

# COLTAN AND THE CONGO

This is a story of child soldiers and cell phones, of mass murder and modern-day colonialism. This is the story of the conflict resource you've never heard of.

by Gordon Setter

Just off a dirt road in the east Congo countryside, a worn 10-tonne pickup truck comes to a dusty halt. From the bed of the vehicle, a team of men emerges, hands gripping spades and pickaxes. There is nothing remarkable about their worksite and in fact the workers themselves can't tell you what it is they're here for. And so, just feet from where they have stopped, they begin to dig. The work isn't all that hard, really. They need not dig very deep, nor are attentive eyes required to distinguish or determine unearthed items. They just dig. Shovelful after shovelful, up and over and into the truck. Later, in town, they will learn that their morning's work is worth \$70,000.

Welcome to a land of almost unimaginable natural resources and equally unimaginable violence, a land where dirt itself is a commodity and where 45,000 people die each month as a result of the deadliest conflict since the Second World War. Welcome to a land of child miners and child soldiers, of mass violations against women, where the average life expectancy hovers around 40 years. Welcome to a land that you helped shape without even knowing it. How, you ask? Well, forget what you think you know about conflict resources. Forget about Leonardo DiCaprio and poorly executed South African accents. Forget about Academy Award nominations. And please, most of all, forget about blood diamonds. Instead, start thinking about your cell phone.

"All the people there knew what was the problem of their misery," says Austrian journalist Klaus Werner. "Everybody there in the region knew the problem was the coltan and the problem was multinational companies buying the coltan and financing the war. Everybody knew. They were really very conscious about the situation." Columbite-tantalite, or "coltan," as it is sometimes referred to, is a dull metallic ore used to produce the elements tantalum and columbium. Due to a number of unique characteristics, tantalum is ideally suited in the production of capacitors for electronic circuits found in laptops, digital

cameras and, perhaps most importantly, cell phones. Though also found in Australia, Brazil and Canada, it is the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where a reported 80 per cent of the world's tantalum supply rests. In the late 1990s, an unprecedented global demand for consumer electronics pushed world prices of tantalum to record highs.

"We get into this extraordinary moment when the world industry requires a huge amount of coltan, and the premium is just fantastic," says Enrico Carisch, a former member of a United Nations panel on the illegal natural resources trade in the Congo. "And, of course, everybody wants to deliver."

Among those looking to profit from the higher prices for coltan were rival military groups interested in funding activities both within and outside the DRC. Since the 1997 overthrow of the Mobutu dictatorship, the Congo has been a

region awash in violence. In August 1998, Rwandan and Ugandan forces invaded the country, assisting rebel groups in an attempt to overthrow Laurent Kabila's established government.

"It doesn't take a lot to start a war, or to wage war in Africa. [For] a few million dollars you can already have a lot of people, along with a lot of bullets," Carisch says.

"The massive deaths and suffering of people, it just defies any real sort of understanding," says Michael Renner, senior researcher and director of the Global Security Project at the Worldwatch Institute. "The longer I worked at Worldwatch, the more I felt that this was an issue that really was worth looking at in various ways."

In his October 2002 report, *The Anatomy of Resource Wars*, Renner writes, "According to one estimate, more than 100,000 foreign troops were at one point involved in the Congo." In this same report, Renner estimates that between 1999 and 2000, the Rwandan government's estimated revenue from Congo-based coltan extraction was \$250 million.

"During the war in 1998, the price of coltan was very high, and there were a lot of mining activities revolving around coltan," says David Mugnier, Central Africa project director for Crisis Group International. "Of course, the various militia groups, armed groups that were involved in this war, were interested in funding their activities through the mining of coltan, which was smuggled through Uganda [and] Rwanda."

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First released in 2001, *Das Neue Schwarzbuch Markenfirmen* (the Black Book on Brand Companies) takes a detailed look at the truth behind the activities of dozens of well-known global corporations. In the chapter entitled “Blood for Mobile Phones,” Klaus Werner details first-hand information, collected through onsite investigations and undercover research, on the link between the sale of tantalum from the Congo, the funding of armed forces and the corporate community.

“Occasionally, I read an article in a German newspaper that spoke about recently published reports of the United Nations. [These] reports said that there is a direct connection between the war in the Congo and the tantalum trade,” Werner says. “I wanted to know if there was a connection between these two things, [so] I decided to become a coltan trader myself, a virtual coltan trader, and I made offers via [the] Internet.”

Taking the name Robert Mbaye Leman, Werner began to contact tantalum dealers online in February 2001 under the premise that he was in possession of, and interested in selling 40 tonnes of product. Within a day of his initial solicitations, Werner had a dozen responses asking for further information.

“There was one e-mail from the representative of [a major European material science company] in Thailand, telling me he is interested [in] buy[ing] all kind[s] of tantalum raw materials,” Werner says. “He wanted to know more about the price and he wanted me to send an explanation of the chemical details and also a small amount of the material to test.”

