



enough

The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

Can You Hear Congo Now?

Cell Phones, Conflict Minerals, and the Worst Sexual Violence in the World

By John Prendergast

The time has come to expose a sinister reality: Our insatiable demand for electronics products such as cell phones and laptops is helping fuel waves of sexual violence in a place that most of us will never go, affecting people most of us will never meet. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the scene of the deadliest conflict globally since World War II. There are few other conflicts in the world where the link between our consumer appetites and mass human suffering is so direct.

This reality is not the result of an elaborate cover-up, either. Most electronic companies and consumers genuinely do not appreciate the complex chain of events that ties widespread sexual violence in Congo with the minerals that power our cell phones, laptops, mp3 players, video games, and digital cameras.

But now that we are beginning to understand these linkages, we need to do all we can to expose them and bring this deadly war fuelled by “conflict minerals” to an end. As a start, the Enough Project has worked with other like-minded groups to create a conflict minerals pledge that commits electronics companies to ensure their products are conflict-free. We are initiating a consumer campaign aimed at encouraging the users of these electronics products to let the biggest companies know that it matters to us that our purchases don’t prolong this ongoing tragedy.

Rape as a tool of war—and profit

Congo’s protracted wars have led to incredibly wide and diverse violence against civilians by an array of armed groups. The general use of violence against communities includes forced labor, torture, recruitment of child soldiers, extortion, and killings by armed groups to oppress and control civilians. In particular, sexual violence has become a tool of war and control for the armed groups in Congo on an immense scale. The Congo war has the highest rate of violence against women and girls in the world, and reports indicate that hundreds of thousands have been raped, making it the most dangerous place in the world to be a woman or girl. We can only guess at the true numbers, as an untold number of women likely chose not to report their crime given the stigma that goes with rape and the low probability that the perpetrators will actually be brought to justice. The scale of these profound crimes against women sets Congo apart from anywhere else in the world.

Competing militias rape in order either to drive communities out of contested areas or else as a means of controlling or subjugating those living in the areas they control. Men know that they could be tortured or killed if they don't obey, and the women know they could be raped. Women from communities that are being displaced are sometimes so traumatized by the sexual violence that they will never return to their home areas. These crimes destroy families, decimate communities, and lethally spread HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. As Dr. Denis Mukwege of Panzi Hospital in Bukavu told Bob Herbert of *The New York Times*, "The ordinary sense of family and community is lost after a man has been forced to watch his wife being raped, or parents are forced to watch the rape of their daughters, or children see their mothers raped. Neighbors are witnesses to this. Many flee. Families are dislocated. Social relationships are lost. There is no more social network, village network. Not only the victims have been destroyed; the whole village is destroyed."

Widespread rape thus becomes an instrument of communal terror as armed groups attempt to exercise control over a mine or the transport and taxation of the minerals. Sexual violence is thus used as an instrument of control and intimidation, as well as punishment for alleged collaboration with rival armed groups.

It is imperative that Congolese, concerned activists and consumers, and the broader international community develop a more effective and comprehensive response to sexual violence. As we have seen with other war crimes and crimes against humanity around the globe, change will only come when there is a concerted effort to deal with the problem and perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. In Congo this requires everything from grassroots development and reconciliation efforts all the way up to an effective diplomatic strategy and a peacekeeping force that is actually capable of protecting civilians.

The electronic devices used by almost every American provide unique leverage to help end the scourge of violence.

Conflict minerals

Sexual violence in Congo is often fueled by militias and armies warring over "conflict minerals," the ores that produce tin, tungsten, and tantalum—the "3 Ts"—as well as gold. Armed groups from Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda finance themselves through the illicit conflict mineral trade and fight over control of mines and taxation points inside Congo.¹

But the story does not end there. Internal and international business interests move these conflict minerals from Central Africa around the world to countries in East Asia, where they are processed into valuable metals, and then onward into a wide range of electronics products. Consumers in the United States, Europe, and Asia are the ultimate end-users of these conflict minerals, as we inadvertently fuel the war through our purchases of these electronics products. This trail has been well documented by the United Nations and others.

