

Democratic Republic of Congo: As global demand for cobalt soars, child miners pay the price

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With its abundant natural resources, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been prey to exploitation since it was first 'discovered' in 1877 by journalist and explorer, Sir Henry Morton Stanley. Stanley returned in 1879 with the backing of King Leopold II of Belgium, who later turned the region into his own personal fiefdom.

In the 150 or so years since, the DRC has repeatedly suffered plunder, civil unrest and the most egregious forms of human rights abuses – much of which is linked to the struggle to control its wealth of metals, minerals and forests.

When rubber became a key raw material in the manufacture of tyres, the country became the world's largest producer, supplying European factories throughout the second industrial revolution – but this came with a heavy toll for local communities, who were subjected to forced labour, displacement and other atrocities. Later on, the uranium used to produce the bombs that dropped on Hiroshima

and Nagasaki during the Second World War was mined in the DRC.

Now, as we transition from cars with internal combustion engines to the new generation of electric vehicles (EVs), the DRC again finds itself bearing the human cost of the latest technology. Some 60 per cent of the world's supply of cobalt – a mineral widely used in the batteries that power EVs, as well as such tech devices as smartphones, tablets and laptops – comes from the DRC, with much of this production concentrated in what was formerly known as Katanga province, a resource-rich region in the south of the country that has



Children pass an enormous mining slag heap of copper and cobalt that is being processed by a Belgian-Congolese-American joint venture. Lubumbashi, Haut Katanga, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Credit: JB Russell /Panos

nevertheless struggled with widespread poverty and intermittent outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence. In particular, the mining industry has attracted many migrant labourers, adding to potential tensions. Indeed, many have typically come from the Kasai region, which has itself recently borne the brunt of massive displacement.

This mining hub has also become the site of an ongoing human rights crisis linked directly to its natural resources. Children as young as 10 years old are reported to be digging in trenches, labouring in rivers, sifting and sorting the mineral and carrying sacks of ore heavier than their own body weight. Even those too young to work themselves are forced to spend the entire day in mining sites with their mothers, breathing in toxic fumes.

Research by Amnesty International and African Resource Watch (Afresource) in 2016 confirmed that chronic exposure

to dust containing cobalt can result in fatal 'hard metal lung disease' and that inhalation of cobalt particles could cause a range of respiratory problems, including asthma. Despite this, the vast majority of mine workers do not have even basic protective equipment such as face masks or gloves. Today, with few safeguards in place, many children continue to be engaged in this hazardous work. Previous estimates by UNICEF have suggested that some 40,000 children were working in mines in southern DRC in perilous and exploitative conditions.

According to international law, the involvement of children in mining constitutes one of the most egregious forms of child labour. In its most recent comments and conclusions, the International Labour Organization (ILO) Committee of Experts reviewing the DRC's adherence to the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (ILO No. 182, 1999) called on the government to intensify its efforts in preventing children from working in mines and ensuring that thorough investigations and prosecutions of offenders are carried out, with adequate penalties imposed.

However, the chain of culpability extends beyond the DRC itself to the large global multinationals which trade, purchase or use cobalt. Given limited regulation, cobalt mined by children can change hands at local markets from Congolese artisanal miners to international brokers, ending up in a laptop or an EV thousands of miles away. Among the largest international companies listed in this trade is Congo Dongfang Mining International (CDM), a subsidiary of Chinese-based Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt Company,

and the Swiss mining giant Glencore. Both corporations then sell it on for processing before it is then bought by manufacturers of EVs, mobile devices and other technologies.

Both companies were named, though not included as defendants, in a landmark legal case filed in the United States (US) on 17 December 2019 by the human rights law firm International Rights Advocates on behalf of 14 parents and children from the DRC against the electric car manufacturer Tesla and a number of technology giants – including Apple, Alphabet (the parent company of Google), Dell and Microsoft – for reparations and rehabilitation on account of forced labour. The parents state that some of the children had been killed in tunnel collapses while others had been paralysed or suffered life-altering injuries from accidents. In the case, the plaintiffs are also seeking compensation for unjust enrichment, negligent supervision and intentional infliction of emotional distress on the complainants. The case was still at an early stage at the time of writing.

The need to enforce clear human rights standards in the cobalt mining sector will only become more pressing as global demand increases. As countries work towards fulfilling their commitments under the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, as well as more specific initiatives such as the 2015 Declaration on Electro-Mobility and Climate Change and Call to Action, demand for EVs – and therefore cobalt – is rising. Indeed, global demand for cobalt has already tripled in the past five years. In line with this trend, market

analysts estimate that, worldwide, car companies will sell around 2.5 million electric passenger vehicles in 2020, 20 per cent more than in 2019.

While this could bring considerable environmental benefits, the increase in EV production could have a corresponding impact on child labour in the DRC. Unless safeguards are built into cobalt supply chains – starting from local artisanal mines, and all the way to consumers purchasing cobalt-containing vehicles – thousands of children will continue to suffer exploitation, abuse and the risk of injury or death. If so, then the DRC will yet again bear the burden of global demand for its resources. This means more human suffering and environmental destruction so that more affluent countries can benefit from new technologies, while its own population continues to experience some of the lowest levels of development in the world.



About **60 per cent of the world's supply of cobalt** comes from the DRC. The mineral is used in batteries that power electric vehicles, as well as smartphones, tablets and laptops.