

Coltan Speech

by Catherine Yesair Gould

Albert Einstein once said: “Technological change is like an ax in the hands of a pathological criminal”. How many of you here today, have cell phones? Or video games? Or computers? Would it surprise you to realize that a key component of most electronics today - from cell phones to computers, contains a rare and valuable mineral that has caused the deaths of countless people in the DRC. This mineral has caused the deforestation of some of the most pristine and beautiful forests and parks on earth, the Ituri forest, the Kahuzi-Biega Park, the place where Diane Fossey did her famous research on mountain gorillas. The mining for this mineral has destroyed the habitat of the rare, critically endangered Eastern Lowland mountain gorilla through forest clearance for timber to build camps, firewood and for ease of access to the forest floor. The streams and rivers of the forest have been polluted by the wash off from the mining. The erosion from the treeless hills has caused once clear rivers to become flows of muddy, contaminated murk which flows into the lakes disturbing the delicate balance of aquatic life.

The home of mountain gorillas are being destroyed and indeed, these rare beautiful creatures have been killed for food, called “bush meat” to feed the miners of this mineral. The Eastern Lowland Gorilla population has decreased by 90 percent and the mountain gorilla is almost extinct with only 600 estimated remaining. Of the Eastern Lowland Gorilla, only 3,000 of these majestic gorillas remain and the Eastern Lowland Gorilla may be the first extinction whose cause can be directly attributed to war, human greed and the pursuit of technologies that are not essential to life - cell phones and video games.

This mineral has caused instability in the entire region and was a contributing factor in the Rwandan genocide, the political instability and violence of 6 neighboring nations, the poverty of the entire region, child soldiers, child miners, arms deals and more. Indeed, some attribute over 4 million deaths to this mineral, a mineral called by some, black gold and it’s more precious than oil.

What is this mineral? Coltan. It is a rare mineral that is an electricity and heat conductor. It is also a highly toxic substance that should be carefully recycled. It is mined

in much the same way as one would mine for gold or diamonds: scrap the surface mud, slosh the water about, and the coltan settles. Many of the miners are children. Before it can be used, it needs to go through a chemical reaction, transforming the ore into a metallic powder. Only 4 companies in the world are capable of doing this process, and one of these companies is American, Cabot Corporation, a MA corporation, who is also the largest refiner of Coltan. And as a side note, Sam Bodman, former CEO of Cabot, was sworn in in 2005 as Secretary of Energy under the Bush administration.

Coltan is used in the batteries of cell phones, electronics - even in fighter jets - to extend the charge of the battery. However, most of us do not have fighter jets but we, in general, all have cell phones that contain a mineral that was pillaged from a country where only a third of the country has phone access. Indeed in 2000, with so many people buying cell phones, and play stations, game cubes, game boys the price of Coltan jumped from \$30 a pound to over \$350 a pound, causing many poor farmers to abandon their farms and join the black gold rush. In a country where 10 or 20 dollars a month is normal, these prices represent a fortune.

The DR Congo is not a wealthy nation. It is one of the poorer African countries due to the political instability, in part caused by this mineral. For those of us who are not from the Congo, this is a country, about a quarter the size of the US, that has vast natural resources, indeed some consider it to have the largest concentration of natural resources anywhere on earth and with the resources comes the potential for great wealth.

But not wealth for the Congolese people, not even wealth for the nation of the DRC, but for surrounding countries and foreign corporations. This is a country where the people are poor - since 1998 over 4 million people have died from famine, conflicts and preventable disease. Homes, schools, markets and even hospitals have been looted and destroyed. There is an estimated 8,000 children soldiers in the DRC. An estimated 3 million men, women and children have been injured by land mines. Over 4 million children are not in school. A third of the children under the age of 5 are underweight. The life expectancy is only 44 years. 80% of the population lives on less than a dollar a day.

Coltan mining is not a high labor cost industry for the Western companies who need the Coltan - it simply involves digging in the mud. Over 10,000 men, women and children

are in forced labor, digging in the mud for Coltan. The miners are kept fed by groups of professional hunters who have killed over 3,000 elephants, rare mountain gorillas and other animals to provide “bush meat” for the miners. The danger to the DRC is that 80% of the world's coltan is found in the DRC. Why is that a danger to the DRC and not an asset? You'd think that having such a rare, expensive and plentiful mineral deposit would be a wonderful find for a poor country. But what if your neighbors, who are also poor and desperate, also knew of this mineral and wanted to profit from it also?

