

Is Your Phone A Cause of War?

A lot of the high-tech gadgets we can't live without contain minerals that are part of the conflict in war-torn Congo

BY NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF



Congolese workers in a storage facility for tantalum ore, used in many high-tech products

A few years ago, there was a lot of talk about “blood diamonds”—diamonds from war-torn countries in Africa, the sales of which were financing brutal rebel armies inflicting horrible violence on civilians in a number of African countries.

You don't hear much about blood diamonds these days,* but we may now be carrying “blood phones.”

Some of our elegant symbols of modernity—smartphones, laptops, and digital cameras—are built from minerals that seem to be fueling mass slaughter and rape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire).

I've never reported on a war more barbaric than Congo's, and it haunts me. In Congo, I've seen women who've been mutilated, children who've been forced to eat their parents' flesh, and girls who've been subjected to rapes that destroyed their insides. Various warlords, each vying for control, finance their armies and this abuse in part through the sale of mineral ore containing tantalum, tungsten, tin, and gold. Tantalum from Congo is used to make electrical components that go into phones, computers, and gaming devices.

Electronics manufacturers have tried to hush all this up. They want you to look at a gadget and think “sleek,” not “blood.”

Yet now there's a grassroots movement pressuring companies to keep these “conflict minerals” out of high-tech supply chains. Using Facebook and YouTube, activists are harassing companies like Apple, Intel, and Research in Motion (which makes the BlackBerry) to get them to lean on their suppliers and ensure the use of, say, Australian tantalum rather than tantalum peddled by Congolese militias.

Facebook Activism

In June, for example, protesters demonstrated outside the grand opening of an Apple store in Washington, D.C., demanding that the company commit to using only “clean” minerals. In May, activists blanketed Intel's Facebook page with calls to support tough legislation to curb trade in conflict minerals. For a time, Intel disabled comments—creating a stink that called more attention to blood minerals than human rights campaigners ever could.

Partly as a result, the U.S. financial reform legislation passed this summer includes requirements that companies report on their use of conflict minerals.

Here's the background: Eastern Congo is the site of the most lethal conflict since World War II and is widely described as the rape capital of the world. The war had claimed 5.4 million lives as of April 2007, with the toll mounting by 45,000 a month, according to a

study by the International Rescue Committee.

It's not that American tech companies are responsible for the slaughter, or that eliminating conflict minerals from our phones will immediately end the war. Even the Enough Project, an anti-genocide organization that's been a leader in the current campaign, estimates that only one fifth of the world's tantalum comes from Congo.

"There's no magic-bullet solution to peace in Congo," says David Sullivan of the Enough Project, "but this is one of the drivers of the conflict."

In other words, the economics of the war are part of what needs to be addressed in order to resolve it.

The Obama administration also should put more pressure on Rwanda to play a constructive role next door in Congo. Rwanda has, inexcusably, backed one militia and bolstered others by dealing extensively in the conflict minerals trade.

Impeding trade in conflict minerals is also a piece of the Congo puzzle, and because of public pressure, a group of companies led by Intel and Motorola is now developing a process to track the origins of tantalum in supply chains.

Can Brutal Be Cool?

Manufacturers previously settled for statements from suppliers that they do not business in eastern Congo, but there was no effort to verify the claims. And checking the supply chains at smelters to determine whether minerals are clean or bloody would not be expensive. According to the Enough Project, it would add about a penny to the price of a cellphone.

"Apple is claiming that their products don't contain conflict minerals because their suppliers say so," says Jonathan Hutson of the Enough Project. "People are saying that answer is not good enough. That's why there's this grassroots movement, so that we as consumers can choose to buy conflict free."

Some ideas about what consumers can do are at raisehopeforCongo.org—starting with spreading the word. We may be able to undercut some of the world's most brutal militias simply by making it clear to electronics manufacturers that we don't want our gadgets to enrich sadistic gunmen.

No phone or tablet computer can be considered "cool" if it may be helping perpetuate one of the most brutal wars on the planet. ●

Nicholas D. Kristof is a columnist for The New York Times.



Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga (seated) is now on trial in the Hague for war crimes; selling conflict minerals is a key source of revenue for rebel groups in Congo.

EUROPE'S UNWANTED (P. 6)

- ❶ What is one reason that the Roma face hostility from Western Europeans?**
- a The Roma have criticized European culture.
 - b The Roma have long had ties to Eastern Europe.
 - c The Roma crossed European borders illegally.
 - d The Roma have often turned to begging or crime in order to survive.
- ❷ The President of _____ recently sent 8,000 Roma immigrants back to Romania and Bulgaria, and ordered their illegal camps destroyed.**
- a Germany
 - b France
 - c Denmark
 - d Italy
- ❸ The expulsion of Roma has been compared to the mass deportations that occurred during**
- a the Russian Revolution.
 - b World War I.
 - c World War II.
 - d the Bosnian War.
- ❹ The European Union's expansion in 2007 to include Romania and Bulgaria**
- a has allowed the poor from those countries to migrate to wealthier countries.
 - b coincided with new programs to help the Roma find jobs.
 - c caused an economic crisis in those countries.
 - d happened over the objections of many Roma.
- ❺ Which is not a reason that Roma have had a hard time rising out of poverty?**
- a The crafts that once sustained them have become obsolete.
 - b Education is not highly valued among the Roma.
 - c They face widespread discrimination throughout Europe.
 - d They do not have the desire to work.
- ❻ Because those Roma who make it out of poverty _____, it is harder for Roma to combat the discrimination they face.**
- a are so much better educated
 - b usually do so in non-European countries
 - c rarely admit their ancestry
 - d often marry non-Roma

IN-DEPTH QUESTIONS

- ❶** Why do you think migration has become such a divisive issue in parts of the European Union?
- ❷** Is it fair to compare the current discrimination against, and expulsion of, Roma in Western Europe to the Holocaust? Why or why not? What similarities and differences exist?
- ❸** Is there anything the international community can do to help the Roma? If so, what? If not, why not?

