

**Forum:** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

**Issue:** Combating Illegal Mining and the Trade of Conflict Minerals in West and Central Africa

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## **Introduction:**

In the twenty-first century, societies across the globe have become increasingly dependent on technologies such as mobile phones, automobiles, and heavy machinery. The components that power these innovations are crafted from a variety of minerals and metals that are most commonly extracted from the earth, hidden away behind layers of design and material that allow for an optimised user experience. Much like the hidden nature of these components and minerals, the conditions under which they were sourced are often left out of the eye of the public eye.

The land of West and Central Africa lies rich with natural minerals that are highly sought out across the world, such as tin, tantalum, cobalt, tungsten, and gold. However, instead of resulting in economic and sustainable development, this wealth of minerals has frequently been used to finance violence and conflict. Poor state management, corruption, and economic instability have fuelled illegal mining networks that facilitate this illicit trade. International groups such as the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) have attempted to enforce policies and processes to aid corporations practising due diligence. Yet, the core issue concerns regional instability and increasingly fragmented nations.

Other than conflicts facilitated by the trade of these minerals, these operations are deeply intertwined with issues concerning human rights. Child labour, exploitation, and environmental degradation have become grave threats in the African Great Lakes region. These concerns extend beyond isolated regions in which illicit trade is prevalent, affecting international cooperation and becoming a critical issue to address for global activist groups.

With the acceleration in technologies such as artificial intelligence, the demand for these minerals has skyrocketed. Therefore, ensuring that the wealth of resources no longer serves the purpose of funding conflict has become an urgent topic to address for the international community.

## Definition of key terms:

**African Great Lakes Region:** A region surrounding seven major lakes in East, South, and Central Africa. These lakes span over ten countries, most notably the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda.

**Armed Non-State Actors (ANSAs):** Organised and armed groups unaffiliated with states that push for their ideological, economic, or social objectives.

**Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM):** An economic sector that is largely informal and often lacks legal status or protection. ASM may lead to human rights violations and environmental concerns if left unchecked.

**Conflict Minerals:** Minerals used in everyday products (such as tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold, also referred to as 3TG) that are often sourced from politically unstable regions. This mineral trade can be used to finance violence.

**Designated Minerals Certification:** A formal process made to improve the scope of mineral traceability, particularly in the African Great Lakes Region.

**Due Diligence:** Often associated with the due diligence guidance created by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), this refers to the responsibility of corporations to analyse their supply chain and verify that they are in cooperation with conflict-free minerals.

**Galamsey:** Derived from the English phrase “gather them and sell”, galamsey describes the illegal gold mining sites spread across Ghana, causing environmental degradation and human rights violations.

**Global Supply Chain:** A complex and international network of suppliers, manufacturers, and distributors that combines both tangible and intangible flows in order to deliver goods across the globe.

**Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs):** The movement of money across borders whose origins, transfers, or usages are illegal in nature.

**Illicit Trade:** Often run by criminal networks, this refers to the production, transportation, and sales of illicit goods. Though the term expands across various industries, in this context, it refers to the illicit trade of minerals.

**Resource Curse/Paradox of Plenty:** A counterintuitive economic concept in which countries rich in non-renewable resources often face a decline in growth as a result of hyper-focused investments in the primary sector and governmental corruption.

**Traceability:** The ability to track the entire history/origin of certain products/data. In this context, traceability refers to that of conflict minerals.

## **Background:**

The issue of illegal mining and the trade of conflict minerals within West and Central Africa is a large and complex issue involving various nations, organisations, and groups. Due to the sheer scale of the issue at hand, it is almost impossible to briefly go over each conflict and point of tension that exacerbates the problem. However, many conflicts occurring as a result of this illicit trade have several similarities, which will be the main topic of this report.

## **History of Colonialism**

For centuries (beginning roughly during the 15th century), Europe began its colonisation of the African continent, reaching its peak during the 19th century during the “Scramble for Africa”. This was largely due to the abundance of raw materials and minerals present throughout the continent, such as cotton or sugar, but most notably (for this topic in particular) minerals such as gold or diamonds.

After years of suffering and exploitation, many nations within Africa gained autonomy and independence from their colonial rulers. However, the effects that remained can be interpreted as a major cause for much of the conflict and instability still present within the continent. During the Berlin Conference spanning between 1884 and 1885, lines were drawn to separate the African continent for effective colonialism. However, due to a lack of consideration for the tensions and history of Africa, these borders have inadvertently caused tensions between groups across the continent, eventually leading to some of the conflicts fuelled by illicit mineral trades we see in the modern day. Furthermore, many of the economic and social systems set up within Africa prioritised foreign control over local development, oftentimes leading to

governmental corruption and poor oversight, which undermine efforts to combat the illicit trade of conflict minerals.

