku Gold. These are U.S., Canadian, Australian, and European mining corporations. They all have deep ties to the criminal extortion, money-laundering, racketeering and theft behind the plunder and depopulation in the Great Lakes countries [the region], and ties to Kagame and Museveni and their agents."

Anvil Mining, which was a Canadian company until 2011, with operations in the Congo, has been sued by Congolese plaintiffs in a Quebec court for contributing to the massacre of 70 civilians in the DRC by the country's army.

The DRC is located in the heart of Africa and is the continent's second biggest country, about the size of Western Europe. The Congo possesses an astounding \$24 trillion in mineral reserves, including gold, diamonds, copper, cobalt, coltan, tin, tungsten, zinc, manganese, magnesium, uranium, niobium, gold, diamonds, and silver. These minerals are needed to make jet engines, cars, missiles, computers, cell-phones, electronic components, iron and steel, as well as required in fibre optics and in other military and high-tech production. The DRC also has a "potentially vast oil industry" and large stands of timber. This enormous wealth is equal to the GDPs of the U.S. and Western Europe combined. Eastern Congo contains most of the country's mineral riches.

In the east, armed militias compete for control of mines and the routes for mineral transportation. According to Giunta Carrie, writing in Pambazuka News, the most prominent website for African political affairs,

“Minerals are channeled through the neighbouring countries of Rwanda and Uganda by violent rebel groups and then bought by multinational companies. The Washington Post reports Congolese minerals are smuggled into Rwanda to the tune of \$6 million a day.”

In addition to the millions of Congolese killed, the Western looting of the country’s resources has resulted in 400,000 women being raped, 2.6 million people being displaced, and 7,000 children being forced to become soldiers. Rape has been used on a horrifying scale as a weapon of war. According to Carol Mann, president of the NGO FEMAID,

“The DRC’s mineral economy is fuelling the violence against the country’s women. Blood-gold, blood copper, blood-coltan (the all-precious material that goes into your mobile phones and computers) are at the heart of the violence.”

Giunta Carrie explains that

“the largely femicidal war in Congo is tied to the huge appetite of the West for strategic minerals essential to the electronics and military industries . . . [as] criminal regimes in Uganda and Rwanda sponsor proxy militias whose violence facilitates the smuggling of these minerals through the two African nations.”

As Carol Mann puts it, behind the militias’

“activities [are] global market interests. Companies do not have private armies and depend on local militias to access mines and even organize their exploitation. In this context, mass rape has been used increasingly as a form of terror in mining zones, employed in ways to facilitate armed militias gaining access to and maintaining control over priceless resources. Indeed, prevalence of rape seems to be correlated to the presence of mines.”

“Rape is the most economical form of violence against a community,” says Venantie Bisimwa, a women’s rights activist from Bukavu city in Eastern Congo. “Families are instantaneously destroyed.”

Adds Congolese activist Bodia Bavuidi, a specialist in women and gender studies:

“The rapes are aimed at the systematic destruction of the Congolese people. They terrorize a whole nation and entire generations. The women are raped in front of their fathers, they make the father rape his daughter, even three-month old babies have been raped. Five-year-old boys are made to watch all this, and this generation of boys, when they grow up, what will they become after they see this happening to their family members? What will we become as a people? And all this incredible suffering is inflicted on Congolese women and children so that Westerners can live comfortably and give video games as Christmas gifts to their children.”

Giunta Carrie asks:

“Considering that violence and brutality in the DRC is proportionate to the demand for the eastern regions of the country’s rich mineral deposits, the question is: what is creating a heightened demand for conflict minerals?” Her answer: “The rush for [the mineral] coltan engenders the violence in the DRC. Spearheading that demand is tantalum, a key ingredient in new military technologies. The U.S. obsession with remote-controlled warfare, especially drones, is sharpening the appetite for tantalum.”

The Eastern Congo is the largest source of the world’s coltan, containing 80% of it. Coltan is a mineral crucial for the manufacture of cell-phones, computers, smart phones, and the latest military weaponry such as drones. Coltan is an amalgam of the two metals columbine and tantalum. According to Carrie, competition for such minerals “has a direct effect on the relentless violence in the region... As stockpiles run low, it is most likely a tantalum shortage could intensify violence again... Today the price of tantalum is up again, and the rise in price corresponds to the violent situation on the ground.

“Tantalum derived from coltan is essential in powering a new trend of military applications made by the U.S. Yet the U.S. has no domestic source of coltan... and its tantalum stocks have been depleted in recent years. In order to sustain a continued flow of coltan, the U.S. depends entirely on imports. Tantalum capacitors are important for aerospace and military technologies, which rely on them for running applications that reach very high temperatures.

“This extends to smart bombs, on-board navigation in drones and robots, and a variety of weapons systems, such as the capacitors in anti-tank systems. If it were not for tantalum’s amazing heat-resistant properties, these systems would otherwise overheat. Tantalum capacitors can tolerate operating environments of up to 200°C.”

Carrie points out that advocates of conflict-free minerals usually focus on consumer electronics such as smart-phones and laptops, and “make the mistake of overlooking the links between minerals and the weapons manufacturing industry. It is doubtful that defence companies will be seeking out conflict-free mineral sources any time soon. A conflict-free weapon is an oxymoron.

“At the current rate, the weapons industry could exceed smart-phone and tablet makers in coltan consumption, if it has not already. The extended use of drones in the past decade means the U.S. needs tantalum because the basic circuitry in drones is built with tantalum from refined coltan. This connection to weapons manufacturing gives new meaning to the term ‘blood coltan’.”

Along with his army, Joseph Kabila, the current President of the DRC, is also involved in looting the country’s resources. He “won” fraudulent elections in 2011 and is very corrupt. Says Maurice Carney,

“Kabila has definitely sold out to U.S. imperialism. He serves as a toll-gate for Western corporate interests. He sells off Congo’s riches for pennies on the dollar, especially to his Israeli billionaire friend Dan Gertler, who has made over \$2 billion from deals in the Congo. In the latest transaction, Gertler obtained a

Congo oil block for \$500,000 and sold it back to the Congolese government for \$150 million without having done anything to develop the concession. According to British MP Eric Joyce, the Congo has lost over \$5.5 billion in opaque deals and corruption.”

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