Indeed, this area, in Eastern DR Congo isn't even really in the hands of the Congoloses. Since 1998, it has been occupied by army troops from Rwanda and Uganda, various rebel forces - and the United Nations has stated that this mineral largely funds the conflicts, the wars, the genocides of the region. Six neighboring countries and several rebel groups are all involved in the competition for acquiring Coltan, the mining, the transportation, the export, the marketing, the profit. Everyone wants a piece of the Coltan pie. The Rwandan rebels at one time even collected taxes on the Coltan and one year a report states that Rwanda made \$250 million in 18 months from selling Coltan even though there isn't any Coltan in Rwanda!

The United States has supported the Rwandan and Ugandan governments - largely as an arm of American corporations who need this mineral. But America is not the lone Western exploiter of the region - Belgium, Dutch, British and German companies and others are also involved and they profess ignorance as to the origins of the Coltan that is used in their products. As one executive said - we asked if it was from the DRC and the supplier said no “All we can do is ask”. Not so. One large American company is requiring that all the Coltan they purchase must be certified to be “gorilla safe”.

Tracing coltan from the DRC to our cell phones is not easy: generally involving at least 10 middle men. The UN Security Council has published 3 reports on the exploitation of natural resources in the Congo, and have cited 85 international companies for their purchases of natural resources from warring factions in the DRC. Of the 85 companies, 8 are American owned. In Jan. of 2003, the UN Security Council approved a resolution condemning the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the DRC and demanded that

countries act immediately to stop the abuses. And an international movement has begun under the slogan of “No blood on my cell phone”.

The comings and goings of the various companies involved in the Coltan industry with connections to arms dealers, former Russian KGB, connections to the numerous fighting factions in the area create a maze that is difficult to unravel. However, I will say that the Coltan industry makes the movie, Blood Diamonds, look like a PG-rated movie.

Kofi Akosah-Sarpong, an African journalist states: "Coltan in general terms is not helping the local people. In fact, it is the curse of the Congo." There is also some evidence that Coltan, a highly toxic mineral, is contaminating the area and causing birth defects, never mind the long-term health risks to the miners of the Coltan, especially the child miners.

And what if the industrial world, the rich nations of the world, so needed this mineral, that they were willing to look the other way in order to acquire this mineral as cheaply as possible in order to increase their profits? What if the people of the rich nations who bought the products that contained this mineral were kept in ignorance of the blood bath that went into the acquisition of this mineral? I doubt that many in America have even heard of Coltan. And indeed, perhaps we would all be more aware of the suffering and repercussions of the technology we use if our cell phones and video games came with this warning: This cell phone was created with a rare material from Central Africa, mined by slave and child labor, the proceeds of which fund war and your purchase of this product may cause the extinction of the endangered Lowland Mountain Gorilla. Do you still want to make your purchase? Is convenience and entertainment worth the price paid by the people of the DRC and the enormous price of potential extinction to the mountain gorilla? The question that we all need to ask ourselves is what hidden costs to humanity or the environment comes with our purchases?

The coltan black gold rush has brought out the worst in people - greed for profit regardless of the costs to humanity and heedless of the environmental damage. I believe that a world consciousness is rising from the realm of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, exploitation, prejudice, intolerance, and greed. It is up to us, as individuals, to demand from corporations that the coltan used in the products we purchase be “blood free” and

“gorilla safe”. It is each of ours responsibility to ensure that our lifestyle is not harming others and as individuals, we may not be able to make an enormous change but collectively, we can.

The industrialized world is beginning to see that the exploitation and suffering of the poor and the consequences of mindlessly neglecting the environment, are beginning to have repercussions closer to home and the more we as individuals learn about such things as Coltan, the more we can work towards change. It is not that individuals in the West don’t care about the child miners in the DRC or don’t care about gorillas becoming extinct, it is because we are not aware that there is even such a thing as Coltan. As with the “dolphin safe” tuna campaign, it will take educating the public and educating consumers to ensure that cell phones and video games become “gorilla safe”, and that no child slave labor was used in the mining of the Coltan.

When a child’s cries of suffering in the Congo, is heard echoing and traversing the globe, we will know that the world has changed. How can a cry of distress from a child not touch each and everyone of us? And does it matter where the child is from; does it matter what nationality, the color of skin? When presidential candidates speak of ending prejudice and racism and ensuring equality as a rallying cry, we know the world is changing. There will be a day when no child suffers from hunger; when no child is harmed for corporate greed; when no child is sloshing in the mud for a mineral so that another child can be entertained. Anne Frank said: “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world” and Margaret Mead said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world”.