



The Uplifting Africa Program

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Blood Cobalt



Children are employed throughout the Artisanal Mines in the DRC
Photo Credit: Amnesty International

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Blood Cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Media Analysis

Blood diamonds? In 2022, try blood cobalt. It is the buzzing blue mineral of the year that's been captivating the West's ear given American commitments to infrastructure and internal manufacturing as seen through the CHIPS Act and the reignited semiconductor industry. However, the Chinese government has been economically exploiting the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) cobalt-rich land for years.

At the current moment, China has a monopoly on the extraction and exportation of rare earth minerals like lithium, cobalt, among others. Through programs like its One Belt Road Initiative, China has spent ample time attempting to expand its economic influence via loan programs throughout developing countries in order to extract natural resources and maintain its economic dominance in this sector. In the DRC, China recently acquired two of the country's largest cobalt mines. With increased Chinese influence has also come increased allegations of corruption and mistreatment of workers. As the United States and Western governments have begun to gradually shift their attention to combating climate change, the energy and automobile industries have followed suit, in pursuit of cleaner electricity and more efficient batteries in lieu of oil and fossil fuels. This shift in the means of energy consumption has laid the foundation for a competition over

control of rare-earth elements like cobalt, an important component of battery production, and the competition is heating up. The resource-rich DRC is no stranger to exploitation, yet amid this competition between great powers, it is increasingly caught in the crossfire between outside interests.

Coverage of this ongoing collision of interests and harm caused to locals, ranges from seemingly impartial, neutral observers to more dismissive forms of state-funded media. In the United States, a country with an obvious stake in the increased production and proliferation of improved electrical batteries, the media tends to strike a more neutral tone. This is evident across various articles including “A Power Struggle Over Cobalt Rattles the Clean Revolution” (NYT) by Dionne Searcey. The neutral tone within the context of DRC cobalt mining arguably conveys a willful ignorance to the darkness of the situation. While facts are not necessarily omitted, the presentation tends to be more focused on a balanced view of the economic and environmental tradeoffs for why this mining economy largely exists in the first place – to produce batteries and to combat climate change.

An Australian reporter, Michael Davie reports on Foreign Correspondent, diving deep into unseen and horrifying costs of the world’s “green energy revolution.” He provides an objective, on the ground approach, following local stories, sneaking into cobalt trading warehouses, which eventually finds himself in police custody. He uncovered the horrors of cobalt mining in the DRC: massive amounts of child labor, zero safety precautions, and the deadly artisanal miner industry. Davie’s investigative approach is transparent, and focuses on China’s role in harming communities of the local Congolese citizens. The video-piece is provoking, emotional, and effectively communicates the dirty side of “clean” energy initiatives. Specifically, it illuminates how unregulated, artisanal mining on the outskirts of large industrial mines have resulted in unauthorized mining communities that search industrial-mine waste for cobalt. The findings are sold in trader markets to China, where they join other “clean” cobalt

suppliers that go on to create iPhones and electric vehicle batteries for massive companies like Apple and Tesla, who have agreements against child labor. Miners face incredibly unsafe working conditions, and statistics of those who are killed on the job are never reported to the government, and their bodies are hidden by the Chinese mining companies.¹

Looking at state-regulated media provides a completely lack-luster, general coverage of partnership between China and the DRC. According to China’s Xinhua article, the DRC Minister of Industry is incredibly inspired by the Chinese-DRC relationship and the “promises of their shared future by 2030.” This short, two-minute video uses an auto-generated narration of the cooperation between the DRC and China, and uses a brief clip of the DRC’s Minister of Industry, Julien Paluku Kahongya. Overall, the clip lacks any contextual knowledge of what the partnerships are, what the shared vision is, and which projects are already underway. This example of media coverage appears

purposefully vague, but wants to communicate to the public that the government is sponsoring some sort of positive economic activity in the region.²



Tesla Model S lithium-ion battery pack in chassis - Photo Credit Marin Gillet via Flickr

Congolese media, on the other hand, showed very clearly that the Government's agreements with China were an "injustice." In an article by Actualite CD, former Prime Minister of the DRC Adolphe Muzito told the press that "Regarding the partnership between the DRC and China...my country has taken nothing away from the Sino-Congolese agreement," referencing the six billion infrastructure agreement signed by the Kabila government with Chinese investors. According to the article, China agreed to use three of the six billion dollars to invest in the mining industry and the rest to be spent on infrastructure. When it came down to it, Chinese mining companies started exploiting the minerals even before the three billion could be disbursed. Muzito went on to state that "Only 800 million has been disbursed, but still no infrastructure in sight. It's an injustice."

