

# In Search of Congo's Coltan

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Bukavu is perched high above Lake Kivu, gently encroaching on the placid body of water between Rwanda and Congo. Once known as the pearl of Congo because of its beautiful climate and mountains, the Bukavu I found last summer (2005) barely resembles the famed city I heard about as a child.

In the past ten years, South Kivu province and its capital city of Bukavu have been known for two things; insecurity and coltan. I came for both. In anticipation of the country's first multiparty elections in four decades, I wanted to understand the potential effect of insecurity on the elections and learn first-hand the role minerals such as coltan play in fueling insecurity.

Four times the size of France, and as big as the United States east of the Mississippi river, Congo holds 80 percent of the world's reserves of coltan, a heat-resistant mineral ore widely used in cellular phones, laptop computers and video games. The ore derives its name from a contraction of columbium-tantalite, the scientific nomenclature.

Columbium-tantalite is so vital to the high tech industry that without it, wireless communication as we know it would not exist. Refined coltan yields tantalum, which is used primarily for the production of capacitors, critical for the control of the flow of current in miniature circuit boards. Tantalum is also used in the aviation and atomic energy industries. Even though it has been exploited for years, this mineral did not come to prominence among the uninitiated until the "coltan rush" of the late 1990's. At the beginning of 2000, a pound of unprocessed coltan cost between US\$30 and US\$40 on the international market. By the end of the year, the price had risen tenfold to US\$400.

The advent of a new generation of mobile phones, the upsurge of tech products, and the popularity of video games such as Sony Playstation 2 increased demand for the ore to unprecedented levels and drove prices to new heights. Hoping to make money, thousands of Congolese men rushed to the mines.

Insecurity welcomes me as soon I exit Bukavu's Kavumu airport. On the way to town, we pass a couple of United Nations peacekeepers' camps – South Africans, Pakistanis and others. On the rest of the road, we see the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo*, known among the people as FARDC.

The FARDC does not inspire trust. Far from a typical army, it is a patchwork of various militias that fought each other not so long ago and still treat each other with suspicion. They idle at the market, smoke at the street corner or fight for public transportation with civilians. They are always armed, do not receive regular pay, and beg whenever they get a chance. Above all, they are hungry and mean. The FARDC seems to own the 35 kilometer-road to town. The bad condition of the road mirrors the collapse of Congo's infrastructure and reflects the failure of the State, which is unable to provide the minimum of public

service. It takes over an hour to reach the center of town and I see no sign of coltan's wealth. It is an old beat up city.

By the end of 2001, coltan overproduction and the subsequent decrease in demand drove prices down to their previous level. Adam Smith's invisible hand did its job. A few international traders made a fortune and militia leaders stuffed their war chests and foreign bank accounts. Local miners, however, only had their dreams for trophy. Coltan perks had evaporated long before I arrived in town.

Bukavu mimics Congo's problems. Like the country, South Kivu has unlimited potential, from its physical beauty to hydro-electrical capacity to human and natural resources. Yet, conflict, mismanagement and corruption prevent the region from benefiting from these riches.

"If you want to understand what has gone wrong in Congo," says Thomas Nziratimana of the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) and vice-governor of South Kivu in charge of finance, economy and development, "You start with the way the country has been run so far. Despotism regimes cannot attract investors. They create tensions that do not make anyone feel safe to come and invest."

Congo has had its share of dictatorships, war and civil unrest. From 1965 to 1997, the late Mobutu Sese Seko presided over a kleptocracy - a predatory regime that benefited a few members of the political elite, bankrupted the rich country and left its population in misery.

"In the past we have had a highly centralized system where everything went to Kinshasa, the capital, yet the provinces were very productive. This has continued today," reflects Nziratimana. "Eighty-five percent of the income generated in South Kivu is sent to Kinshasa and nothing remains here, nothing."

The kleptocratic culture did not end with Mobutu's fall. In May 1997, Laurent-Désiré Kabila forced Mobutu into exile and became president. A former pro-Lumumba guerilla fighter who had trained along side Che Guevara in the hills of eastern Congo in the 1960's, Kabila launched his rebellion from South Kivu with the support of neighboring Rwanda and Uganda in 1996. Bukavu served as his rear base and suffered great damage in human and infrastructure terms during the fighting.

In the new Kabila regime power remained in the hands of a few cronies who amassed wealth for themselves à la Mobutu. A new millionaire class emerged overnight as Congo sank deeper into misery. In 1998, after Kabila fell out of grace with his backers in Uganda and Rwanda, these two countries invaded Congo in an attempt to overthrow him. A multinational war followed, with Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia intervening on Kabila's side. Unable to unseat Kabila, Rwanda and Uganda chose to support a second rebellion in eastern Congo.

In 2001, following Laurent-Désiré's assassination, his son Joseph assumed the presidency. The city did not recover from the suffering. Neither did the country. The conflict partitioned the country. Supported by Uganda, Jean-Pierre Bemba's Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo ruled over northern Congo, from east to west. Rwanda-backed RCD militiamen controlled eastern Congo for five years until a series of peace accords brought a transitional government in Kinshasa, which included leaders of various warring factions.

Rwandan occupation years also coincided with the coltan boom years. In fact, while neither Rwanda nor Uganda have gold, diamond or coltan deposits of significance, both countries have become important exporters of these minerals. A 2003 United Nations Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources accused both countries of prolonging the civil war so that they could illegally siphon off Congo's wealth with the help of Western corporations.

This second rebellion, which has claimed over 4.4 million lives, has made Congo's conflict the deadliest in the world since World War II. Mineral exploitation was one of the driving forces behind the war and the proliferation of militias; some of these militiamen still operate in the region and control mining areas.

