

Forum: UN Office on Drugs and Crime

Issue: Addressing Illegal Mining, Trafficking, and Instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as a Consequence of Increased Demand for Minerals

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Introduction

Cobalt production

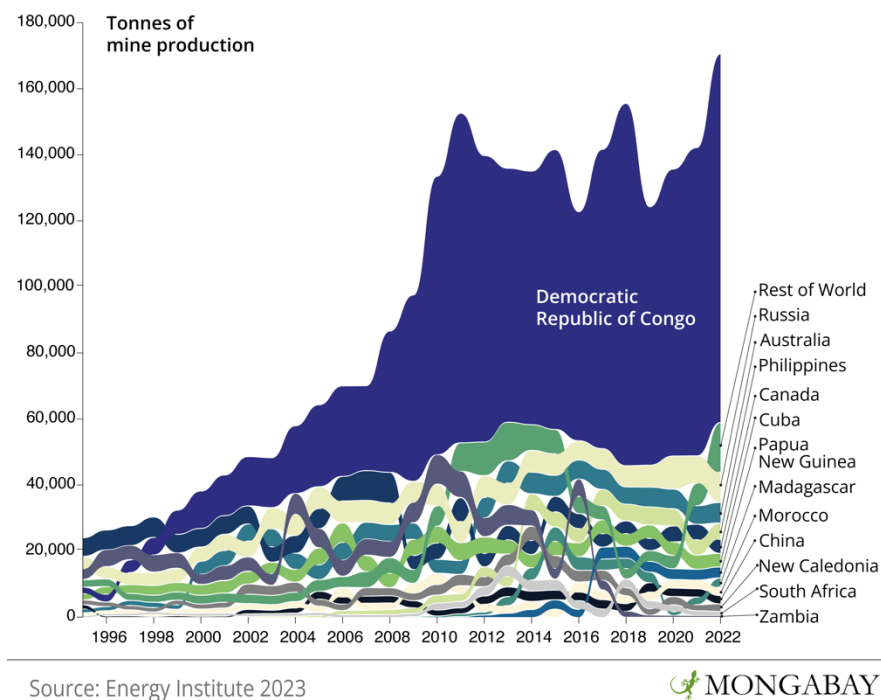


Figure 1: A graph to illustrate DRC's dominant cobalt production compared to the rest of the world

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a country where metals like cobalt, copper, gold, and coltan- virtually all the materials needed to make smartphones and electric cars- are in abundance, placing it at the center of the entire minerals market. However, despite its position as one of the richest countries in the world, the DRC is also one of the poorest and most unstable. The DRC's mineral wealth has come with a lot more than development. It has become a breeding ground of conflict, corruption, and human rights abuse, a place where profitability comes at the cost of human dignity.

Since the late 1990s, armed groups have been fighting to control mining territories and to fund their activities with the help of the illicit trade of conflict minerals. The DRC is the source of an estimated 70 percent of

the world's cobalt, which is a vital component in lithium-ion batteries. A fifth of this output is also produced on informal or artisanal mines. In them, miners, including tens of thousands of children as young as seven, work in dangerous conditions, without safety equipment or legal protection. Attempts to control the industry have recorded limited success. Programs like the Dodd-Frank Act of the United States, Section 1502, and the OECD Due Diligence Guidance have advocated increased transparency in global supply chains, yet laxity in enforcement has allowed the smuggling networks to continue and even flourish. Weaknesses in the state and corruption in the armed groups and rogue militia create an unstable environment through the illegal collection of taxes, which weakens the rule of law. In the meantime, uncontrolled mining activities, such as mercury pollution, deforestation, and water pollution, cause more damage to local communities already afflicted by poverty.

In September 2025, Bintou Keita, the UN Special Representative in the DRC, told the Security Council that, despite being in the DRC, the peace there remains largely a promise and that, unless the causes of conflict are resolved, it will not last. The illegal mining crisis in DRC is a national tragedy, but its impacts and influences the entire world today. With the shift towards green technologies and sustainable energy, the demand of Congolese minerals is on the rise. This green revolution will be erected at the expense of the miners, who are exploited unless there is a comprehensive overhaul of the system. The global community, then, is confronted by a characteristic dilemma of how to reconcile the need to be economically viable and the need to be ethically accountable.