The principal conflict minerals are:

- **Tin (produced from cassiterite)**—used inside your cell phone and all electronic products as a solder on circuit boards. The biggest use of tin worldwide is in electronic products. Congolese armed groups earn approximately \$85 million per year from trade in tin.

- **Tantalum (produced from “coltan”)**—used to store electricity in capacitors in iPods, digital cameras, and cell phones. Sixty-five to 80 percent of the world’s tantalum is used in electronic products. Congolese armed groups earn an estimated \$8 million per year from trading in tantalum.
- **Tungsten (produced from wolframite)**—used to make your cell phone or Blackberry vibrate. Tungsten is a growing source of income for armed groups in Congo, with armed groups currently earning approximately \$2 million annually.
- **Gold**—used in jewelry and as a component in electronics. Extremely valuable and easy to smuggle, Congolese armed groups are earning between \$44 million to \$88 million per year from gold.

The deadly nexus between the worst violence against women in the world and the purchase of electronics products containing conflict minerals from the Congo is direct and undeniable. And it can be stopped by a combination of focused consumer pressure and enlightened government action. If women and girls are to be protected and empowered in Congo, one of the most important priorities is to end the deadly trade in conflict minerals. Take away the fuel and the violence will be much easier to end.

The perpetrators and orchestrators of this violence do so primarily in a mad scramble for natural resources. There is little rule of law in the Congolese war zone and no strong mechanism to monitor the international supply chain for these minerals. Without accountability for their debilitating crimes against women and action to create a transparent supply chain for the mineral trade, war criminals will continue to commit horrendous atrocities and reap large profits with impunity.

Building a campaign

Because we are all unconsciously part of the problem in Congo, all of us can consciously become part of the solution. Collectively, American consumers have enormous leverage over the companies from which we purchase our electronics. We can marshal that power to press them to play a positive role to protect and empower Congo’s women.

We have an extraordinary opportunity for education and movement-building. Working with other nongovernmental organizations, the Enough Project has spent the last year researching the supply chains that link these conflict minerals to our most relied-upon consumer products. Our goal is to bring an understanding of these direct linkages into every living room in America. Attached to this public education blitz will be targeted campaigns and actions aimed both at the U.S. government and international corporations, which both have a hand in the solution.

Our campaign will emphasize how we can use our consumer power for good to take concrete actions that will make a difference. Once people realize their purchases are funding the worst sexual violence in the world, we hope they will be primed and motivated to join in building a popular movement against these atrocities. Because women and girls have become primary targets in the war of attrition between the armed groups, Congo’s transformation must begin with them.

A century ago, thousands of people across the globe joined together in what became one of the 20th century’s first great international human rights movements in protesting the bloody reign of Belgium’s King Leopold II over the Congo. In a murderous effort to exploit the vast natural

resources of the country, half of the Congo's population was decimated by King Leopold's personal rule—an estimated 10 million people. The resulting public outcry helped curb the worst abuses of that period.

This was before the Internet. Before television. Before the widespread use of telephones.

A century later, the people of the Congo need a new popular movement to end the atrocities once and for all. Today, we can use the very technologies that have fueled Congo's fighting to put an end to these crimes against humanity and help build a hopeful future for Congolese families that have suffered too much. It is up to us.

What we want: Government and corporate action

In order for real change to occur—and to help create space for Congolese civil society and others fighting for peace—action is required from three actors: President Barack Obama, electronics companies, and Congress.

President Obama

We need presidential action. President Obama must make a clean break with past policy toward Congo, which has too often been designed to half-heartedly manage the symptoms of the crisis through humanitarian aid, erratic diplomacy, and peacekeeping assistance. President Obama should make the objective of U.S. foreign policy to end the conflict there, which will change the way America engages.

