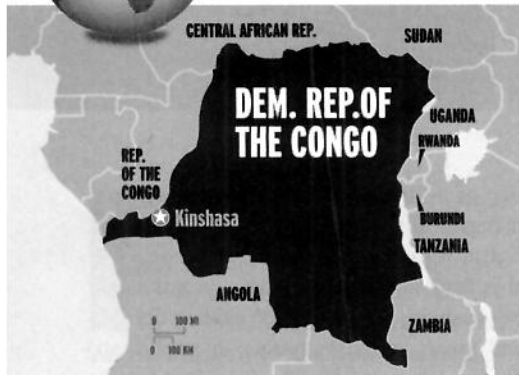


Is Your Phone A Cause of War?

A lot of the high-tech gadgets we can't live without contain minerals that are part of the conflict in war-torn Congo

BY NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF



Congolese workers in a storage facility for tantalum ore, used in many high-tech products

A few years ago, there was a lot of talk about “blood diamonds”—diamonds from war-torn countries in Africa, the sales of which were financing brutal rebel armies inflicting horrible violence on civilians in a number of African countries.

You don't hear much about blood diamonds these days,* but we may now be carrying “blood phones.”

Some of our elegant symbols of modernity—smartphones, laptops, and digital cameras—are built from minerals that seem to be fueling mass slaughter and rape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire).

I've never reported on a war more barbaric than Congo's, and it haunts me. In Congo, I've seen women who've been mutilated, children who've been forced to eat their parents' flesh, and girls who've been subjected to rapes that destroyed their insides. Various warlords, each vying for control, finance their armies and this abuse in part through the sale of mineral ore containing tantalum, tungsten, tin, and gold. Tantalum from Congo is used to make electrical components that go into phones, computers, and gaming devices.

Electronics manufacturers have tried to hush all this up. They want you to look at a gadget and think “sleek,” not “blood.”

Yet now there's a grassroots movement pressuring companies to keep these minerals out of high-tech supplies. Using Facebook and YouTube, activists are harassing companies like Apple and Research in Motion (which makes BlackBerry) to get them to lean on suppliers and ensure the use of, say, tantalum rather than tantalum from Congolese militias.

Facebook Activism

In June, for example, protesters demonstrated outside the grand opening of an Apple store in Washington, D.C., demanding the company commit to using only “clean” minerals. In May, activists blanketed Intel's website with calls to support tougher legislation to curb trade in conflict minerals. Intel disabled comments—creating a firestorm called more attention to blood minerals. Various human rights campaigners ever could have called for such action. Partly as a result, the U.S. financial community passed this summer legislation that requires companies to report on their use of conflict minerals.

Here's the background: Eastern Congo is the site of the most lethal conflict since World War II and is widely described as the blood capital of the world. The war has claimed 5.4 million lives as of April 2007, with deaths mounting by 45,000 a month, according to

*Lobbying efforts by a variety of groups led the U.S. and other countries to ban the import of diamonds from Sierra Leone in 2001. A 2006 movie, *Blood Diamond*, with Leonardo DiCaprio, raised public awareness.

study by the International Rescue Committee.

It's not that American tech companies are responsible for the slaughter, or that eliminating conflict minerals from our phones will immediately end the war. Even the Enough Project, an anti-genocide organization that's been a leader in the current campaign, estimates that only one fifth of the world's tantalum comes from Congo.

"There's no magic-bullet solution to peace in Congo," says David Sullivan of the Enough Project, "but this is one of the drivers of the conflict."

In other words, the economics of the war are part of what needs to be addressed in order to resolve it.

The Obama administration also should put more pressure on Rwanda to play a constructive role next door in Congo. Rwanda has, inexcusably, backed one militia and bolstered others by dealing extensively in the conflict minerals trade.

Impeding trade in conflict minerals is also a piece of the Congo puzzle, and because of public pressure, a group of companies led by Intel and Motorola is now developing a process to track the origins of tantalum in supply chains.

Can Brutal Be Cool?

Manufacturers previously settled for statements from suppliers that they do not business in eastern Congo, but there was no effort to verify the claims. And checking the supply chains at smelters to determine whether minerals are clean or bloody would not be expensive. According to the Enough Project, it would add about a penny to the price of a cellphone.

"Apple is claiming that their products don't contain conflict minerals because their suppliers say so," says Jonathan Hutson of the Enough Project. "People are saying that answer is not good enough. That's why there's this grassroots movement, so that we as consumers can choose to buy conflict free."

Some ideas about what consumers can do are at raisehopeforCongo.org—starting with spreading the word. We may be able to undercut some of the world's most brutal militias simply by making it clear to electronics manufacturers that we don't want our gadgets to enrich sadistic gunmen.

No phone or tablet computer can be considered "cool" if it may be helping perpetuate one of the most brutal wars on the planet. ●

Nicholas D. Kristof is a columnist for The New York Times.



Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga (seated) is now on trial in the Hague for war crimes; selling conflict minerals is a key source of revenue for rebel groups in Congo.