Of course, there are various other factors contributing to the illegal mining of minerals that we see today; however, it is crucial to acknowledge historical causes that may contribute to issues that we discuss today.

### **The Global Supply Chain**

The continent of Africa is rich with natural resources, being home to roughly 30% of the world's mineral reserves. In 2019, it was estimated that Africa produced “92% of the world’s platinum, 89% of its gold, 71% of its cobalt, 75% of its diamonds, 60% of its chromium and 49% of its manganese”. The average battery for an electric vehicle requires roughly 13kg of cobalt, with a mobile phone requiring roughly 7g. From 2010 to 2025, this demand has roughly tripled to an expected 222,000 tonnes.

Many of the technologies that we use today rely on these minerals as core components of their design. In particular, 3TG is often used for the production of mobile phones, cars, or jewellery. Artificial means of producing them remain largely experimental and costly for companies, leading them to source their materials from conflict-ridden regions such as the DRC, which have an abundance. However, many mines throughout the continent consist of ASMs, which often do not have the same legal status or protection as many industrial mines do. As a result, miners are often subjected to inhumane working conditions, consistently exposing them to dangerous substances or situations. Furthermore, ANSAs and other criminal groups are largely present in these mines, who are no strangers to exploitation and endangerment of civilians. Due to the global demand for these minerals that are more often than not sourced from Africa, it becomes increasingly difficult to attempt to restrict their operations.

### **Regional Conflicts**

A major reason as to why this issue is particularly difficult to address is due to it being deeply intertwined with various pre-existing armed conflicts across the region, many of which involve ANSAs rather than governments. One prominent example is within the North Kivu and Ituri provinces within the DRC, with groups such as the M23 Movement and the Allied Democratic

Forces (ADF) operating. These groups often fall into conflict over mineral-rich regions containing 3TG and other valuables. However, much like many other countries across the continent, they frequently tax miners and control mining sites in order to gain profits, which they can then use in order to finance conflicts. Particularly within the DRC, tensions regarding smuggling networks through neighbouring countries exacerbate tensions and IFFs. The M23 Movement specifically is reported to have backing from Rwanda, particularly the Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF).

Despite differences in groups, most nations with ANSAs present in mining sites that finance their conflicts through their trade have many similarities. In most cases, ANSAs attempt to push for their own beliefs and ideologies (whether economic, religious, or social) through conflict, which can most easily be financed through conflict mineral trades. They often take control over mining sites either directly or through the taxation of miners, and secure trading routes outside of governmental control. Below is a list of various ANSAs from across West and Central Africa to consider:

- Former members of the Seleka Coalition and Anti-Balaka militias in conflict in the CAR, using diamonds and gold to finance their operations.
- The Jihadist insurgency in Burkina Faso saw groups such as Ansar ul Islam and other foreign groups attacking and seizing control of gold mines.
- In Mali, Jihadist groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) have taken control over various gold mines, as well as expanding to neighbouring countries. JNIM has been reported to be associated with Al-Qaida, and ISGS with ISIS.
- The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram of Nigeria have been involved in the illegal smuggling of minerals, though not directly linked to mining. ISWAP is reported to be associated with ISIS.

### **Environmental Implications**

Damage done to the environment as a result of mining in West and Central Africa is a leading cause of displacement and poor health quality. Not only does it affect the regions in which mining occurs, but it also affects the larger ecosystem of the continent and planet.

Deforestation is one of the major issues occurring as a result of illegal mining operations. One example that we may examine is transportation infrastructure. Roads, often built by China, cut through undisturbed areas of forests, opening themselves up for logging and mining operations. Some of the worst damage done is present in rainforests throughout West and Central Africa, in which weak governance and regulations have helped multiple Chinese companies work around legalities and get past international agreements protecting both the people and environment.

Water has also been largely contaminated throughout the region, largely due to toxic chemicals such as mercury, cyanide, arsenic, and fluoride, which are used when extracting minerals. Both ground and surface water in the region face pollution, leaving rivers impotable for both humans and other species. As a result, biodiversity has been in decline, and many individuals have suffered numerous health complications. In particular, ASM operations cause large portions of this damage through mass sedimentation and the use of intensive chemicals.

ASM operations not only affect bodies of water, but also the soil itself. In many regions of West and Central Africa, soil erosion has become commonplace alongside its pollution due to toxic heavy metals. In comparison to unmined soil, mined soil experiences a nutritional deterioration from 50% to 77%. This not only affects mining operations, but also agricultural operations that feed populations.

### **Human Rights Violations**

The increase in ASM operations and control by ANSAs has caused a significant growth in human rights violations. Not only are working conditions in mineral-rich mining sites often inhumane and expose miners to hazardous chemicals, but oftentimes men, women, and children are forced into labour.