To achieve the objective of ending the crisis, President Obama should name a high-level special envoy with a team that can work in coordination with others on the local, national, and regional sources of instability. Just like Richard Holbrooke in Afghanistan-Pakistan, George Mitchell in the Middle East, and Scott Gration for Sudan, the Congo needs such a presidential envoy, someone who reports to the president and whose job it is to find solutions. Robust diplomatic leadership is needed to pressure the governments of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda to better protect civilians and stop fueling the deadly cycles of violence from which they profit in the context of the illicit mineral trade. Further, the president should provide all necessary support to the International Criminal Court as it attempts to introduce accountability for war crimes in Congo, and press for rape as a weapon of war to be a primary focus of criminal investigations in the eastern part of the country.

Alongside diplomacy, the president should ensure that America's defense and development capabilities contribute to a comprehensive solution for eastern Congo. For instance, the new U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM, should provide additional support for army reform, demobilization programs, and capacity building for the U.N. peacekeeping force in Congo to help protect civilians and to help establish legal control over the mining sector. And our foreign assistance programs should focus on creating legitimate economic opportunities in eastern Congo, including a mining sector that does not finance war crimes, as well as on helping Congolese to build viable state institutions in the east.

Electronics companies

None of the big electronics companies want to fuel the deadliest war in the world. But at a time of financial crisis, when every penny of profit counts, corporations may continue to turn a blind eye toward Congo's conflict mineral trade. Therefore, we need to use our considerable market muscle to demand evidence from companies such as Apple, Nokia, Hewlett Packard, and Nintendo that their products do not contain conflict minerals. This will require them to change their procurement practices and demand that their suppliers provide proof of where their minerals are sourced from.

The electronics companies are powerful actors in their supply chains. If they show leadership, they can fundamentally change the way these minerals are bought and sold, ensuring that the minerals don't contribute to armed conflict and the continuation of the worst violence against women and girls in the world. As consumers, we can compel them to exercise that leadership. To that end, the Enough Project has worked with other organizations active in the fight against conflict minerals to develop a corporate pledge that commits these corporations to ensuring that their products will be conflict-free by taking specific steps (see Text Box 1). Governments and companies have developed sophisticated approaches to staunch international money laundering and terrorist financing and corporations should capitalize on those advancements to ensure that we are not financing crimes against humanity.

Conflict minerals pledge

Companies manufacturing, retailing, or trading in materials containing tin, tantalum, tungsten, or gold that may originate in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have an obligation to ensure that they are not financing armed groups and military units or contributing to human rights abuses at any point along the supply chain. As consumers and suppliers of these products, we are united in our belief that we can be part of the solution to this deadly conflict.

FOR COMPANIES TO SIGN

By signing the Conflict Minerals Pledge, the company commits to ensuring that its products will be conflict-free.

In support of this goal, companies commit to the following steps:

1. Trace the supply chain for all tin, tantalum, tungsten, or gold in their products to verify their mines of origin.
2. Conduct independently verifiable supply chain audits to document the routes taken, intermediaries involved, and transactions made from mine of origin to final product.

The Enough Project and its partners will work with companies that sign the pledge to help them fulfill their commitments, and support efforts to

provide companies with definitive guidance from the United Nations, the U.S. government, and expert sources on conflict actors and areas of concern in eastern Congo. If you are a company that would like to learn more or sign on to the pledge, please send an email to conflictminerals@enoughproject.org.

FOR INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS TO ENDORSE

By endorsing the Conflict Minerals Pledge, organizations and individuals commit to using their voices and consumer power to influence companies to sign the pledge. Specifically:

1. Contact the largest makers of cell phones, portable music players, digital cameras, PCs, and video games, and urge them to sign the pledge.
2. Commit to only purchasing electronics from firms that have taken and are abiding by the conflict minerals pledge.
3. Educate fellow consumers and activists about the crisis in Congo, the role of conflict minerals, and how they can be a part of the solution.

