

Coltan: What You Should Know

From Friends of the Congo Website

April 2010

What is Coltan?

Coltan is short for Columbite-tantalite - a black tar-like mineral found in major quantities in the Congo. The Congo possesses 64 percent of the world's coltan. When coltan is refined it becomes a heat resistant powder that can hold a high electric charge. The properties of refined coltan is a vital element in creating devices that store energy or capacitors, which are used in a vast array of small electronic devices, especially in mobile phones, laptop computers, pagers, and other electronic devices.

Who are the primary exploiters of Coltan in the Congo?

Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and their proxy militias are the primary exploiters of coltan in the Congo. In an 18 month period Rwanda made \$250 million as a result of exploitation of coltan in the Congo. Although Rwanda and Uganda possess little or no coltan, during the period of the war in the Congo, their exports escalated exponentially. For example, Rwanda's coltan export went from less than 50 tons in 1995 to almost 250 tons in 1998. Zero cassiterite was transported from the Congo to Uganda in 1998, however by 2000 151 drums were transported.

The United Nations notes in its 2001 report on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources in the Congo that "The consequences of illegal exploitation has been twofold: (a) massive availability of financial resources for the Rwandan Patriotic Army, and the individual enrichment of top Ugandan military commanders and civilians; (b) the emergence of illegal networks headed by either top military officers or businessmen."

Foreign Corporate exploitation

Although the countries mentioned above directly exploit coltan, foreign multi-national corporations have been deeply involved in the exploitation of coltan in the Congo. The coltan mined by rebels and foreign forces is sold to foreign corporations. Although, the United Nations in its reports on the Congo do not directly blame the multi-national corporations for the conflict in the Congo, the United Nations does say that these companies serve as "the engine of the conflict in the DRC."

Major United States players identified by the UN include:

Cabot Corporation, Boston, MA

OM Group, Cleveland, Ohio

AVX, Myrtle Beach, SC

Eagle Wings Resources International, Ohio

Trinitech International, Ohio

Kemet Electronics Corporation, Greenville, SC

Vishay Sprague, Malvern, PA

Corporations from other countries have been a part of the coltan exploitation chain. These companies include but are not limited to Germany's HC Starc and EPCOS, China's Nigncxia, and Belgium's Traxys and George Forrest International.

Once the coltan is processed and converted to capacitors, it is then sold to companies such as Nokia, Motorola, Compaq, Alcatel, Dell, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Lucent, Ericsson and Sony for

use in a wide assortment of everyday products ranging from cell phones to computer chips and game consoles.

What are some of the uses of coltan in modern society?

- Laptop computers
- Cellular phones
- Jet engines
- Rockets
- Cutting tools
- Camera lenses
- X-ray film
- Ink jet printers
- Hearing aids
- Pacemakers
- Airbag protection systems
- Ignition and motor control modules, GPS, ABS systems in automobiles
- Game consoles such as playstation, xbox and nintendo
- Video cameras
- Digital still cameras
- Sputtering targets
- Chemical process equipment
- Cathodic protection systems for steel structures such as bridges, water tanks
- Prosthetic devices for humans – hips, plates in the skull, also mesh to repair bone removed after damage by cancer
- Suture clips
- Corrosion resistant fasteners, screws, nuts, bolts
- High temperature furnace parts.
- High temperature alloys for air and land based turbines

A path to peace and stability in the Congo require the following:

1. Cessation of U.S. and British carte blanche military and financial support for Paul Kagame and Yoweri Museveni
2. The opening of political space in Rwanda and Uganda
3. Holding to account Western Mining Interests who contribute to the fueling of the conflict and the exploiting of the people
4. Support for Congolese civic society and local institutions
5. Support justice and reconciliation throughout the Congo

Links and Resources

Coltan Wiki Facts

Guns, Money and Cell Phones

United Nations Coltan Primer

Congo's Coltan Rush!

POLE Institute Report "The Coltan Phenomenon!" (PDF)

Columbium and Tantalum: US Geological Survey (PDF)

"Stolen Goods: Coltan and Conflict ..." by Dana Montague (PDF)