
Congo, Democratic Republic: Cell phones, forest destruction and death

Could anyone imagine that cell phones are tainted with the blood of 3.2 million deaths since 1998? Also, that the same thing happens with some children's video games? And that mega-technologies contribute to forest depredation and spoliation of the rich natural resources of paradoxically impoverished peoples?

In the case of these new high techs, it is Coltan that is at stake --the minerals columbium and tantalite, or Coltan for short. Tantalite is a rare, hard and dense metal, very resistant to corrosion and high temperatures and is an excellent electricity and heat conductor. It is used in the microchips of cell phone batteries to prolong duration of the charge, making this business flourish. Provisions for 2004 foresee sales of 1,000 million units. To these properties are added that its extraction does not entail heavy costs --it is obtained by digging in the mud-- and that it is easily sold, enabling the companies involved in the business to obtain juicy dividends.

Even though Coltan is extracted in Brazil, Thailand and much of it from Australia --the prime producer of Coltan on a world level-- it is in Africa where 80% of the world reserves are to be found. Within this continent, the Democratic Republic of Congo concentrates over 80% of the deposits, where 10,000 miners toil daily in the province of Kivu (eastern Congo), a territory that has been occupied since 1998 by the armies of Rwanda and Uganda. A series of companies has been set up in the zone, associated to large transnational capital, local governments and military forces (both state and "guerrilla") in a dispute over the control of the region for the extraction of Coltan and other minerals. The United Nations has not hesitated to state that this strategic mineral is funding a war that the former United States Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright called "the first African world war" (and we understand by world wars, those in which the great powers share out the world), and is one of its causes.

In August 1998, the Congolese Union for Democracy (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie-RCD), launched a rebellion in the city of Goma, supported by the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA). Since then, in a struggle in which, behind the myth of ethnic rivalries, are hidden the old colonial powers that continue to ransack the wealth of post-Colonial Africa, the war has been rife between two, loosely defined parties. On the one hand the RDC and the Governments of Rwanda and Uganda, supported by the United States, relying on the military bases such as that built in Rwanda by the United States company Brown & Root, a branch of Halliburton, where Rwandese forces are trained and logistic support is provided to their troops in the DRC, together with United States combat helicopters and spy satellites. The other party is made up of the Democratic Republic of Congo (led by one of Kabila's sons, after his father was assassinated by the Rwandese), Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

However, behind these states are the companies sharing out the zone. Various joint companies have been set up for this purpose, the most important one being SOMIGL (the Great Lakes Mining Company), a joint company set up in November 2000, involving Africom, Premeco, Cogecom and Cogear, (the latter two are Belgium companies --it should be remembered that DRC, formerly the Belgium Congo, was a Belgium colony), Masingiro GmbH (a German company) and various other

companies that ceased their activities in January 2002 for various reasons (a drop in Coltan prices, difficult working conditions, suspension of Coltan imports from DRC) and are waiting for better conditions: Sogem (a Belgian company), Cabot and Kemet (U.S.) the joint United States-German company Eagles Wings Resources (now with headquarters in Rwanda), among others.

The transport companies belong to close family members of the presidents of Rwanda and Uganda. In these virtually military zones, private air companies bring in arms and take out minerals. Most of the Coltan extracted is later refined by a small number of companies in Germany, the United States, Kazakhstan and the Far East. The branch of Bayer, Starck produces 50% of powdered tantalite on a world level. Dozens of companies are linked to the traffic and elaboration of this product, with participation of the major monopolizing companies in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United States. As if this were not enough, the Trade, Development and Industry Bank, created in 1996 with headquarters in the capital city of Rwanda, Kigali, acts as correspondent for the CITIBANK in the zone, and handles large amounts of money from Coltan, gold and diamond operations. Thirty-four companies import Coltan from the Congo, among these, 27 are of western origin, mainly Belgium, Dutch and German.

The Belgium air company, Sabena is one of the means of transporting the mineral from Kigali (capital city of Rwanda) to Brussels, and associated to American Airlines, announced last 15 June the suspension of the service, under strong pressure from the world campaign "No blood on my cell phone!" (or: "Pas de sang sur mon GSM"), exhorting people not to buy cell phones containing Coltan due to its repercussion on the prolongation of the civil war in the Congo. As a result of this campaign, the Belgium research institute International Peace Information Service (IPIS) produced a document in January 2002 "Supporting the War Economy in the DRC: European Companies and the Coltan Trade," which documents the leading role played by the companies in promoting the war through their cooperation with the military and exhorting that the international consideration of the Coltan trade be given priority over its local aspects.

The main zones where Coltan is extracted are located in forest zones, such as the Ituri forest (see WRM bulletin No. 67). The entry of military commandos and workers (many of them farmers who have been dispossessed of their lands and resources, seeking the promise of better income), the installation of mining camps, the construction of routes to reach and take out the coveted mineral, all this goes to conspire against the forest as a whole. Formerly fulfilling functions for the region and the neighbouring peoples, the forest, once the traditional lands of the hunting and gathering indigenous peoples, such as the Mbuti and a reserve for gorillas and okapis --a relative of the giraffe-- the habitat of elephants and monkeys, has become the scenario for war and depredation.

The African journalist, Kofi Akosah-Sarpong has even stated that "Coltan in general terms is not helping the local people. In fact, it is the curse of the Congo." He has revealed that there is evidence that this material contaminates, pointing out its connection with congenital deformations in babies in the mining zone, which are born with bandy legs.

Far from clean and innocent, these technologies, on which the concentration of capitals is based and built, have acquired through their "globalisation" their highest expression, contaminating and breaking up the web of life in its multiple and rich manifestations. In the meanwhile, over the tombs of the 2000 African children and farmers who die every day in the Congo, can we absentmindedly continue to use our cell phones?

Article based on information from: "Supporting the War Economy in the DRC: European Companies and the Coltan Trade" and "European companies and the Coltan Trade: an Update", International

Peace Information Service, <http://users.skynet.be/ipis/tnewpubsnl.htm> ; "Basta de matanzas y saqueo en el Congo", Solidarité Europe-Afrique, Belgium, <http://www2.minorisa.es/inshuti/extracto.htm> ; "La fiebre del coltan: el imperialismo continúa", Ramiro de Altube, Observatorio de Conflictos, correo electrónico: obserflictos@yahoo.com.ar , <http://www.nodo50.org/observatorio/coltan.htm> ; "La fiebre del coltan", Ramón Lobo, El País Spain, 2/09/2001, <http://www.elpais.es/suplementos/domingo/20010902/1fiebre.html>; "UN report accuses Western companies of looting Congo", Chris Talbot, 26/10/2002, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/oct2002/cong-o26.shtml> ; "The Trouble With Coltan", Kofi Akosah-Sarpong, <http://www.expotimes.net/issue020116/AAbusiness2.htm>