To endorse the Conflict Minerals Pledge, text "CONGOLEDGE" (one word, no spaces) to ACTION (228466) or visit www.raisehopeforcongo.org/special-page/conflict-minerals.

First, letters have been sent to the heads of the 21 leading electronics companies utilizing conflict minerals in their products. Based on their responses, consumer campaigns will be launched that will encourage these companies ultimately to stop using conflict minerals and allow independent supply chain verification to that effect. Congressional legislation is being developed, and a mass-based consumer education initiative is being prepared. Over the coming year, we want to bring this issue into living rooms of consumers and board rooms of corporations, and encourage both to make the use of conflict minerals in our electronics products a thing of the past.

We do not want these companies simply to turn their backs on eastern Congo. Electronics companies that have profited from this trade owe it to the millions of Congolese who depend on mining for their livelihoods to help transform the mineral trade to be an engine of empowerment rather than fuel for atrocities.

Congress

It would be ideal if we could trust that the electronics companies would do the right thing and ensure that the minerals that make their products work no longer come from war zones. But it turns out these minerals are cheaper when they come from war zones using what borders on slave labor. Bad habits are not going to change easily. Corporate promises will need to be subjected to independent verification.

To that end, legislation will soon be introduced in Congress that requires companies to disclose where their minerals are sourced, and creates penalties for those who continue purchasing conflict minerals. This would place the burden of proof on companies to prove that they are not sourcing their minerals in ways that finance armed groups in Congo.

We will need to get as many co-sponsors as possible for this legislation in both the House and the Senate after the bill is introduced in order to demonstrate to President Obama and to the electronics industry that this issue matters to consumer activists. Just as has been the case in Darfur, congressional action will be needed to sustain executive branch action on an issue like this.

The good news

Remember the movie “Blood Diamond?”

A decade ago, the West African country of Sierra Leone was in turmoil, ripped apart by battles over the diamond mines and militias fueled by illegal trade in diamonds. The rebels—populated principally by child soldiers—used amputations to terrorize civilians just as Congolese armed groups use rape today.

Today, Sierra Leone is a nascent democracy that is finding its way peacefully. The horrors there led governments and corporations to get serious about ending that crisis. And it was a consumer campaign against blood diamonds that was the catalyst for a change in the logic of war and violent exploitation to a logic of peace and stability.

We need to do the same now for Congo—and fast.

How to make an impact

The crisis in eastern Congo is fueled by conflict minerals, but we can stop the deadly cycle by using our power as activists and consumers.

1. Join the Movement at www.raisehopeforcongo.org
2. Text “CONGOLEDGE” (one word, no spaces) to ACTION (228466) or visit www.raisehopeforcongo.org/special-page/conflict-minerals to endorse the Conflict Minerals Pledge.
3. Send emails to the industry leaders and ask them to be a leader on this issue by signing the pledge. Visit www.raisehopeforcongo.org/special-page/conflict-minerals to send your emails now.
4. Call the White House switchboard at 202.456.1414 or write to President Obama at www.whitehouse.gov and ask him to appoint a special envoy for the Great Lakes region.

Millions of lives are at stake. We have the power to demand an end to the horrific crimes against humanity in the very place where the term “crimes against humanity” was invented a century ago. We need to demand that President Obama, Congress, and our electronics companies do all they can to help end the violence.

Our lives are made vastly easier by the technology in our cell phones, laptops, and other electronics products. This could not happen without an array of minerals, many of which come from the Congo. The price we pay for these goods is modest. The price that Congo’s women and girls pay is unacceptable.

We must tell our politicians that we cannot allow such crimes against humanity to continue.

Not on our watch.

Endnotes

- 1 Although recent investigations have not yielded concrete evidence of the Ugandan armed groups’ direct involvement in the illicit minerals trade, Ugandan-backed militias and the Ugandan army and intelligence service have a history of profiteering from eastern Congo’s mineral wealth.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

