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Congo mining ban: a first step towards ending ‘conflict mineral’ trade?

A new ban on mining in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo could provide breathing space for fundamental reforms to resolve conflict and instability in the mineral-rich area but protection of civilians must remain paramount in the weeks that follow, said campaign group Global Witness today. The ban should be followed by concrete measures that enable miners to work free from extortion and abuses by armed groups.

The ban, imposed on Saturday by President Joseph Kabila, signals a welcome increase in engagement with mining-related problems at the highest political level. Addressing the situation has become even more urgent, as violence has been escalating in eastern Congo. Recent atrocities include the rape by suspected rebels of about 200 women in a cluster of villages over a period of six days from 30 July.

“It is clear to anyone who observes Congo closely that competition to control and exploit the country’s vast mineral wealth is fuelling the brutal conflict. The ban on mining activity could provide breathing space for fundamental reforms,” said Daniel Balint-Kurti, head of Global Witness’s Congo campaign.

“However, it is not just rebel groups that are in the mines. Soldiers from the national army are also illegally engaging in mining and in the extortion and abuse of civilian miners. Bisie, the biggest tin mine in eastern Congo, is controlled by ex-rebels who were recently integrated into the national army. Any action taken by the government to address the militarisation of mining must also target its own troops and their commanders,” he added.

Global Witness also expressed concern that the ban could be followed by a military crackdown. Several hundreds of civilians have been killed and raped in military operations in eastern Congo since January 2009. Strong measures must be taken to prevent such abuses during any new military actions aimed at imposing the government’s authority in the east. Monusco, the UN peacekeeping force in Congo, should take all necessary steps to protect civilians, including monitoring any new offensives.

“We are concerned because in former military offensives civilian casualties have been very high, and soldiers have committed widespread acts of rape and other violence against the population. The government and UN peacekeepers on the ground must be vigilant to ensure that the ban doesn’t backfire, leading to yet more violence and suffering for the civilian population,” said Balint-Kurti.

The ban will cover the provinces of North and South Kivu and Maniema, areas rich in coltan (tantalum ore) and cassiterite (tin ore). These minerals are used in the production of mobile phones and other electronic items.

Global Witness is urging electronics manufacturers to take more responsibility for the minerals used in their products and ensure that they are not indirectly funding conflict. A recent law passed by the United States Congress will make it compulsory for U.S.-registered companies sourcing from Congo to state the measures they have taken to exclude conflict minerals from their supply chains.

Balint-Kurti: “The new U.S. law is a very positive step which extends the accountability for abuses in Congo’s mining areas up the chain to the companies who are using the products and making millions as a result. We urge other governments to follow suit.

“The ultimate aim is a viable mining industry in the Congo, which provides jobs and livelihoods to civilians and boosts the country’s economic development. To achieve this, the Congolese government needs to demilitarise the mines, companies need to do better due diligence, and other governments need to hold companies to account and consider making international aid conditional on reforms in the mining sector.”

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