

Exploitation of conflict minerals in the congo politics essay



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The Democratic Republic of the Congo, once a European colony relinquished for its vast amount of raw minerals, gained independence in 1960 from France and has for more than twelve years suffered from continuous civil war over the distribution and control of said resources. Moreover, violence has become so deadly in this region, from forced labor, torture, recruitment of child soldiers, extortion, and killings by armed groups to oppress and control civilians, that it has been regarded as being the "... deadliest conflicts globally since World War II." (Prendergast, 2009) Scholar Michael Niemann (2007) reported that " Corrupt national and local government, various rebel movements, and governments and armed forces of Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, and, to a lesser extent, Angola, Namibia, and Chad all conspire for one thing- to profit from the mineral and other wealth in various resource enriched areas of the country" (p. 25). One of these minerals includes Columbite-tantalite - coltan for short - one of the world's most sought-after materials; the refinement of coltan leads to a highly heat-resistant metal powder called tantalum. This powder can sell for "...\$100 a pound, and slowly is becoming increasingly vital to modern life. For the high-tech industry, tantalum is magic dust, a key component in everything from mobile phones made by Nokia and Ericsson and computer chips from Intel to Sony stereos and VCRs." (Essick, 2001)

Mineral conflict in the Congo is not only a national concern but an international one as well, as most consumers of products that use the minerals exploited from the Congo live outside the country. Prendergast (2009) reported, " Consumers in the United States, Europe, and Asia are the ultimate end-users of these conflict minerals, as they inadvertently fuel the

war through purchases of these electronics products.” Consequently, many people are directly connected to this issue as they are part of a group that legitimize and unintentionally spur such conflict. Thus, it is important to appreciate the gross antiquity the consumer of the final product sanctions and endorses by virtue of the use of certain products that may contain coltan. In addition to this, this is relevant to Canada’s relationship with the ‘Third World’ because Canadians are a large group of this consumer population. Three important areas of discussion in regards to Congolese conflict mineral development are: the country’s struggle to establish viable states on the ruins of repressive colonial states and how this relates to internal maintenance of socio-economic hierarchy, the related role of a paltry economy, and mineral industrialization in regards to globalization and the role of national and international governments. The goal of this paper will be to outline, within the realm of these three subtopics, the national and international shortcomings/ hindrances and adverse progressions to reduce current mineral conflict in the Congo.

Despite frequently promoting colonization as a key contributor to developmental regression, professional and scholarly literature on Congolese conflict often varies in regards to what particular element of Congolese culture is most reflective of such regression. (Economic standing, political makeup, etc.) Scholar Michael Niemann’s (2007) journal *War Making and State Making In Central Africa*, specifically concentrates on critically analyzing the concept of the African failed state, recognizing the Western bias inherently stemming from the dominance of colonial powers. Niemann (2007) advocated for a governmental space where “.... alternative

forms of rule and political community can be explored, forms that have a longer staying power than the mostly failed attempts to create the veneer of a liberal democracy ...which the palimpsest of the repressive colonial state remains visible." (p. 23). Niemann also and most importantly affirms a principle of sovereignty in Congolese government that was not only clearly apparent under colonial rule, but also continuously apparent in modern Congolese government as well (p. 27).

This particular issue of modern Congolese rule as a means of mineral conflict hindrance can best be understood with reference to internal maintenance of socio-economic hierarchy as it relates to colonial legacy. Both Niemann and scholar Severine Autesserre (2009) indicated the influence of the national and local elite. Niemann presented a specific argument: " the process of class formation on the continent is incomplete... [and].. African states tend to be repressive, rather than hegemonic, but nevertheless fully functioning for the purposes of the class alliance in power." (p. 26) He reported that " Efficiency.... is not a necessary prerequisite for a functioning state..[and] stresses that the African role in the global system is not one of marginalization or dependence, but one of extraversion, through which elites have long constructed external relations to strengthen their power within their own spheres." (p. 26) Consequently, Niemann concluded that although these relations have proven asymmetrical, it does not detract from the fact that they worked well for Congolese elites. Complimentary to this notion, Jackson (2002) also indicated the prominence of the elite minority in the form of corrupt government when he reported " the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.... exploit minerals

and other resources through stealing stockpiles, entering into agreements with transnational corporations to produce, procure and sell these resources in a global market (p 519).” Thus, colonial legacy which is reflective and extended in socio-economic hierarchy according to Niemann and Jackson, proves to be an integral part in both understanding and unpacking the issue of mineral conflict in the Congo. Moreover, in order to begin to understand the upkeep and maintenance of such conflict, it would appear critical to first understand the legacy colonial rule has left on the make-up of national and local Congolese elites. Furthermore, as Niemann points out, it is difficult not only to apply liberal democracy to Congolese government and recognize it either as a veneer or perhaps even a solution, without first considering the impact and legacy colonialism has left on the political makeup of the country.

