

The Back End of Genocide – How the Rush for Congo’s Cobalt is Killing Thousands

By Victor Audu

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The Democratic Republic of Congo is currently facing a humanitarian crisis as miners are forced to work under exploitative conditions which amounts to modern-day slavery. The mining industry, because of its high demand, is host to various human rights violations including child labour.

On 20 December 2023, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) will head to the polls for a general election. These elections have caused worries that the current insecurity in the region will lead to increased violence for citizens. In response to the violence, on 08 November 2023, a video of a man who set himself on fire holding a ‘Stop the Genocide in Congo’ sign went viral on X (formerly Twitter).

Just as Nigeria has oil and South Africa has diamonds, the DRC has cobalt. African countries with extensive reserves of precious raw materials often find themselves prey to irresponsible leadership and the greed of Western powers. The DRC, with the largest reserve of cobalt in the world, is no exception. As of October 2023, 6.9 million Congolese people have been displaced due to violence and rebel attacks.

Some of that displacement (about 400 households in October 2023) has been directly linked to forced evictions driven by cobalt mining. Mining in the DRC has particularly gained attention, albeit insufficient, due to its association with grave human rights abuses and exploitation along with the fierce international competition that leeches off it.

COBALT AND THE DRC

Cobalt is a hard, lustrous, silver-grey metal that is often extracted as a by-product of nickel and copper mining. It has a variety of industrial applications, but it is perhaps most well-known as a critical component in the production of rechargeable lithium-ion batteries used in electric vehicles, smartphones, laptops, and other electronic devices. In other words, if you can send messages, browse the internet, and ride an electric car or plane, cobalt has been used as a production component.

While cobalt is an essential element, exposure to high levels of the metal can be toxic. Occupational exposure, particularly in mining and processing operations, is a concern. Cobalt’s importance in defence became clear in the First World War (1914-1918), which only grew in the Second World War (1939-1945) as the US’s importation of cobalt from the DRC grew twelvefold from 1938 to 1943 to support the production of jet engines.

To keep up with the high demands, cobalt mine production in the DRC experiences a growth rate of 20 per cent yearly. The multi-purpose use of cobalt has also made it a source of power in global politics, which only intensifies its demand.

The DRC, despite being a major source and exporter of some of the world’s most valuable minerals (copper, gold, coltan, cobalt and diamonds), as well as having the

second-largest forest in the world after the Amazon, remains one of the poorest countries in the world. 5.7 million people in the country are also displaced and one in four Congolese people cannot meet their basic food needs. This disproportionate reality signals a major humanitarian crisis resulting from exploitation and injustices such as child labour, unsafe working environments, and corruption.

COBALT AND SLAVERY

While history books remember the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a heinous injustice, we are currently faced with a plague of modern slavery, which according to the United Nations' International Labour Organisation, amounts to 49.6 million people as of 2021. The DRC produces more than 60 per cent of the world's supply of cobalt which is mined in the country's copper belt.

Of the 255,000 Congolese citizens mining cobalt, at least 40,000 of them are children. Much of the work is informal small-scale mining where labourers primarily use their hands and earn less than \$2 per day.

According to American non-governmental organisation, World Vision, mined minerals are often hazardous and exposure to some can have profound health effects. There is also a constant risk of falling into open mine shafts, being trapped, or injured by collapsing tunnels, or drowning while mining underwater.

In a survey, World Vision also found that 19 per cent of miners have witnessed a child die at a mining site, 67 per cent reported frequent or persistent coughing, and several girls had genital infections after working waist-deep in acidic water. In addition, up to 2,000 people die from cobalt mining accidents in the DRC every year.

Miners also face sexual assault and forced evictions. Those in the mines face the most salient human rights abuses and exploitations, but risks in this industry are spread across various groups. Truck drivers who move minerals from Kolwezi in the DRC to Zambia and then to coastal ports for transportation to other countries such as China, a major player in the DRC cobalt industry, went on strike in November 2023 to demand an extra risk allowance.

Unfortunately, solutions to this problem are not as easy as they may appear. Some tech companies such as Apple have decided to stop purchasing cobalt from small-scale mining companies to avoid any kind of contribution to exploitation and slavery. However, this does not solve the systemic problems such as poverty that drives families to depend on such exploitative mining jobs for income. Instead, the situation underscores the importance of formalizing the cobalt mining industry to encourage regulated working environments, provide proper equipment and safety procedures and eradicate child labour.

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