

# Bloody Minerals: The Geopolitical Chessboard of Congolese Coltan and Other Minerals

by Dr. Kwame Amuah

*Dr. Amuah, born in Ghana, is an academic and writer on security matters, and a techno-entrepreneur. He was formerly a Senior Adviser on Nuclear Affairs for the South African government and is a former regional chair of the Nuclear Disarmament Forum. This article is reprinted with his permission from [African Agenda](#).*



Indigo Kulani Group

Dr. Kwame Amuah

Jan. 30—The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a nation blessed with some of the world's richest mineral deposits, has long been a battleground for global powers vying for control over its resources. At the heart of this struggle lies coltan—a metallic ore containing niobium and tantalum. These derivatives of coltan are essential for the production of smartphones, electric vehicles, and advanced military technology. As the DRC grapples with a devastating conflict fueled by foreign financed rebel groups and foreign interference, the United States and the European Union are quietly maneuvering to secure access to these critical minerals, even as they publicly condemn the violence and alleged smuggling operations orchestrated by Rwanda. This article delves into the complex web of geopolitics, resource exploitation, and human suffering that defines the fight for Congolese coltan.

Coltan, short for columbite-tantalite, is a dull black metallic ore that has become indispensable in the modern world. When processed, it yields tantalum, a heat-resistant powder used in capacitors for electronic devices, and niobium, which strengthens steel alloys. From iPhones to Tesla batteries,

coltan is a cornerstone of the global tech economy. The DRC holds an estimated 60 to 80% of the world's coltan reserves, making it a strategic prize for nations and corporations alike.

However, the extraction and trade of coltan have come at a horrific cost. The eastern provinces of the DRC, particularly North Kivu and South Kivu, have been engulfed in a decades-long conflict characterized by violence, displacement, and human rights abuses. Rebel groups, often backed by foreign powers, have seized control of mining sites,

using the profits to fund their operations and enrich their patrons. The Congolese people, meanwhile, endure unimaginable suffering, with millions displaced and countless lives lost.

At the center of the current conflict is the M23 movement, a Rwanda-backed rebel group that has repeatedly destabilized the eastern DRC. In recent months, M23 has seized control of Goma, a critical transport hub for coltan and other minerals. The DRC government in Kinshasa accuses M23 of smuggling coltan and other resources out of the DRC and into Rwanda, where they are laundered into the global supply chain.

The United Nations Security Council's Group of Experts has corroborated these allegations, reporting that M23 illegally exported at least 150 metric tons of coltan to Rwanda in 2023 after capturing the Rubaya mining area. This illicit trade not only fuels the conflict but also undermines the DRC's sovereignty and economic potential.

Rwanda, under President Paul

**“The fight for Congolese coltan is a microcosm of the broader struggle for control over the world’s critical resources. As the U.S., EU, and China compete for dominance, the Congolese people are caught in the crossfire, their lives and livelihoods sacrificed on the altar of geopolitical ambition.”**

Kagame, has consistently denied involvement in the conflict, framing its actions as efforts to protect the Tutsi minority in the DRC. However, critics argue that Rwanda's true motives are economic and geopolitical. By controlling the flow of coltan, Rwanda positions itself as a key player in the global minerals market, while also currying favor with Western powers eager to secure alternative supply chains.

### EU and U.S. Involved

While the U.S. and EU have publicly condemned Rwanda's alleged role in the DRC conflict, their actions tell a different story. Both powers have been actively pursuing access to the DRC's mineral wealth, often through partnerships with Rwanda and other regional actors.

In February 2024, the European Union signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Rwanda on sustainable supplies of minerals and rare earths. The agreement, which focuses on ethical sourcing and supply chain transparency, has been criticized as hypocritical given Rwanda's alleged involvement in the DRC conflict. Advocacy group Global Witness has traced minerals sourced from eastern DRC to European traders, raising questions about the true origins of these resources.

The United States has also been working to secure access to the DRC's minerals through infrastructure projects like the Lobito Corridor. This railway, which connects the DRC to Angola's Atlantic coast, is seen as a strategic alternative to Chinese-dominated supply chains. In 2024, the U.S. pushed to expand the corridor, aiming to facilitate the export of coltan and other critical minerals to American and European markets.

Of the four major coltan processing plants worldwide, the two largest are located in Germany and the United States. These facilities rely on a steady supply of raw coltan, much of which is sourced from the DRC. By controlling the processing stage, the U.S. and EU maintain significant leverage over the global coltan market.

