

Coltan, Civil War and Genocide

Sprocket

Cell phones may have revolutionized the way people communicate, but in central Africa, their biggest legacy is war and the extermination or endangered species.

More than 4 million people have died in central Africa in a war over *coltan*, a heat-resistant mineral ore widely used in cell phones, laptops and other high-tech electronics. Coltan is found in three-billion-year-old soils like those in the Rift Valley region of Africa. The *tantalum* extracted from the ore is used to make tantalum capacitors, tiny components that are essential in managing the flow of current in electronic devices. Eighty percent of the world's coltan reserves are found in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

This mountainous jungle area is the battleground of what has been grimly dubbed "Africa's First World War" pitting Congolese forces against those of six neighboring countries and numerous armed factions. The victims are mostly civilians; starvation and disease have killed hundreds of thousands, and the fighting has displaced two million people from their homes. Often dismissed as "just an ethnic war", the conflict is actually a battle over the natural resources that are sought by foreign corporations—diamonds, tin, copper, gold—and most of all—coltan. At stake for the heavily armed militias and governments is a cut of the high-tech boom of the 1990s, in which the price of coltan skyrocketed to nearly \$300 per pound.

The war started in 1998 when Congolese rebel forces, backed by Rwanda and Uganda, seized the eastern DRC and moved into strategic mining areas, attacking villages along the way. The Rwandan Army was soon making an estimated \$20 million a month from coltan mining.

Today, the fighting rages on despite peace treaties signed in Summer 2002. The peace process was initiated after the assassination of DRC President Laurent Kabila in January 2001, and following mounting pressure from South Africa. But while foreign troops have officially withdrawn from the DRC, internal factions remain at war.

Digging for "Black Gold"

Coltan has also transformed the DRC in more subtle ways. Farmers displaced from their lands have little option but to join coltan-mining brigades. Mined much like gold, coltan is found by digging large pits in riverbeds, with miners scraping away at the dirt to get to the coltan below.

Reports of rampant human-rights abuses pour out of the rebel-controlled mining region, where there is also a huge market for prostitution. An estimated two million people in the DRC are HIV-infected. Local men, women and children are forced into mining, fighting and sex work, or they are threatened with torture, rape and murder.

The coltan makes its way out of the mines to "trading posts" which are taxed or controlled by the rebels. Foreign traders then buy the mineral and ship it abroad, mostly through Rwanda. All of it ends up being bought by just three companies—Cabot Inc. of the US, Germany's HC Stare and China's Nigncxia - which are the only firms with the capability to turn coltan into the coveted tantalum powder. The "magic powder" is then sold to Nokia, Motorola, Compaq, Sony and other manufacturers for use in cell phones and other products.

On a side note. Sam Bodman, former CEO of Cabot, was appointed in December 2004 to serve as President Bush's Secretary of Energy. Under Bodman's leadership from 1987 until 2000, Cabot was one of the US's largest polluters, accounting for 60,000 tons of airborne toxic emissions annually.

Ecological Effects of the War

The main coltan mining area within the DRC contains the Kahuzi Biega National Park (KBNP), home of the critically endangered Eastern Lowland Gorilla. Deforestation from mining has destroyed much of the gorilla's habitat and the poverty caused by the displacement of the local human populations has led to gorillas being killed and sold as "bush meat" to the miners and rebel armies that control the area.

The KBNP population of Eastern Lowland Gorillas along with the population in the adjacent Kasese forests, represented 86 percent of the subspecies' total population prior to the civil war. According to a report released by the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund and the Born Free Foundation in May 2001, the population of Eastern Lowland Gorillas in KBNP has plummeted from an estimated 8,000 in 1991 to less than 1,000 individuals in the year 2000, an 85 percent crash in only 9 years. The report continues: "The indications are that the biodiversity of the Kahuzi-Biega region has been seriously, if not irreparably, damaged", further procrastination and bureaucratic delays prevent effective and timely action, the world will have stood by and watched as the magnificent Eastern Lowland Gorilla becomes the first great ape to be driven to extinction - a victim of war, human greed and high technology.

Making the Connection

Somehow, it's not surprising that this information isn't included in the instruction manual that comes with your cell phone. Perhaps mobile phones should be outfitted with stickers that read: "Warning! This device was created with raw materials from central Africa. These materials are rare, non-renewable, were sold to fund a bloody civil war and have caused virtual elimination of endangered species. Have a nice day." People need to realize that there is a direct link between the gadgets that make their lives more convenient and the frightening reality of the violence, turmoil and destruction that plague the world. ☹☹☹☹

[Source : *Earth First Journal*]