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“La Technologie Sanguine”: The Conflict of Conflict Minerals

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[Content Warning: This article contains mentions of war, forced child labor, and sexual assault]

In Summer 2019, my family and I went to The Democratic Republic of Congo to celebrate my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary. I wrote about my experience there in the August issue of This Wonderful World. Six months later, my family and I found ourselves in Congo again, this time, to celebrate Christmas and New Year's.

When I learned that the theme for the March issue was “Where do you see the devil in the world?”, I instinctively knew what I wanted to write about. So, I'll be writing about the Congo for the second time. However, this time I will be focusing on the issue with conflict minerals.

Before we can go any further, we need to define what a conflict mineral is. A conflict mineral, according to Lexico.com, is “(especially in Africa) a mineral mined in an area of armed conflict and traded illicitly to finance the fighting”.

The most notable examples of conflict minerals include: Columbite-Tantalite a.k.a. Coltan, Wolframite, Cassiterite, and Gold. Conflict material can be extracted from anywhere in the world yet if there's one place in the world that is notorious for the extraction of conflict minerals, it is The Democratic Republic of The Congo where my family comes from. These conflict minerals somehow find their way into some everyday items that we use such as smartphones, computers, televisions or, jewelry to name a few.

You might be thinking “while I'm not fond of the idea of mining minerals, let alone going to someone else's land to take something, I still don't see why you find this issue evil.” You're right, dear reader, I wasn't clear enough. So, let me explain it to you in this way:

The end goal for companies such as Apple, Microsoft, and Tesla, for example, is to make technology for consumers like you or me. Yet, how would these companies make their products? The solution is to use the material like Coltan for capacitors or more recently, Cobalt for electric cars batteries.

Ok, so you know what is needed to make the latest gizmos. That's swell and all but how exactly are you going to get these minerals? You hire mine workers, of course! And by “hire”, I mean force, exploit men, women and even children into working in the mines.

“Who forces those people into mining?”, you ask? Warlords and rebel forces who use any tactic necessary, from murder to rape, to get the job done.

Now, just how effective are these tactics? Rather effective, unfortunately. This information comes from the United Nations’ website, specifically within the “Sexual Violence in Conflict” section. It reads as follows:

“In 2018, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) documented 1,049 cases of conflict related sexual violence against 605 women, 436 girls, 4 men and 4 boys. Most of the cases (741) were attributed to armed groups, while 308 were attributed to the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Congolese National Police.”

As for the number of deaths, it can be largely contributed to The Democratic Republic of Congo’s civil wars, particularly its’ second one. The second Congolese war, a.k.a. “Africa’s World War” due to the involvement of nine other African countries, lasted from 1998 to 2003 and according to a 2018 U.S. Department of state article on U.S. relations with the D.R.C., had “a death toll of an estimated 5 million people in the D.R.C. from the fighting and ensuing humanitarian crisis”.

Another consequence from these acts of violence is displacement. “This conflict”, states a Migrationpolicy.org article referring to the Second Congo War, “led to forced migration of refugees and more than 1.2 million internally displaced persons”. Once territories are empty, particularly parts of East Congo that hold conflict minerals, rebel forces can use the places for mining without any distractions.

Once that happens, someone from the mines sells the minerals to a buyer. The buyer will, then, bring the minerals to tech companies and finally, the tech companies use the minerals to makes products like smartphones, home entertainment systems, etc.

Thus, a vicious cycle is made this cycle will continue to run like this until there’s either no longer a need for technology or tech companies completely limits the use of conflict resources.

However, let’s face it: We need technology (and maybe jewelry as well). The problem isn’t that we use these products (I mean, how else did you expect me to write this article? a clay tablet?). Technology, whether you like or not, is something that we need to survive. I’m not just talking about high-end gadgets like smartphones or watches but also appliances like a stove or a toilet. Technology isn’t always an electronic gizmo but something that we use to make life more efficient. The problem is **how** we acquire the materials necessary to produce such products.

There are many things in life that get my blood boiling such as bigotry, hatred, and unkindness towards any individual, just to name a few.

Yet, there's something about enjoying the latest gadgets and gizmos that wouldn't have gotten into my hands if it weren't for the literal blood, sweat and tears of a child slave, an exploited worker or a raped woman that doesn't make my blood boil.

Rather, it leaves my conscience stained...

Sources: www.state.gov , www.un.org , www.bbc.com , www.migrationpolicy.org ,
<https://conflictmineral.wordpress.com/>, www.responsiblemineralsinitiative.org, www.business-humanrights.org,
www.lexico.com