Rwandan President Paul Kagame has cultivated close ties with the United States, particularly through his relationship with former President Bill Clinton. Kagame's pro-U.S. stance has made Rwanda a key ally in the region, despite its controversial role in the DRC conflict. This alignment allows the U.S. to indirectly

access Congolese minerals while maintaining plausible deniability.

The U.S. and EU's interest in Congolese coltan is driven not only by its economic value but also by the desire to counter China's dominance in the global minerals market. China currently controls over 80% of the world's rare earth processing capacity, giving it significant leverage over industries ranging from electronics to renewable energy.

By securing alternative supply chains in Africa, the U.S. and EU hope to reduce their dependence on China and strengthen their geopolitical position. However, this strategy risks exacerbating the conflict



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*Coltan ore (columbite-tantalite) is critical for high-tech capacitors and jet engine alloys. Coltan-rich DRC exported less coltan than Rwanda in 2023, according to the Ecofin Agency, yet Rwanda does not have significant deposits of coltan.*

in the DRC, as rival powers compete for control over its resources. Thus, the very essence of the conflict in eastern DRC.

### The Human Cost

Amid the geopolitical maneuvering, the Congolese people bear the brunt of the violence and exploitation. The eastern DRC is one of the most dangerous places in the world, with armed groups committing widespread atrocities, including sexual violence, forced labor, and mass killings. The mining sector, which should be a source of economic development, has instead become a driver of conflict and poverty.

Artisanal miners, including children, work in hazardous conditions for meager wages, often under the control of armed groups. The profits from their labor flow into the pockets of warlords and foreign corporations, while local communities remain trapped in cycles of violence and deprivation.

The exploitation of Congolese coltan is a stark re-

mind of the human cost of the global tech economy. To address this crisis, the international community must take concrete steps to promote ethical sourcing and accountability:

Governments and corporations must implement robust due diligence measures to ensure that minerals are sourced ethically and legally. Initiatives like the EU's Conflict Minerals Regulation are a step in the right direction but must be enforced rigorously.

Investment in education, healthcare, and infrastructure is essential to break the cycle of poverty and conflict in the DRC. International aid should prioritize projects that empower local communities and promote sustainable development.

The international community must hold accountable those who profit from the illegal exploitation of Congolese resources. This includes imposing sanctions on individuals and entities involved in smuggling and human rights abuses.

Lasting peace in the DRC will require cooperation among regional actors, including Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola. Diplomatic efforts should focus on addressing the root causes of the conflict and fostering

economic integration.

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The story of coltan is a reminder that the devices we rely on every day come at a cost—one that is often hidden from view but borne by the most vulnerable. As consumers, we have a responsibility to demand transparency and accountability from the companies and governments that shape the global supply chain. Only by confronting the dark realities of resource exploitation can we hope to build a more just and sustainable future.

In the words of Congolese activist Jacques Depelchin, "The wealth of the Congo is a curse for its people, but it doesn't have to be. If we can harness these resources for the benefit of all, rather than the few, we can turn this curse into a blessing." The question is whether the world has the will to make that vision a reality given the foreign actors involved.

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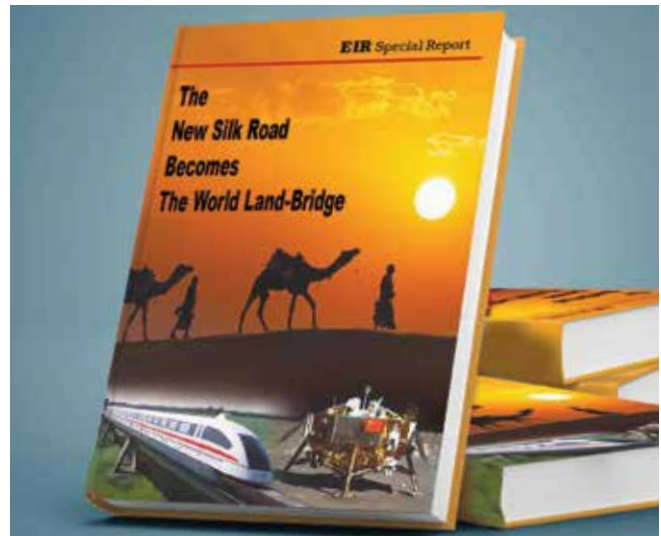
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