When asked about the source of his tantalum, Werner was forthright.

“I told them I had very good connections to the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (Rally for Congolese Democracy, RCD) rebels, who were the rebels at the time,” he says. “It was obvious that this was illegal, what I’m doing with

them, and that’s why I can offer it at such a low price.”

Werner further moved into character by aligning himself with SOMIGL (Société Minière des Grands Lacs), the mining firm created by the RCD rebels and granted an export monopoly on all coltan in the RCD-controlled territory in November of 2000.

“SOMIGL was mentioned by the United Nations report as something like the biggest mafia company in Eastern Africa,” Werner says. “They traded with arms, drugs and raw materials. The chief of SOMIGL was really one of the big

mafia bosses in Eastern Africa. They were at the time the main partner of the rebels.”

In its April 12, 2001 expert panel report on illegal exploitation of natural resources in the DRC, the United Nations identifies four “individual actors” chosen “based on the crucial roles played by these persons and their direct involvement in either providing support, entertaining networks or facilitating the exploitation of natural resources within the Democratic Republic of the Congo.” One of those named was SOMIGL general manager Aziza Kulsum Gulamali. According to the report, Gulamali was “involved in gold, coltan and cassiterite dealings in territories controlled by the Rwandans.” Prior to that, “she was involved in the arms trafficking for the benefit of the Burundian Hutus and was equally involved in gold and ivory trafficking.” The report also specifically identifies Gulamali’s coltan-related clients, among which H.C. Starck, a division of the material science company that contacted Werner, is the first listed. A report by the Goma-based Pole Institute, titled *The*

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Streetscape of Goma, capital of RCD rebel-controlled Eastern Congo, 2001.

*Coltan Phenomenon*, similarly concluded “the main clients for tantalite - the ore from which tantalum is extracted in order to produce tantalum powder for the use in capacitors and of two components of coltan - are the German firm H.C. Starck,” along with several U.S. companies.

From late February to early March of 2001, Werner traveled to Goma in the eastern region of the DRC. Granted permission to investigate as a journalist by then-RCD president Adolphe Onusumba Yemba, under the guise that he was there to report on social conditions, not the tantalum trade, Werner found a number of individuals willing to speak with him about his true interest. Under the cover of nightfall and under the radar of drugged child soldiers wielding AK-47s, Werner gained insight into the sale of the Congo-mined tantalum from other researchers in the area.

“They told me that the biggest foreign seller trading in the region was a German geologist named Karl-Heinz Albers,” Werner says. “And they told me they think he’s the biggest exporter of materials.”

Back in Germany, Werner contacted Albers regarding his involvement in the Congo tantalum trade. To his surprise, Albers was receptive to his questioning.

“I told him that I never have been in Africa, that I don’t know anything, but I have read in the papers that there is trouble with the coltan trade, and if he can tell me something about it,” Werner says. “He said, ‘Of course I can, I’m the biggest seller. I’m the biggest trader.’”

Werner’s next question was an obvious one.

“He told me, ‘I sold it to a German company you won’t know. Its name is H.C. Starck.’”

With this information, Werner had established the connection between Congolese coltan, the funding of military activities and a widely-known inter-



Former RCD leader Adolphe Onusumba Yemba in the garden of his residence. In the background a bodyguard keeps a watchful eye.

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national corporation. Likewise, in its aforementioned report the Pole Institute writes, “H.C. Starck refused for months to confirm that it buys Congolese coltan and only relented in October 2001 following the publication of a book in which industry sources were quoted as confirming the firm as a buyer of 80 per cent of Congo’s coltan.”

The good times couldn’t last forever, however. In 2001, the international price of coltan fell sharply. The issue of resource exploitation in the Congo, however, and the country’s direct link to cell phones and the electronics industry at large, was far from over.

“The pricing of coltan completely collapsed, plus it was for reputation reasons no longer feasible for companies to use coltan, so they moved to different materials,” Carisch says. “We suddenly see that instead of going for the coltan, where the prices have dropped dramatically, we see that [the price of] tin oxide has increased fantastically.”

On March 6 of this year, the *Financial*

*Times* reported that major electronics companies in the US, Japan and Korea have been forced to examine supply chains after the discovery that tin ore, also known as cassiterite, mined by the renegade faction of the Congolese army, the 85th brigade, is reaching international markets.

Werner speaks simply regarding his thoughts on his findings.

“It’s just an example for how globalization works,” he says. “For me, the globalization of the multinational companies is just an extension of colonialism. Colonialism was at least official 100 years ago. People knew that the colonies were exploiting the poor countries, the colonial countries. People knew where, for example, Belgium got their resources in the Congo, and how they were exploiting and killing people. Now, it’s completely clandestine. It’s so difficult to get the information. I had to make myself an illegal coltan trader to discover what [these companies] do. It’s completely clandestine, and it happens a lot faster.”