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Blood Minerals

How your iPhone is contributing to the
atrocities in the Democratic Republic of Congo



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In the Western world the rise of technology, particularly for handheld items like the iPhone has revolutionised the way we interact. However, this rise has not come without cost. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), minerals required to make these technologies are being mined and with disastrous consequences.

The first essential mineral being mined is Cobalt. Cobalt is required to make lithium-ion batteries, which are required for running smartphones and other electronic devices. The second essential mineral being mined is known as columbite-tantalite, or more commonly coltan. Coltan is mined by digging large pits in riverbeds and scraping away at the dirt to reach the coltan below. Campbell (2009) on his visit to the mines in DRC, states "it's a long walk across a treeless landscape in searing heat; everything has to be carried in or out by foot."

Coltan is an ore from which niobium and tantalum are extracted. According to Williams "Roughly two-thirds of tantalum is used to manufacture electronic capacitors, a fundamental component of smartphones and other in-demand electronics...[the mineral] enables the miniaturisation of handheld electronic devices because it allows an electrical charge to be stored in small capacitors."

Patta advised in research conducted by Amnesty International, that cobalt mined by children was ending up in products from several companies, including Apple, Microsoft, Tesla, and Samsung. In addition, in the latest research conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), it was estimated 40,000 children were working in these mines. Aleem further notes, that in an investigation conducted by Sky News, children as young as four were working in the [cobalt] mines and had "crippling health issues, linked to fumes."

In addition to these cobalt mines, 80% of the world's coltans reserves are found in the DRC. Many women, men, and children are forced into mining given its lucrative value in the global supply chain.

The mines where both minerals are found are run by either rebel organisations or the DRC Government. In both cases the working conditions are abhorrent. Earth First! Journal reports "rampant human-rights abuses pour out of the rebel-controlled mining region, where there is also a huge market for prostitution...Local men, women, and children are forced into mining, fighting, and sex work, or they are threatened with torture, rape and murder."

While Apple maintains it is the industry leader in supply chain standards, in reality, it is very difficult to trace mined minerals in a global supply chain. In an investigation conducted by Patta, she explains "we followed the mineral [cobalt] as it left the mines-piled high on every mode of

transport available, including bicycles. Sacks were mixed up, without labels making it impossible to know who had mined the mineral."

As consumers, we must be cognisant not only of the rampant abuse of human rights, but also the ecological havoc caused in the area. The main coltan mining area within the DRC is home to the critically endangered gorilla and deforestation from mining has destroyed much of their habitat.

In an article by Ayres, she concludes that "there can be no doubt that consumer demand for electronic capacitors used in mobile phones has helped rebels to fund conflicts that have had many devastating consequences for the DRC's people, animals, and environment." This article was published in 2012 and yet in 2019, it is just as relevant.

With the proliferation of these smart devices in western society, the demand for these minerals continues. As a consumer, it is imperative to understand how the products we use may have consequences for other global citizens. Without a sustained effort by global technology companies to either source these materials elsewhere, or to continue to source them in DRC in a more sustainable and humane environment, these atrocities will continue to occur under our watch.

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