When I inquire of the people how to get to a coltan mine, I receive different versions of the same response. "It's too dangerous out there," they say. "There is too much insecurity. We advise you, 'don't go to the mines'." For several days, I tried to arrange a trip to the mines and found nobody to take me. My search eventually takes me to the city's Ibanda neighborhood, to the backyard of a two-story house that someone converted into offices. Olive Depot is one of the largest coltan companies in town, but to my surprise, it is unimpressive. Considering the publicity coltan has received recently in Western media, I expected a large processing center – an imposing edifice with complex machines and engineers barking orders to their foremen. Instead, I found the most rudimentary of processing systems, two dozen men working with their hands and playing with dirt like children. No one barked orders. They worked in silence, interrupted only by the sound of their own movements.

My attention turns to several men squatting down and playing with dirt – black dirt – in a medium-sized hangar. "That is coltan," says my guide Alexis Mushaka, a metallurgical engineer. "Are you joking?" I ask. That dirt in front of me could not be the highly-prized coltan, the bloody ore that fueled the conflict and the subject of several UN investigations. "No, I am serious," Mushaka responds as he motions me to follow him to the hangar.

The men give us a quick look and return to their business. They are covered in dust, coltan. A couple of them sift through a large bowl of dirt and blow on the dust, which falls on their faces. It looks terrible. Most of them do not wear any mask. Neither do they wear any uniform. They also do not wear shoes, perhaps by choice. I do not ask. They work in silence and quietly listen to Mushaka explain the process to me.

"First, the négociant brings the coltan from the mine," he says and points to a white sack of dark brown dirt on the floor. "He sells it here and then these fellows start the separation process." The process means the men in the hangar have to separate all impurities from the product itself. "Deep in that dirt is coltan or its sister products of cassiterite and wolframite," Mushaka continues, "and they will have to find it." The end product looks like crushed gravel. He beckons me to the other side of the hangar where a man dressed in a tank top and shorts sits on the floor, working with two small piles of black dirt. "Look, he is holding a magnet in his hand," Mushaka says. "He is separating iron from the rest. The bag of cassiterite comes with all kinds of other minerals. They need to get all of them out."

When I ask the men what type of work contract they have, I learn that most of them have no contract. Every morning a large group of laborers lines up outside the compound's gate and ask for work. Few are chosen and the rest are sent home. They make less than US\$1 a day. "If we did not have this job, we will have no work," says one of them when I ask why they accept to work in these conditions.

The négociant's situation is not much different. As the middleman, he is very much at the mercy of the depot. "They wait until their merchandise is processed before they are paid," Mushaka explains when I ask how a négociant sells his load. "The tonnage they bring does not equate their pay. It shrinks quite a bit after the impurities are sorted out."

The négociant who arrives while I visit the depot says most of the time he is in the red. When asked why he still deals coltan considering his losses, his response reflects what the average Congolese worker in any profession says. "If I did not do this, then what else?" he retorts. He makes US\$1.59 per pound.

On the international market, coltan costs between US\$8 and US\$18 per pound. If anyone still makes any money with coltan, it's the processing depot and the other dealers on the international market. The final product is exported via Kigali in Rwanda to the ports of Mombassa and Dar-es-Salaam where it is shipped overseas.

The coltan business underscores the failure of the State. Beyond a new mining code adopted by the transitional government, which imposes a high tax rate on businesses and investors, the government has not undertaken any serious initiative to formalize the coltan industry, as is the case with other resources such as copper, cobalt and zinc.

"There is an issue with taxes these days," says Nzojusa Belembo, director at Olive. "During the RCD rebellion, there was an exportation monopoly through a local company called SOMINGL. Companies paid a fixed tax, regardless of the product price fluctuation. Everyone benefited." After a pause, Belembo continues. "It is simple. We have porous borders," he says. "You can cross the river to Rwanda with coltan in your pocket. They offer better prices there. Our legislation encourages fraud."

The visit at the Olive Depot did not prepare me for what I saw at the mines. Dug on the steep flank of a high mountain, Mushangi mines are located about 90 kilometers west of Bukavu. Driving as fast as we could on an arduous road, the trip took two hours. The mines are 15 kilometers from the Nzibira area where several militias have operated, including the Interahamwe and the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda. The FARDC also has a post in the vicinity, which is not encouraging either. Insecurity required that we brought armed guards with us.

At Mushangi, a treacherous path leads to the mines where we find only a handful of adults. The mines are exploited by children of all ages, working in precarious conditions. From sunrise to sunset, they toil in open pits with the most primitive tools and no protection from falling rocks and mudslides. They crawl through dark tunnels with no structural support.

In my travel across Congo, I have seen a great deal of suffering. Watching children crawl through those pits and tunnels tested my resolve. Ten-year old Bashizi tells me, "I do this hard work because my father is too old to support me." He has been doing it for several months. "That is the only thing there is to do around here," he says. The children swarm around us, seeking attention and asking to be photographed. I snap several pictures as I speak with them and hear their stories. Through my lens, I see lost childhoods and broken dreams. Images from my own youth in a different Congo flash before my eyes when I push the button.

We ask 16-year old Baruti and his friends whether they understand where their coltan goes from Mushangi. "It goes to Bukavu," they say. "Do you know coltan is highly prized in America and Europe? It is needed for computers, mobile phones and video games," I follow. "No," Baruti replies. Their world revolves around the open-pits where they spend seven days a week and make less than 20 cents a day.

One last question before we leave for Bukavu. It is three in the afternoon, and that is late to be out here. "Do you understand that the exploitation of coltan fuels the conflict in Congo?" I inquire. Baruti looks at me straight in the eye and answers, "If we knew that, we would no longer work here."