Similar to Niemann’s point on colonial rule, Stephen Jackson’s (2002) journal *Making a Killing: Criminality & Coping in Kivu War Economy* spoke of the Congo’s “lucrative economy based on artisanal mining of tantalum ore”, highlighting a “...radical mutation of livelihood strategies responding to an economy profoundly destroyed by colonial and post-colonial neglect and greed”. (p. 517) Both scholars articulate the legacy of colonial rule, so to speak, but also focus their research on separate cohesive hindrances on conflict reduction. While Niemann highlighted the importance and withstanding failure of developing political rule separate from Western idealized liberal democracy, Jackson focused his research on the recurring danger of the paltry and dependent Congolese economy. Noteworthy scholar Carol B. Thompson’s journal *US Trade with Africa: African Growth &*

Opportunity also provides sufficient economic reasoning in cohesion with colonial legacy. Thompson (2004) reported that the Congo's "... exports are non-processed minerals and agricultural products. Although the countries are now independent, their exports remain colonial products." (p. 458) In his writing, Thompson also provided a remark by President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique that, although not specific to the Congo, articulates the role colonialism has had and continues to have in various African countries' economy:

.... circumstances have confined us to act as producers of raw materials and unprocessed goods for export to the rich countries of the North. While we are passed to open upon countries and streamline our methods of doing international business, so that the global economy may sink roots, invisible barriers are still making it difficult for us to access resources. (Thompson, 458)

Both Thompson and Jackson do an effective job of explaining the impact that colonial rule has had both implicitly and explicitly on the economy of the Congo. This is further proven in the United Nations Human Development Report (2003) that stated that " Africa's share in the world fell from about 6 percent in 1980 to 2 percent in 2002, and its share of world imports from about 4. 6 percent in 1980 to 2. 1 percent in 2002." (p. ii) The report also went on to state that subsequently "...Africa's heavy dependence on primary commodities as a source of export earnings has meant that the continent remains vulnerable to the vagaries of the market and weather conditions." (" Economic Development in Africa: Issues on Africa's Trade Performance," 2003, p. ii). Similarly, the Congo, once officially a colony of France, was <https://assignbuster.com/exploitation-of-conflict-minerals-in-the-congo-politics-essay/>

exploited primarily for its raw mineral wealth. Today, although technically an independent country, the Congo remains highly dependent on raw minerals, coltan in particular. It is this heavy reliance that enables not only economic instability but also related conflict (Jackson, 2002).

Furthermore, it is also important to contextualize the financial situation of the Congo in order to better understand, in detail, any economic hindrance on reducing mineral conflict. In recent years, because of the pressure of declining oil prices, the depreciation of the dollar, and burdensome debt service, the Government of the Congo has been forced to adopt austere financial measures. After slashing its 1986 budget by 40 percent, the government entered into a Stand-By Agreement with the IMF which made possible the rescheduling of Congo's then \$1 billion in foreign debt. ("Congo: U. S. goods are extremely competitive here right now," 1998) A subsequent Paris Club rescheduling, debt relief granted by commercial banks, and World Bank structural adjustment also helped avert what would have otherwise been a large capital-account deficit. ("Congo: U. S. goods are extremely competitive here right now," 1998) Production in the forestry sector has gradually increased due to improvements in the transportation system and the opening up of new concessions in the north. ("Congo: U. S. goods are extremely competitive here right now," 1998) Consequently, such information is, although brief, critical in establishing sound understanding of further encumbrance on the reduction of Congolese mineral conflict with respect to economic instability.

Closely related to discussions of the implication of colonization on the

Congolese economy, are ones involving the exploitive effects of mineral
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industrialization and globalization on African states and the role of national and international governments to curb such behavior. As the countries of the world increase their interdependence and co-relation, African states, including the Congo, are not only forced to deal with establishing themselves on the ruins of repressive colonial state, but simultaneously adapt to increasingly globalized, and thus changing markets. The success and adverse hindrances as a result of this, will be explored in the following few paragraphs.

Most scholarly and professional literature recognize the direct role that exploitation of conflict mineral in the Congo has played in the onset and preservation of warfare, (Niemann; Collier, 2003; Prendergast, 2009; Global Witness Limited, 2009) though provide various explanations to suggest the role globalization has had in the conflict. P. Collier of the World Bank reported in a policy report that, in a cross-national statistical analysis of civil war onset in 161 countries since 1960, “ the extent of primary commodity exports is the strongest single influence on the risk of conflict” (2000, p. 10). By way of explanation, he argues that primary commodity dependence creates better opportunities to finance rebel groups which in turn enable rebellion. Niemann (2007) explicitly spoke of globalization and Transnational Corporations when he stated that “ cell phones have revolutionized the way we communicate, but in Central Africa their biggest legacy is war. Nearly 3 million people have died in Congo...over coltan... in the conflict that is really over natural resources sought by foreign corporations “(p. 39). Essick (2001) similarly indicates that the “ demand for tantalum took off with the boom of high-tech products...” and with it “...a new sinister market began flourishing

in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” (para. 3). Despite providing context for why globalization does in fact take place, Global Witness Limited is the only source that provided framework to explicitly suggest why corporations have not sanctioned or cut their ties from mineral conflict. Global Witness Limited (2009) reported on the trading houses based in “...Goma and Bukavu that buy, sell and export minerals produced by or benefiting the warring parties and how houses are officially censured and registered with the Congolese government act as a cover for laundering minerals which are fuelling the conflict.” (p. 7) Global Witness Limited focused on how these companies “sell the minerals on to a range of processing and manufacturing companies, including firms in the electronics industry.” (p. 8) Global Witness Limited also reported on the difficulty and lack of initiative from corporations and governments to regulate chain minerals. In the following few paragraphs international and subsequently national, initiative will be explored.

