

The minerals at the heart of the campaign and their global significance

By Barnaby Dye

Congo Calling's campaign focuses on the world of mining and its role in the creation and prolonging of conflict. Whilst the conflict in the Congo is the motivation for the campaign, establishing a "conflict-free" badge for minerals that are used in mobile technologies has global significance. This is because the Congo is not the only place where mining provides the fuel (sometimes literally) for armed groups. The control of mining activities and their profits gives a group local power: the ability to buy weapons, food, vehicles etc and to make bribes. The resources from mining are a key underlying factor for conflict. The Democratic Republic of Congo is perhaps the country most affected by the mining of conflict minerals, but there are many cases of it elsewhere on the African continent and internationally. Therefore understanding the source of the minerals in the products you buy could help many nations around the world.

The "Conflict" Minerals

There are a number of minerals that have tended to be extracted in conflict zones. One uniting factor is their usefulness in everyday life and thus high value.

The main minerals mined in the Congo and associated with conflict in the East are cassiterite (producing tin), coltan/columbium–tantallite (producing niobium and tantalum), wolframite (producing tungsten) and gold. Coltan has attracted particular attention because the extracted minerals make the tantalum capacitor, an important electronic component. The minerals are extracted by small-scale artisanal miners who are controlled by or forced to sell to rebel groups or rogue elements of the national army. A large proportion of the minerals are then smuggled out of the country to neighbouring nations including Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda before being sold to international corporations. The Congo is a significant producer of coltan minerals, consistently contributing 20% of the global output. This figure rose to 50% in 2011 (US Geological Survey, 2011), in part because of the international financial crisis. The Congo is also rich in gold, and so this expensive metal has also been mined and sold to profit armed groups.

The Central African Republic also has coltan and gold. Armed groups have been able to control mining activities in areas under their jurisdiction and have used these resources, along with diamond mining, to finance the ongoing conflict. International NGOs have highlighted these activities, for example Global Witness and IPIS. As a result the Central African Republic was temporarily suspended from the Kimberley Process in January 2013.

Another source of conflict coltan, although on a much smaller scale, is in Latin America. Mining coltan is illegal in both Colombia and Venezuela, yet it is being extracted in the border region of both countries. Mining here is done by local artisans often linked to paramilitary groups, drug gangs and smaller militia that operate in the region. The presence of such mining has been reported by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and Venezuelan court records describe the seizure of 3,960 pounds of mined Coltan between

2009 and 2011. The Columbian police have also captured coltan, for instance they report capturing 54 tons of ore in September 2009. The trade has exacerbated the conflict in this area, allegedly helping paramilitary groups such as FARC.

The Global Reach of Congo Calling's Work

By highlighting the role of mining in conflicts around the world Congo Calling is stimulating a globally relevant social movement. Conflict free mining will cut the line of financing that has until now helped paramilitary groups, drug gangs and local warlords. Although the Congo has suffered arguably more than any other country as a result of 'conflict' mining, establishing a 'conflict-free' label should assist a much wider range of countries now and in the future.

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