Definition of Key Terms

Mineral Crime

The illicit and illegal activities surrounding the extraction, trade, and trafficking of minerals, including environmental destruction, corruption, human rights abuses, and money laundering.

Illegal mining

Mining conducted without legal authorization from the state, or in violation of regulations that leads to environmental harm and economic disruption.

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM)

A global economic sector that uses primarily simple tools and low-tech, labor-intensive methods to extract minerals like gold, diamonds, and metals such as cobalt and tin. It is often informal, with miners working individually or in small groups.

Large-scale mining (LSM)

A capital-intensive, legal form of mineral extraction typically conducted by multinational companies that use advanced technology and large workforces to achieve high rates of production.

Critical Energy Transition Minerals (CETMs)

Essential resources like copper, lithium, nickel, cobalt, and rare earth elements whose demand has intensified illegal extraction. CETMs are needed for today's rapidly growing clean energy technologies, such as solar panels and electric vehicles.

Conflict Minerals

Minerals from war zones that fund violence and are illegally traded by armed groups to finance their activities in the DRC- primarily include tantalum, tin, gold, and tungsten (3TG).

Mineral Supply Chain Due Diligence

The process companies use to identify, assess, and mitigate risks of human rights abuses, conflict financing, and other financial crimes in their mineral sourcing, per OECD and EU rules (OECD Due Diligence Guidance).

Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs)

Outflow of illegal mining profits from mineral activities across borders, often laundered, depriving the DRC of development funds and increasing economic instability.

Background

Historical Context of Mining and Conflict in the DRC

Indigenous peoples had been mining long before the arrival of colonial powers in the DRC. An example is the Katanga Cross, a cross made of copper sand-cast dating back to the 14th century, which was used as a mark of wealth and later as currency. During the Berlin conference that resulted in the Scramble of Africa, the copper mining area in the DRC was controlled by indigenous peoples who were predominantly a part of the Yeke Kingdom under the leadership of Msiri.

Colonization of the DRC took place in two forms: the rule of King Leopold II of Belgium (1885-1908) and the Belgian colonization (1908-1960). The two periods were characterized by harsh mining and compulsion of labor in copper and diamond mines. Firms like Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (1906) and Forminière (1913) increased mining for European profit. The colonial rulers, such as Georges Moulaert, were infamous for their heavy usage of forced labor in the mining activities. It was only after gaining its independence in 1960 that the DRC was no longer subjected to exploitation and discrimination with an estimated 10 million Congolese lives lost under the reign of Leopold.

The country was plunged into disorder when Congo achieved independence, turning into a contention ground during the Cold War. Mobutu Sese Seko, who took over power in 1965, initially brought stability by

nationalizing all mining and mineral rights. However, this gave elites the power to monopolize the state enterprises and allow corruption to infiltrate the whole system. Rwandan and Ugandan invasions enabled foreign forces and militia groups to capture the mining fields, which funded the war using coltan, tin, tungsten, and gold. These wars resulted in more than five million deaths and were termed as the African World War. The Sun City Agreement of 2002 tried to demilitarize mining areas but left over 100 armed groups in the east. By the 2010s, laws such as the U.S. Dodd-Frank Act attempted to prevent the conflict mineral trade, yet smuggling continued on the rise with the growth of technology demand around the world. This unrest, coupled with the occurrence of precious minerals, paved the way to the present situation in the Congo.

