

How Illicit Exploitation in the Mining of Critical Minerals Contributes to the Cycle of Violence in Eastern DRC

written by Melissa (Mel) Sanderson | January 26, 2025

“The relentless cycle of violence and exploitation in Eastern DRC is not just a regional issue but a glaring example of how global demands and local governance failures collide. By allowing continuous conflict and exploitation, particularly in the mining of critical minerals like tantalum, the international community and local leaders are complicit in perpetuating a crisis that they periodically attempt to placate with ineffective ‘peace talks’.” – Melissa ‘Mel’ Sanderson, Government Relations Expert & Co-Chair, [Critical Minerals Institute](#) (CMI)

Today’s headlines about the violence in the Eastern DRC might have been written before – oh wait, so they have been, for over 20 years. Once again the terrorist group M23 and its State-sponsor, Rwandan President Paul Kagame, have become restive and eager for new riches and acquisitions. So M23 marches relentlessly again toward Goma, a major Eastern city, intent on capturing and controlling it. Why? Well, it is a major commercial port with Rwanda – but Rwanda doesn’t need Goma to freely transship Congo’s mineral riches to its own capital, Kigali, where they are processed and sold internationally. No, M23 wants Goma because the last time it captured the city it was handed major concessions and its activities virtually

legitimized by “peace talks” hastily convened by an embarrassed international community. Guess what – the UN and Western countries are calling for a ceasefire and peace talks again.

President Kagame has a small problem, since pressure and scrutiny on traceability of sourcing for critical minerals such as coltan and tantalum is mounting and threatens to potentially put a crimp in the incredibly lucrative illicit flow of such minerals from slave labor mines in Eastern DRC to Rwanda. Kagame essentially wants to secure his supply chain and thus, M23 is on the rampage again. In case you’re wondering, the connection between Kagame, the Rwandan military and M23 (some of whose commanders are ‘former’ Rwandan military) has been well documented for the same twenty-plus years that M23 has committed atrocity after atrocity, including utilizing rape as a weapon of war against Congolese women, stealing children from families (girls as sex slaves, boys as drug-addicted soldiers) and forcing civilians of both genders to dig in the dirt like badgers or haul loads like donkeys to pull out and transport the minerals that M23/Rwanda steals.

‘Peace talks’ are not the answer. Peace talk are needed only when there are two or more combatants – not the case here. Kagame just will laugh and shrug his shoulders at so-called peace talks, as he has done in the past. As long as there are no serious consequences to him he has no reason to even consider withdrawing his quasi-military from Eastern Congo’s areas that he defacto is slowly annexing.

If the UN and Western nations seriously wanted peace in Eastern Congo, Kagame should be named as a sponsor of terrorism; he personally, and the traders in Kigali who buy and sell the stolen minerals (and who are well known) should be sanctioned at the very least and possibly Kagame should be indicted for war crimes in DRC and brought before the International Court of

Justice. It is worth noting that Kagame is the dictator of Rwanda, rather than its genuinely elected President. The world also has turned a blind eye to his oppressing and disenfranchising Rwandans, the jailing or disappearance of his political enemies and the cynical and barely disguised manipulation of elections that consistently return him to office as an “elected” national leader.

All of this of course poses a dilemma for companies potentially interested in doing business in DRC, whose mineral resources are virtually legendary. Companies courageous enough to try and set up in the East have had employees attacked and, in some cases, killed: shipments intercepted and stolen, mine sites attacked, employees taken for ransom, etc. So, is Congo a no-go zone? What are companies to do?

First, it is important to remember that the DRC is huge. It is as large as the US east of the Mississippi. That’s a lot of space with a lot of potential. DRC’s minerals are not only in the East, but throughout the country. In practical terms, Congo’s size means that even when M23 is acting up in the East it has no meaningful impact on a company doing business in other parts of the country.

Second, the DRC government is itself interested in trying to establish businesses – mining or otherwise – throughout the country and has tried to incentivize this.

Congo also has a well-educated young workforce eager for opportunities, and, in the mining sector in particular, often with experience.

The biggest impediment to doing business in DRC isn’t violence, it’s lack of infrastructure. The inaccessibility of many parts of Congo – and therefore the difficulty in exporting product – is a more real challenge to a new mining company in northwestern

DRC, for instance, than is violence.

Africa in general is challenging, and DRC is far from the worst. There is less corruption than in some other African countries. There is less societal violence than in some other African countries, where even capital cities are not safe after dark. There are (so far) no military coups. There is far less prejudice against foreigners than in many other African countries.

So, Congo is not a 'no-go' except in that part of the East from Bukavu up to the Ugandan border. Those mineral-and-energy rich zones are the ones Kagame is claiming for his own. If international businesses would like the opportunity to do business securely there then they should pressure their governments to impose meaningful punishment on President Kagame. Removing Rwanda's sway in Eastern Congo is the only way to ensure peace and open the door for economic development in all of DRC.