In the DRC, the global demand for copper (often used in rechargeable batteries) has left numerous cases of evictions that actively destroy communities. Many ANSAs in control of these areas illegally take over property, with cases of sexual assault, arson, and beating on those who attempt to resist. In the neighbourhood of Cité Gécamines, cobalt and copper mines operated by Compagnie Minière de Musonoie (COMMUS) have been destroyed, leaving houses burnt and residents injured.

As mentioned above, damage to the ecosystem has left populations extremely susceptible to life-threatening illnesses, such as lead poisoning, respiratory issues, and severe dehydration. In

particular, children who are forced to work in these mines often face hazardous work, leaving them with a plethora of health complications.

### **Certifications and Guidance**

Many organisations have produced various certifications and guidance outlines to aid corporations in ensuring that their supplies are conflict-free. Two notable processes are the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) and the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas (OECD Due Diligence Guidance).

The KPCS accounts for 99.8% of all global diamond shares, with 86 countries in participation. Their goal is to ensure that diamond trades are conflict-free, promoting transparency and accountability for both nations and corporations. Those involved are required to comply with four fundamentals: enforcement of regulations, principles of transparency, verification of exports, and selective trading protocols.

The OECD Due Diligence Guidance was created to ensure that corporations sourcing minerals from conflict-prone areas do not contribute to armed violence, IFFs, and human rights violations (amongst various other issues). It introduced a five-step risk-based due diligence process, which includes establishing strong management systems, identifying risks, responding to said risks, auditing, and reporting.

### **Timeline of Key Events**

<b>November 15th 1884 - February 26th 1885</b>	The Berlin Conference takes place, dividing Africa between European colonial powers.
<b>March 23rd 1991</b>	The Sierra Leonean civil war begins, largely funded by “blood diamonds.”
<b>December 9th 1999</b>	International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism is adopted.

<b>June 2nd 2000</b>	The Panel of Experts is established to investigate illegal exploitation of minerals in the DRC.
<b>November 15th 2000</b>	The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime is adopted.
<b>January 1<sup>st</sup> 2003</b>	The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme is officially established.
<b>October 31st 2003</b>	The UN Convention against Corruption is adopted.
<b>February 1st-3rd 2009</b>	The Africa Mining Vision (AMV) is adopted during an African Union Summit Conference.
<b>July 11th 2011</b>	The OECD Due Diligence Guidance is published.
<b>December 10<sup>th</sup> 2012</b>	The CAR Civil war, preceding the Central African Bush War, begins with attacks from ex-Seleka rebels.
<b>April 2nd 2013</b>	The Arms Trade Treaty is adopted.
<b>November 7th 2021</b>	The M23 Movement in eastern DRC resurges.

### **Major parties involved:**

\* Many nations unmentioned in this list, particularly those of the Sahel and African Great Lakes regions, are involved with the issue of conflict mineral trades. Other organisations, such as the African Union or foreign entities with stakes in Africa's minerals, such as the UAE, are also involved.

**Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC):** The DRC possesses some of the world's largest reserves of coltan, cobalt, and 3TG, which have historically been used to finance conflicts within the region. Despite the abundance of natural minerals, the DRC government lacks control over

their (particularly eastern) territories, leading to many of them being controlled by armed groups. Recently, in 2021, the militia known as the “Mouvement Du 23 Mars” (M23) has had a resurgence due to frustrations within the DRC government, though it is also alleged that the group acts with the interests of Rwanda concerning minerals. Much of their finances has been attributed to the illicit trade of coltan and other minerals, which they have allegedly exported to Rwanda.

**Rwanda:** Rwanda’s position on the issue of the trade of conflict minerals may be deemed as controversial, with alleged ties between the nation and the M23 movement of the DRC. The nation is also a major hub for the illicit transit and export of minerals, largely originating from the DRC. Minerals such as the 3TG and coltan are often first smuggled into Rwanda from eastern territories of the DRC before entering the global supply chain. Despite the claims from Rwandan officials, particularly those of the Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF), the strategic alliance between Rwanda and the M23 Movement has been well documented by various organisations, as well as the UNSC.

**Central African Republic (CAR):** The land within the CAR is rich with gold and diamonds, with gold being its second most exported product. Despite this, the nation struggles with maintaining control over its territories, in particular its diamond and gold reserves, which have largely been seized by non-state actors and have been used to finance conflicts, such as the ongoing CAR civil war between the former members of the Seleka Coalition and Anti-Balaka militias in 2012. Artisanal & small-scale gold mining (ASGM) has become a prominent issue within the nation in recent years, similar to multiple other countries. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the mineral saw a surge in global prices, leading many organised criminal organisations to maximise their profits through illegal production and smuggling.