Current State of Illegal Mining in the DRC

The DRC is a highly mineral-dependent economy, with the industry contributing 12.8 percent economic growth in 2024 and 6.5 percent to the country's total GDP growth. The nation continues to be the center of the global supply of cobalt with an estimated half of the world's cobalt reserves within its borders while serving as a world-leading production of more than 70 percent in 2023, along with major production in copper, gold, and coltan. Estimates of this production are between 15 percent to 30 percent as it is a result of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), which is a highly informal or illegal mining method that can be exploited. It is estimated that up to 2 million Congolese rely on ASM to make their living and approximately 150,000 to 200,000 miners directly participate in cobalt mining. Although ASM has offered employment in strategic areas where the mining activity can be conducted, such as Katanga (Haut-Katanga and Lualaba), Ituri, and the Kivu provinces, the areas have also been used to trade and smuggle illegitimate minerals. Minerals are usually traded to Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, and they are combined with legally obtained materials and exported.

Armed Groups, Organized Crime and Political Implications

Mining in the regions has contributed to funding and supporting the operations of the armed groups and organized criminal groups. M23, Mai Mai factions, and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) are among the over 100 armed groups that have been using red zones in major areas to mine minerals that discredit the sovereignty of the Congo state. UN estimates indicate that these groups have been making millions every year, with the M23 rebel group making \$300,000 every month just on the coltan sites alone to sustain their operations. In 2025, M23 was reported to have smuggled 195 tons of 3T minerals (tin, tantalum, tungsten) within a week. It is a complicated network of informal mining and smuggling, which perpetuates poverty at 72.9 percent and contributes to political instability. Due to this resource-based conflict, there has been an escalation in 2025, where M23 has committed mass killings, and at least 140-319 civilian deaths occurred in a weak truth.

Trafficking is also facilitated by corruption, including bribery to get permits and collusion along the border. The foreign business actors, especially Chinese ones, are playing an increasingly complicated role in the DRC mining industry. China is the largest consumer and processor of cobalt globally, and Chinese companies have joint ventures and long-term concession deals in approximately 70-80 percent of the cobalt production in the DRC. The fact that DRC is dependent on Chinese foreign investment restricts the leverage of the government to implement

stricter labor, environmental, or transparency policies and ultimately does not allow any meaningful reforms to take place. Thus, the resource wealth of the DRC continues to remain a key strategic geopolitical battleground.

Environmental Impacts of Illegal Mining

With clean energy production and multi-sector technological innovation on the rise, global demand for precious metals and critical minerals like gold, copper, lithium, cobalt, and tantalum will only grow in the years ahead, yet mining these minerals will bring major negative impacts on biodiversity and the environment. In particular, illegal and unregulated mining in the DRC has caused severe environmental damage, specifically in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve in the Congo Basin, home to the world's second-largest tropical rainforest. Due to the informal nature of ASM operations, they often occur without environmental safeguards, resulting in deforestation, soil erosion, and water contamination. Miners in particular cut trees for firewood, construction, and charcoal, driving deforestation. "[T]he trees have all been cut, and of course the river has been polluted quite heavily because of the chemicals they use during the mining process. It's a real mess," John Lukas, president of the Okapi Wildlife Project, an NGO, told Mongabay in 2023.

Meanwhile, occurring in more than half of the mining sites, restaurants visited frequently by miners sell illegal bushmeat from poaching. Furthermore, in gold processing, the use of toxic chemicals such as mercury and cyanide contaminates rivers and groundwater, threatening both aquatic ecosystems and the health of local communities. While efforts to address mining in the reserve were made with the collaboration between high levels of the DRC government and the UNESCO World Heritage Center, where a joint committee was formed, progress has been slow. Evidently, the ongoing environmental destruction stems from the lack of environmental governance and enforcement and is inseparable from the social and economic impacts of illegal mining in the DRC.

Social and Humanitarian Impacts

Humanitarian and social impacts that illegal mining, especially ASM, has on the DRC influence the most vulnerable members of the Congolese society: children and women. Recent statistics indicate that some 40,000 children are working in the DRC in cobalt mining. In 2024, LIO was reporting that more than 6,200 children had been detected in the mines of the Haut-Katanga and Lualaba provinces alone, most of them as young as seven years old. Children who are subjected to such dangerous mining conditions are made to do jobs like digging, washing, and sorting ore. However, they are forced to work without protective clothing and also receive less than two dollars for an entire day's work. The key factors that lead to child labor in mines are poverty and systemic inequalities, since these children are compelled to work in the mines and they are depended upon by their families to meet their basic needs. This, in the end, leads to a vicious cycle where they are left without an education and are dependent on ASM work, continuing this vicious cycle of poverty and child labor.