The article references points of learning for the Congolese moving forward, asserting the importance of legally fair and transparent negotiations for mining contracts that are equitable and preserve the rights of investors and the Congolese people. This piece revealed back-channel transactions, shedding light on a recent investigation that revealed how Chinese buyers utilized one of Africa's largest banks to funnel over \$130 million in public funds to the former Kabila

administration and family. Alongside its insight regarding injustices perpetrated by China, the article also includes Chinese claims, building trust with the audience and demonstrates willingness to account for both sides of the issue. The article specifically mentioned how China rebutted Congolese claims that they have not benefited from the cobalt agreement, stating that they had built several projects despite obstacles and “lack of energy to develop the mines.” China’s Foreign Ministry went on to defend the deal, stating that the agreement increased tax revenue and created more jobs, and had invested in infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals, and hydroelectric power stations.

When utilizing the different media sources from different countries, one can learn the extent of the cobalt mining situation in the DRC and the underpinnings of the competing interests involved. However, whether intentional or otherwise, a given country’s stake in the situation tends to shine through to its media coverage. Though not always the case – more scrutinous investigative journalism on the subject is available. Overall, there appears to be a detectable set of biases intrinsically influencing coverage. In the defense of more neutral journalists, it is near impossible to separate oneself from implicit bias when evaluating a given topic. However, this subject appears to be more difficult for Western sources to cover as they are keenly aware of the benefits cobalt can bring to the masses. The neutrality may be informed by the idea that because of sacrifices made by a given population, the global collective may benefit. Moreover, neutrality may be the more logical option in the sense that there may not truly be an alternative to combat climate change – an issue that may cause harm to all people, including the Congolese, to a greater extent if not for the growing battery market.

Ultimately, the political-economic agenda for both the Xinhua and the Actualite CD media pieces are evident. The Actualite CD article dives deep into the intricacies of its partnership history with China, revealing trade agreements, false promises, and how the Congolese people are not benefitting from the mines. Overall, the piece reflects the interest of the Congolese government. At the same time, it does not mention the artisanal mining communities that have sprung up alongside industrial mines, and how many children there are working there – often getting hurt and dying. This is where the Australian piece was more investigative and objective in its reporting, exploring the social and economic forces at play that leaves no other option for children - other than to work in dangerous artisanal mines. Both the Congolese article and the Australian Foreign Correspondent video piece are absolutely contrary to the Xinhua piece, which is completely void of nuance and fails to provide researched support for its claims. Its lens is state-regulated economics, which does demonstrate a genre of reporting for highly surveilled countries. It’s interesting to note that the Australian Foreign Correspondent video piece, despite providing a thorough story, fails to mention Australia’s competition with China over shares of the Manono lithium mine in the Southern DRC.³

It paints China as the absolute neo-colonialist even though other countries are also attempting to exploit the country in similar ways.

DRC holds around 70% of the world's reserves of cobalt, crucial for the lithium-ion batteries used in the fast-growing EV sector. Congo's artisanal miners are the world's second-largest source of cobalt after the country's industrial mines. Consultancy CRU expects the DRC to produce more than 100,000 tons of cobalt this year, or 71% of the global total, of which 8,000 will come from artisanal sources.⁴

ENDNOTES

1 Michael Davie: Blood Cobalt: The Congo's Dangerous and Deadly Green Energy Mines, 2022.

2 Xinhua. Globalink: DR Congo official sees promising future in Africa-China cooperation, 2022.

3 Olander, Eric. Chinese and Australian Companies Battle for Control of Massive Congolese Lithium Mine. 2022.

4 Tesla, Re|Source to launch final pilot in DRC to trace cobalt from mine to EVs Cecilia Jamasmie, Mining.com Newsletter, August 13, 2021,

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