**Ghana:** Ghana is a leading exporter of gold within the African continent, having exported roughly \$5.9B in 2024 alone. In Ghana specifically, the term galamsey is used to describe illegal gold mining sites, which have only become increasingly sophisticated over the years. Local politicians, businessmen, and foreign businessmen (such as from China, Burkina Faso, and Côte d’Ivoire) have allegedly bought out cacao farms and turned them into illegal mining sites, contributing to “the mad gold rush”. Ghana’s environmental damages from ASM are especially of note, with many rivers such as the Pra, Ankobra, and Birim being contaminated from the excessive mining, often involving dangerous substances such as mercury.

**Burkina Faso:** Within the Sahel region, Burkina Faso is one of the largest exporters of gold, and the third largest exporter of gold within the African continent. Between 2012 and 2021, an estimated \$4.93B was lost due to IFFs, 61% of which was attributed to illegal gold trading. With a weak governmental presence in rural mining zones, as well as poor oversight and corruption, the nation has become a hub for illegal smuggling networks and for ANSAs to profit from illicit trade.

**People's Republic of China:** Despite being located on an entirely separate continent, China is by far one of the most influential foreign actors in Africa's illicit trade of conflict minerals. The nation acquired major mining assets, such as Tanzania's Ngualla rare earth mine in 2025, establishing a dominant position in not only the extraction but also the refinement processes and mining infrastructure within the continent. Their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) contributes significantly to the region, building multiple transportation infrastructures and power grid networks. Furthermore, many of their state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operating within Africa hold an unusually high tolerance strategy, absorbing damages in order to gain market dominance even in politically unstable regions.

### **Relevant UN treaties, resolutions, and reports:**

#### **United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime**

*UNTOC, Palermo Conference, 2000*

#### **A/RES/55/56; The role of diamonds in fuelling conflict**

*The General Assembly, 2000*

#### **S/RES/1493; Arms Embargo in the DRC**

*UNSC, 2003*

#### **United Nations Convention against Corruption**

*UNCAC, 2003*

#### **Transnational Organised Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment**

*UNODC Report, 2013*

## Previous attempts to solve the issue:

### **Dodd-Frank Act Section 1502, Conflict Minerals & SEC Reporting Requirements:**

Signed in July 2010, the Dodd-Frank Act was a piece of US federal law that required companies listed under the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to disclose annually if their products contained conflict minerals, in particular 3TG, from nations such as the DRC. Three main steps must be complied with: a Reasonable Country of Origin Inquiry (RCOI), due diligence measures aligned with the OECD, and an annual SEC Form SD filing due on the 31st of May.

Despite these measures, there remain various transparency gaps in multiple reports by various companies, including incomplete data on suppliers. Furthermore, several elements of the Conflict Minerals Report have not been completed for the past decade, due to them not being actively enforced. With recent reviews by the Trump administration, these enforcements have been weakened further.

### **EU Conflict Minerals Regulations:**

Adopted in May of 2017, then enforced from the first of January 2021, the EU Conflict Minerals Regulations were established in order to reduce the entry of conflict minerals into European markets. It specifically targets 3TG and high-risk areas, requiring EU importers to practice due diligence, verify the origins of their supplies, and identify any involvement of militias and human rights violations. One major issue raised is that these regulations only target 3TG minerals in raw or semi-processed forms. Therefore, products such as electronics and automobile parts often do not fall under its jurisdiction. Much like many other similar efforts, they also heavily rely on companies self-reporting accurately, which results in incomplete supplier data and other areas without transparency.

## Possible solutions:

### **Formalisation of Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining:**

A major reason as to why environmental degradation, human rights violations, and illegal mining occur is due to the lack of legal status and protection given to ASM operations, despite making

a significant portion of mining in Africa. Identifying this, delegates may choose to target ASMs in particular to strengthen their position on the international scale to reduce harm.

### **Cross-Border Mineral Traceability:**

Another major issue concerning the issue at hand is the difficulties faced when minerals cross borders. Illegal trading routes cause IFFs, leading to communities and nations being unable to reap the benefits of their resources. Oftentimes, illegally mined minerals are mixed into routes containing legitimate exports, which may be a central issue that delegates wish to address.

### **Investment into Local Governance and Communities:**

Long-term success relies on these nations being able to support themselves without great amounts of foreign aid. Weak governance and regulations are a core issue regarding why this issue persists, which may be a focal point delegates wish to address. Of course, delegates must remember to take into account a nation's sovereignty and the principle that aid must be beneficial in the long term.

### **International Restrictions on Foreign Actors:**

Though global efforts to minimise the use of conflict minerals are indeed helpful, many foreign actors (mainly corporations) are still present throughout the continent, contributing to the exploitation occurring. Delegates may choose to further push for increased transparency and restrictions that are currently lacking in international frameworks.

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