Poor working conditions are common in operations of ASM. Miners normally work in small cramped tunnels that are not reinforced and are exposed to poisonous substances, such as cobalt dust and chemical remnants of ore smelting. This has long term health-related risks like lung disease, skin infection and heavy metal poisoning. The number of injuries attributed to collapsing tunnels, unsafe equipment, or landslides that result in permanent

disabilities or even death is relatively high, but they are underreported because of the underdeveloped nature of the sector and the lack of access to healthcare or legal assistance.

Women and girls face further problems in mining communities. Out of 2 million employees in ASM, half of them are women who assume unsupervised regulations like ore washing, transportation, or small-scale trade, earning less than male miners. A study conducted by HHI and the World Bank revealed that 30 percent of the women claimed they had been harassed by men in the mines and only one out of seven women had shared the experience with others. Armed groups and a lack of any legal protection further contribute to gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual exploitation. GBV is a weapon of war by armed groups to take and hold control of lucrative mines. In fact, the UNHCR reports that in only 2 weeks in 2021, 243 cases of rape, 48 of which were perpetrated by minors, have been reported by 12 different villages of rival armed groups competing to control gold mining. These instances are an extension of the larger trends of gender disparity and insecurity in the mining areas.

Major Parties Involved

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Democratic Republic of the Congo is at the heart of this issue. As the world's largest producer of cobalt and a major source of coltan, copper, tin, and gold, the DRC's mineral abundance drives economic growth but also instability. The Congolese government officially opposes illegal mining and mineral trafficking, with initiatives like creating the *Entreprise Générale du Cobalt* (EGC) to oversee artisanal cobalt production. However, enforcement remains weak due to corruption and the presence of armed groups in mineral-rich eastern regions.

Republic of Rwanda

The Republic of Rwanda is a key regional actor, often accused of benefiting from illegal mineral flows coming from the DRC. While the government denies direct involvement, reports have documented evidence of Congolese minerals—especially gold, tin, and coltan—being trafficked across the border and exported as Rwandan products. The Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group is critical in the trafficking and violent operations, which have created tensions between Congo and Rwanda and have resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis that displaced thousands of people in early 2025.

People's Republic of China (PRC)

China has great influence over the DRC's mining sector, controlling or financing an estimated 70–80% of cobalt production through state-owned or private enterprises. China has a high demand for minerals needed for electric vehicles, batteries, and renewable technologies, and its major Chinese firms, such as China Molybdenum Co. Ltd. (CMOC) and Sicomin (Sino-Congolese Mining), operate in partnership with the Congolese government under joint-venture agreements. While the country supports DRC's sovereignty, some argue that China's influence weakens Congo's ability to self-regulate and govern.

United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)

The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has become an integral peacekeeping body in the nation since 2010. MONUSCO's goal includes the protection of civilians, disarmament of militias, and monitoring of human rights violations. It serves to assist the Congolese government in maintaining peace by supporting reforms and strengthening state institutions.

International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR)

The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising 12 member states, including the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi. It leads the implementation of the Regional Initiative against the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources (RINR), which aims to stop the illicit trade of conflict minerals in Central and East Africa. However, it struggles with weak enforcement and data limitations, allowing smuggling to continue.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

- The Situation Concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), 20 December 2024 (S/RES/2765)

This resolution extended MONUSCO's mission until December 2025, modifying the planned withdrawal of MONUSCO because of renewed fighting and insecurity in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and Ituri. The resolution serves to continue the protection of civilians and support for disarmament and stabilization in the face of the M23 movement.