One of the most pronounced hindrances on the reduction of mineral conflict in the Congo is the national government’s failure to address the role of Rwanda as a channel and trading post for the products which benefit the warring parties of the Congo. Global Witness Limited reports indicated this point, as well as that “In theory, Rwandan customs officials check the paperwork accompanying all consignments from the Congo, but the government has not been pro-active in delving deeper into the origins of the minerals transported across the border.”. (p. 71) As well, Global Witness Limited also stated that “neither the Rwandan government nor mineral trading companies operating in Rwanda are conducting due diligence to ensure that trade is not benefitting any Congolese warring parties.” (p. 71)

Thus, from the Global Witness Limited report, it would seem that a major encumbrance on the reduction of national mineral conflict stem from the ease with which such minerals can cross the border into Rwanda; something that is helping to fuel the conflict.

Adversely, progression in the reduction of mineral conflict seems to have been made with regards to national governmental initiatives within the country itself as of 2010. Although the Global Witness report indicated a lack of government corresponding action, this report was issued in 2009 and obviously does not address the most current initiatives of the government. According to the 2009 report, “ Neither of the two main initiatives launched in late 2007 – the Nairobi communiqué of ... and the Amani Programme arising from the Goma agreement...-including concrete actions to stop the involvement of the warring parties in the natural resource trade.” (p. 77) However according to Africa Research Bulletin: Political, Social and Cultural Series (2010) the government of the Congo has “ suspended all mining operations in three eastern provinces, North Kivu, South Kivu and Maniema on the border with Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi...after the United States threatened new legislation to ensure stricter controls to ensure DR Congo’s minerals were obtained legally.” (para. 1). It was also reported in the article that as of September of the same year, Congo’s armed forces had recaptured the coltan specifically in Walikale, a town torn by over 15 years of mineral conflict. (“ Democratic Republic of Congo: Enyele Attack,” 2010). Subsequently, national governmental initiatives by virtue of such suspensions, seem to be progressive in absolving some mineral conflict within the country.

With specific respect to the country's struggle to establish viable states on the ruins of repressive colonial states and how this relates to internal maintenance of socio-economic hierarchy, the related role of a paltry economy, and mineral industrialization in regards to globalization and the role of national and international governments, mineral conflict complexity in the Congo has been explored. Though scholars and academics vary in their research according to different enablers of such mineral conflict, from political instability to economic condition, all seem to agree to some degree the importance of historically contextualizing the conflict. For example, political instability and maintenance of socio-economic hierarchy are not merely a static political or social reality of Congo, but the by-product of over a hundred years of instilled and exploitative colonial rule. Moreover, as much as mineral conflict is harmful in itself, it is important to recognize that by virtue of colonial legacy that has created socio-economic hierarchy, there are still those that benefit from the exploitive behavior and subsequent mineral conflict. Similarly, economic conditions of the Congo also must be understood with reference to colonial rule of the past, as well as current exploitive behavior of rich countries on developing countries' primary commodified economies of the present. Again, industrialization of mineral resources in the Congo and national and international government initiatives, or lack of, must be understood with reference to historical power relations. There is a high demand for coltan as the consumer population of technologies that use this precise metal grows. However as this demand grows, it would appear that companies have capitalized on historical power relations to exploit countries like the Congo with little regard to things like labor conditions and rebel control. Although there has been some

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progression in the way of conflict mineral reduction, it would appear that there are still many hindrances that need to be first addressed in order to continue this progression. Canadian consumers must recognize not only the existence of mineral conflict, but also appreciate how their purchases fuel directly such conflict and endorse exploitive behavior. The next step in reduction of mineral conflict in the Congo after this recognition is to recognize the historically relevant legacy of colonialism that continues to be reflective in elements such as national financial condition and political stability. Once this occurs, it is then important to start asking questions. Is it possible to reconfigure socio-economic hierarchy in the Congo that has prevailed with the help of paternal countries for over a hundred years? Is it possible to screen mineral trade and purchase without greatly stalling and bruising the mineral dependent economy of the Congo? There are many enabling factors that contribute to mineral conflict in the Congo and there are a number of related issues that much be recognized and absolved before real progression can take place. The most important element however remains the same, this is not merely an international conflict that is the by-product of something inherently Congolese, but the result of international exploitive and historical behavior.