



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Child Labor and Human Rights Violations in the Mining Industry of the Democratic Republic of Congo

Thursday, July 14, 2022

1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. EDT

Rayburn Room 2200 and Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Rep. Christopher H. Smith

Excerpt of Remarks

In 2009, Adam Hochschild wrote a book which so shocked the conscience, telling a story of how greed could justify the worst exploitation of one's fellow human beings.

That book, *King Leopold's Ghost*, tells of the raping and ravaging of the resources of what was then called, ironically enough, the Congo Free State. In reality, it was the personal preserve of one man, King Leopold II of Belgium, though he never visited it during his reign.

As one surveys the history of Western colonialism in Africa, there was probably no more brutal experience than that which happened in King Leopold's Congo, which eventually was annexed by Belgium and later became what we know as the independent Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC, though it was called "Zaire" for many of my early years in Congress.

In the case of Leopold's Congo, it was the unquenchable quest for rubber which ignited the greed of men.

The brutality, as told by Hochschild, was driven home by photos of severed hands that appear in his book, and of handless amputees. As land was claimed for rubber plantations, the men of villages that did not submit were often killed. Hands were collected from corpses to demonstrate to Belgian overseers that bullets were not wasted, or to collect bounties. That in turn incentivized the severing of hands of those still living to up the tally, leaving amputees with lives forever intentionally crippled.

I was reminded of these photos in preparation for today's hearing, as I saw a photo of a Congolese child without a leg in a submission for the record of today's hearing by International Rights Advocates.

That child lost his leg in an artisanal mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which brings us directly to the topic of today's hearing.

For just as rubber once motivated the greed of men, today it is the quest for cobalt for batteries and lithium for solar panels to power the so-called Green Economy that motivates human rapacity.

Today's hearing will focus on the mining industry of the DRC, and its exploited victims.

The DRC is a resource rich and governance poor country. Seventy percent of all the world's [mining of cobalt](#) – constituting a major part of a global supply chain – occurs within the DRC, and an estimated 40,000 children toil in non-regulated artisanal mines under hazardous conditions.

These artisanal mines are often no more than narrow shafts dug into the ground, which is why children are recruited – and in many cases forced – to descend into them, using only their hands or rudimentary tools without any protective equipment, to extract cobalt and other minerals.

These hastily dug artisanal mines are also subject to collapsing, which is why we see photos of children with amputated legs. And these are the lucky ones, who escaped from a collapsed mine with their lives if not their limbs.

But it is not only in artisanal mines where safety standards are not met, and environmental impact disregarded, but in the mining sector as a whole.

Many Congolese mines are owned by Chinese firms like China Molybdenum. Indeed, the Chinese presence – and to a lesser but still significant extent, the Russian one – can be seen throughout Africa, particularly in the mining industry.

For China has a strategic interest in controlling the global supply chain in cobalt, as it does rare earth minerals with military applications – something that for too long successive US Administrations have ignored, as one of our witnesses, former Ambassador Eric Schultz, will amplify.

Indeed, no U.S. president since President George W. Bush – whose PEPFAR plan to combat AIDS positively transformed the lives of so many African individuals and families – has shown a real interest in either the strategic importance or humanitarian needs of Africa. That is an indictment of both successive Democratic and Republican administrations.

And it is in the DRC where we see the effects of that neglect play out.

Into that vacuum others step in, and so often for ill.

In the eastern DRC, where Rwanda and Uganda are competing for leverage, and a revived M23 movement is fomenting civil conflict.

Islamist groups like [ADF](#), which pledges allegiance to ISIS, are also

active. In the eastern DRC, it is the Congolese state appears almost hapless and unable to meet the basic needs of governance.

But what makes the mining industry different is that there we see the complicity of corrupt government officials in inviting outside actors to exploit the Congo.

This corruption is alleged to go to the very top, to President Tshisekedi and his family. Officials overlook illegal Chinese smelters that straddle the National Road near Likasi and Kolwezi. This processed ore is then often smuggled untaxed through Zambia, which further deprives the State and the Congolese people of revenue that they would otherwise be able to benefit from. (I would like to submit a non-paper, anonymously drafted to protect the author's identity, as part of the record which addresses this and related issues.)

Before closing, I want to address what it is that the United States and Congress can be doing to address the manifest problems of the DRC, from human rights and humanitarian concerns to the issue of corruption, especially as [elections in 2023](#) approach.

We do know, based on reporting by independent observers including the Catholic Church, that the 2018 election which brought Tshisekedi to the Presidency was [marked by fraud](#).

Yet at this critical time, as China and Russia spread their malign influence, the United States' presence is strangely muted in the region.

Our current ambassador to the DRC, Mike Hammer, has been nominated as the Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa, and will be leaving.

No Special Envoy to the Great Lakes has been appointed, and we have no ambassador-level representation in Rwanda, which is alleged to be supporting the M23 guerillas in the Eastern DRC.

The DRC is far too critical – and its people far too precious – for us to be absent. It is my hope that this hearing will spur both Congress and the Administration to pay greater attention to the DRC, and in particular to human rights and the abuses in the mining industry.