The renowned intellectual, Noam Chomsky recently argued that the conflict in the Kivus is ‘the worst catastrophe in Africa, if not the world...’ This is because, to date, over 5 million people, mostly civilians have died in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since the beginning of the conflict in 1996. Many more are displaced. And thousands of women – including the elderly and young girls – continue to be viciously raped.

Human Rights Watch reports that the ‘United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the agency coordinating work on sexual violence in Congo, estimates that 200,000 women and girls have been the victims of sexual violence since 1998. In 2008, it recorded nearly 16,000 cases; 65 per cent of the victims were children, mostly adolescent girls.’

The government and the rebel groups have signed numerous cease-fire agreements. And in 2006, the first democratic elections in more than 40 years were held. Yet, the rapes, plundering and violent death continue nonstop.

Why, despite the 2006 democratic elections, is there no peace in the DRC, particularly in the eastern provinces? And most importantly, can there ever be peace in the DRC?

Well, according to a report released earlier this year by Global Witness, a human rights group, the war in the DRC is likely to continue for many more years, unless the international markets stop supporting the illegal trade of minerals. The report entitled Faced with a gun, what can you do? documents the militarisation of mining in the conflict-affected areas of eastern DRC.

According to the report, the illegal trade, which is largely controlled by armed gangs, including the DRC’s military (FARDC), ‘is prolonging the armed conflict which has been tearing the country apart for more than 12 years’.

Perhaps to get a sense of the situation in the DRC, one needs to understand its history and put the conflict into an historical context.

Laurent Kabila, backed by Rwanda and Uganda, led a coup d’état, against Mobuto Sese Seko’s corrupt government, and forced the ailing tyrant to flee the country in 1997.

It was not long before another rebellion erupted in the eastern provinces, the Kivus, in 1998. Kabila’s former allies, Rwanda and Uganda, had become his fierce enemies and were supporting rebel groups that attempted to topple his government.

The second uprising, which claimed over three million lives, drew in six foreign forces, with Angola,
Namibia and Zimbabwe backing Kabila’s government, while Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda sided with the rebel groups.

Though the rebels failed to overthrow Kabila’s government, one of his bodyguards gunned him down in 2001, leaving his son Joseph to take over as the head of state.

Following years of negotiations between the government, rebel factions, and the foreign forces, the war officially ended in 2003. An agreement, which asked foreign governments to withdraw their troops, was signed. In the same year, a transitional government was set up.

And in 2006, the first elections in 46 years were held. After a second run-off, Joseph Kabila emerged as the winner and thus remained as the head of state.

Some parts of the country, especially the western provinces, have experienced less brutal violence since the 2006 elections. But the eastern provinces - North and South Kivu - continue to be ravaged by conflicts. And, as is always the case, women are the ones who are mostly affected as they continue to be raped. According to Oxfam ‘cases of children, some as young as four, being brutally raped were reported…’ at the beginning of this year.

Apart from being the hub of militias, the Kivus are rich with mineral resources. According to Global Witness, some of the most important minerals found in the Kivu’s are cassiterite, coltan, gold, pyrochlore and wolframite

Both cassiterite and coltan are useful in the ‘electronics industry. The former is ‘used among other things... for the production of tin cans.’ And the latter is used ‘as a component in electronic goods, such as circuits in mobile telephones, laptop computers, airbag protection systems, playstations, video cameras and digital cameras’ notes the report.

Wolframite is used in ‘heavy industry, particularly to manufacture metal and stone cutting tools, mining tools and other machinery components’. And pyrochlore is used for the ‘production of steel.

Although it might be armed men who go through extremes of murdering, raping, and forcing people to mine and extract the minerals, ‘the international markets in Europe, Asia, North America and elsewhere’ not only benefit from this plundering, but they are actually fuelling the conflict.

After all, some of our computers, cell phones, ipods and other electronics – which continue to grow in demand – are produced by the minerals found in the DRC. Warlords do not tax multinational companies, thus it’s cheaper and more profitable for these companies to continue supporting the armed gangs.

According to Global Witness, ‘some of the most violent armed groups’ would not survive if it were not from the profits they make from selling the minerals to ‘the international markets’. Thus, one can safely argue that the conflict would not be as deadly as it is, if multinational companies were not supporting the illegal trade.

The Global Witness study concurs with the editor@pambazuka.org or comment online at Pambazuka News.

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Article-Summary:
Over 5 million people, mostly civilians, have died in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since its
Conflict began in 1996. In this week’s Pambazuka News Phumlani Majavu looks at why peace is so elusive, with reference to a recent report from human rights group Global Witness on the role the illegal trade in minerals plays in fuelling violence in the DRC.

Country: Democratic Republic of Congo [9]

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[1] https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/6298
[3] http://tinyurl.com/yhh8lcm]2008 UN Group of Experts report&lt;/a&gt; that multinational companies from Belgium, UK, China and other countries ‘have been buying minerals’ from traders ‘known to be trading with armed groups for several years, apparently without adjusting their practices in light of the conflict or carrying out sufficient due diligence to ensure that their trade is not fuelling the violence.’&lt;/p&gt;&lt;#10;&lt;/p&gt;If peace and justice are ever to exist and prevail in the Kivus and indeed in the entire DRC, then those involved in the illegal trade – including multinational companies who are in cohorts with the armed gangs ought to face the law and be punished for the ‘the most horrific human rights abuses, including widespread killings of unarmed civilians, rape, torture and looting, recruitment of child soldiers..., and forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people...’ that result from this deadly trade.&lt;/p&gt;&lt;#10;&lt;/p&gt;And as the Global Witness report further notes, ‘any lasting solution to the problem has to be centred on restoring [freedom, justice and peace] and in bringing those responsible to justice – be it rebel leaders, army officers, companies or traders.&lt;/p&gt;&lt;#10;&lt;/p&gt;BROUGHT TO YOU BY PAMBAZUKA NEWS&amp;lt;/p&amp;gt;&amp;lt;#10;&lt;/p&amp;gt; Phumlani Majavu is an activist and a freelance writer based in Cape Town.&lt;br /&gt;&lt;#10;* Please send comments to &lt;mailto: https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/6289