QUIZ 2 ► OPINION

IS YOUR PHONE A CAUSE OF WAR? (P. 10)

- ❶ Congolese warlords finance their armies in part through**
- a the sale of cellphones on the black market.
 - b the sale of several types of mineral ore.
 - c raffles of American-made gadgets.
 - d fund-raisers promoted by text messaging.
- ❷ Many technology companies use _____ mined in Congo in their products.**
- a tantalum
 - b iron
 - c aluminum
 - d copper
- ❸ Grassroots activists are pressuring technology companies to**
- a make donations to war victims in Congo.
 - b enact policies that better protect their workers and suppliers.
 - c ensure that their suppliers use only "clean" minerals.
 - d lower prices on items that contain conflict minerals.
- ❹ A few years ago, this natural resource got a lot of media attention because brutal rebel armies in Africa were selling it for profit.**
- a sapphires
 - b rubies
 - c dinosaur fossils
 - d diamonds
- ❺ New financial-reform legislation in the U.S. requires that tech companies _____.**
- a report on their use of conflict minerals
 - b stop using conflict minerals
 - c pay a financial penalty for using conflict minerals
 - d participate in an awareness campaign

IN-DEPTH QUESTIONS

- ❶** Do you think an American embargo on minerals from the Democratic Republic of the Congo would have a significant effect on the war there? Why or why not?
- ❷** Would you pay more for your cellphone if doing so would help victims of the war in Congo? Explain your answer.
- ❸** Has reading this article made you feel any differently about the high-tech products you use? Explain.

USE with articles identified.

The statements are answers to questions [modeled after the TV show *Jeopardy!*]. Students must answer in the form of questions.

DIVIDE the class into teams.

READ the statements.

CALL on the first team with a hand raised.

CORRECT ANSWER = 10 points
WRONG ANSWER = -10 points
(And another team may respond for the same chance to gain or lose 10 points.)

EUROPE'S UNWANTED

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 Thousands of Roma have headed to this region to try to escape poverty back home. | What is Western Europe? |
| 2 The 10 million Roma living in Europe today are concentrated in these two countries. | What are Romania and Bulgaria? |
| 3 It's difficult for Roma to find jobs in Western Europe because they lack these two important things. | What are education and practical skills? |
| 4 Some people have compared the recent expulsion of Roma from France with the deportation of Roma, Jews, and others during this time. | What is the Holocaust (or World War II)? |
| 5 Roma first came to Europe in the 14th century from this country. | What is India? |

IS YOUR PHONE A CAUSE OF WAR?

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 Diamonds sold to finance rebel armies in Africa are often referred to as this. | What are blood diamonds or conflict diamonds? |
| 2 Warlords in this country finance their armies in part through the sale of mineral ore. | What is Congo? (or Democratic Republic of the Congo) |
| 3 Activists have spoken out against technology companies that use this particular conflict mineral from Congo in their products. | What is tantalum? |
| 4 The war in Congo had claimed this many lives as of April 2007. | What is 5.4 million? |
| 5 Checking the supply chains to determine whether minerals are conflict-free would add this much to the price of a cellphone. | What is about a penny? |

ANSWER KEY

QUIZ 1 ► PAGE TE 5

- [d] The Roma have often turned to begging or crime in order to survive.
- [b] France
- [c] World War II
- [a] has allowed the poor from those countries to migrate to wealthier countries.
- [d] They do not have the desire to work.
- [c] rarely admit their ancestry

QUIZ 2 ► PAGE TE 5

- [b] the sale of several types of mineral ore.
- [a] tantalum
- [c] ensure that their suppliers use only "clean" minerals.
- [d] diamonds
- [a] report on their use of conflict minerals

QUIZ 3 ► PAGE TE 6

- Laos
- Mediterranean, Red
- Tropic of Capricorn
- Cote D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)
- Adriatic Sea
- Elburz, Zagros
- New Dehli, India
- Reykjavik, Iceland
- 14
- Myanmar
- Cheyenne, WY; Denver, CO; Santa Fe, NM
- Sicily

QUIZ 4 ► PAGE TE 6

- 32
- Monaco
- Afghanistan
- 72; Tunisia; Libya; 40; Lesotho
- literacy rate
- literacy rate, life expectancy, per capita GDP, HDI
- 12
- Port-au-Prince
- 1991, nine
- Niger, percentage of population under 15
- Norway, 0.971
- Tonga, Fiji

GRAPH ► PAGE TE 4

- [b] one seventh
- [c] 20.4 billion
- [d] Norway and Kuwait
- [c] 1,200
- [b] fourth

ONLINE TEACHER RESOURCES & DIGITAL EDITIONS PASSWORD: CONGRESS