- The Situation Concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo (M23), 21 February 2025 (S/RES/2773)

This resolution strongly condemned offenses committed by the M23 rebel group and demanded its immediate cessation of hostilities and withdrawal from seized territories. It demanded that M23 immediately cease hostilities and explicitly called on the Rwanda Defense Force (RDF) to cease its support for the M23. It also demanded unhindered humanitarian access for civilians and condemned the illegal exploitation of the DRC's natural resources, urging relevant companies to exercise due diligence. Finally, the resolution reaffirmed full support for MONUSCO and its mandate to protect civilians. Although UN officials reported that many of its key provisions remained largely unimplemented, this resolution lays the groundwork for further negotiations and peace-building with its prioritization of civilian safety.

- Regional Initiative against the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources (RINR)

This initiative is an effort by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) to stop the trade of "conflict minerals," which have fueled armed conflict in the region. It sets the Regional Certification

Mechanism (RCM) to track and certify legally sourced minerals, and member states are required to align their national laws with RINR protocols to prevent mineral revenues from funding armed groups. It also establishes a database to track the movement of 3TGs. However, enforcement and regional cooperation have proven challenging.

- U.S. Dodd-Frank Act, Section 1502 (2010)

This US law requires publicly traded companies to report on their use of “conflict minerals” (3TG) and trace their supply chains to avoid funding armed groups in the DRC. Companies must perform due diligence to determine if the conflict minerals are present in their products and if they came from the covered region. Companies must also submit an annual report to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) detailing their efforts and findings. There were reported supply chain improvements; however, it also led to increased smuggling and failed to address the root issue of the complex conflict

Possible Solutions

Delegates should start with corruption, one of the biggest enablers of mineral crime and exploitation in the DRC. Establishing a single transparent tax authority to consolidate revenue collection and prevent overlapping taxes imposed by multiple ministries and agencies could be the first step in restoring transparency and accountability, reducing opportunities for bribery and arbitrary taxation. Enforcing whistleblower protections and supporting civil society oversight can also prevent impunity. International financial support for CETM projects can be made conditional on concrete anti-corruption safeguards. These measures are necessary to reduce systemic risks, protect communities, and ensure a just and transparent energy transition. Anti-corruption and law enforcement bodies also need to be strengthened, including environmental and mining regulators. This could include providing adequate funding, specialized training, and protection from political interference.

Given the global reliance on Congolese cobalt and other CETMs, improving the transparency and traceability of mineral supply chains and combating crime networks and armed groups interfering with these supply chains is also vital. This could be done through incentivizing responsible business practices and ensuring that buyers can verify the ethical and legal sourcing of minerals. More emphasis should be put on companies to comply with international due diligence frameworks such as the OECD Guidelines and the UN due diligence standards. Technology should be implemented and strengthened to enhance risk management and early detection of illegal activities, deterring smuggling. Also, to prevent data gaps within mineral supply chains, greater data-sharing mechanisms among international organizations, governments, and private sectors should be encouraged. Independent field assessments to map mining sites, labor practices and trade routes can be carried out by UN bodies, regional institutions and NGOs to strengthen monitoring frameworks. In addition, the establishment of specialized anti-mining crime task forces composed of individuals with expertise in illicit mineral trade, trafficking routes and financial crime should be considered. Border patrol and border control agencies should be supported and

work along this task force, allowing them to closely monitor mineral flows and intercept smuggling operations, especially along borders with Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi.

Finally, the Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) sector, which employs an estimated two million Congolese, should be formalized due to its perpetuation of human rights abuses, unsafe working conditions, and smuggling. ASM operations can be formalized through implementing a clear system of permits, registration and inclusion under existing labor and safety regulations. For instance, specific artisanal mining zones could be designated where miners can work safely under regulated conditions with environmental and labor oversight. Moreover, strict prohibitions on child labor should be enforced through monitoring systems and community education campaigns, where governments can collaborate with international and local organizations to ensure that children in mining areas have access to free education and quality support. To ensure the safety of working conditions in mines, mandatory safety and health standards, including the provision of helmets, gloves, masks, and improved equipment, should be reinforced.

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