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By Raf Custers
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The only thing that endures in Congo is colonization



Sources: Investig'Action

Translated from French for Rebellion by Beatriz Morales Bastos

Multinationals and Western diplomats urge Congo to increase its production of cobalt, an essential component, especially for electric car batteries. Increase cobalt production, but under what conditions? While Westerners dream of clean cars and a greener planet, Congolese kill themselves to feed a not very clean industry (Investig'Action)

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The spirit of Berlin floats over Africa. Not a single great power leaves the continent alone, but, on the contrary, they do everything possible to attract allies to their terrain (and keep them). The opportunity now is COP 26, the summit in Glasgow on climate. The American envoy for climate, Jonathan Pershing, has just finished a tour from Cape Town to Dakar with the aim of bringing together people of good will. Climate envoys from the UK, France, Germany and the European Union (EU) were also present in Cape Town. A mandatory stop for U.S. envoy Pershing was Kinshasa, the capital of the world's richest mining province, according to industry jargon.

Pershing conducted very intense climate diplomacy and pledged dollars for the transition, including the transition to less coal use in South Africa. But in Congo Pershing associated with this "race for zero greenhouse gas emissions" a strategic objective of enormous importance: "the race for cobalt", without which there are no batteries, especially in the automotive industry. However, Congo's mining industry supplies 60 per cent of cobalt and Western industry aims to obtain the absolute guarantee of being able to continue importing cobalt and all other metals in the subsoil of this country from Congo. The stars are favorable in this.

The first reason is that Congo is an impoverished country and accepts all the inflows of money it can receive. This year its budget does not exceed a very modest \$7 billion for a country that is potentially rich and has a population of 87 million people. In fact, the mining industry, the engine of the country, is mainly oriented to extractivism: it extracts as much ore as possible from the subsoil to export it. When a new mining law came into force in 2018, major miners violently opposed the rate hike and the prospect of the government amending the law every five years.

This *lobby* ("the G7") consisted of a strange alliance of Western and Chinese multinationals. But Felix Tshisekedi, the new president since 2019, cunningly manipulates this *lobby*. Tshisekedi expressly profiles himself as pro-Western (he meets every week with Mike Hammer, US ambassador in Kinshasa). Last spring it took a stand against Chinese multinationals in the framework of an offensive prepared since 2019. Tshisekedi explained that enough of "foreigners coming here with nothing and leaving millionaires while we remain poor."

And Congo moves from words to deeds. Coincidence or not, it has recently been ordered to stop the activity of six Chinese companies in eastern Congo because they exploited minerals without authorization. This campaign has been well received in Washington and Brussels. Earlier this month, during talks between the EU and Congo, the European delegation also virulently opposed illegal mineral trafficking. The EU adopted a regulation in January that obliges companies to check that their raw materials do not come from farms where they work in inhumane conditions. Exports should be "clean", but export is still the norm.

People work in inhumane conditions because they can't do anything else, because they are desperately poor. In Kolwezi, Congo's largest mining town, I have attended the search for the bodies of missing miners. They worked in an artisanal way and without protection in the bed of the Musonoi River when heavy rains transformed the river into a real tsunami that brought down their mining pits. Today these artisanal wells are seen everywhere in the surroundings of Kolwezi. Tens of thousands of people work in them under indescribable conditions. The minerals produced by these people were destined for export through buyers. Over the years, its share of production has increased so much (today it represents between 20% and 30% of the cobalt extracted from Congo) that the industry has decided to lean towards the artisanal sector.

I am aware of at least ten "responsible sourcing" initiatives so far: these are pipelines designed to channel Congo's artisanal cobalt so that it can reach known recipients. Two compatriots from the Belgian consulate in Lubumbashi invited me to lunch at the Golf, an exclusive club in this other mining town in Katanga. They let go that they were very busy with the *Global Battery Alliance* (GBA), a *lobby* of more than 70 companies that wants battery manufacturers (and first and foremost car manufacturers) to work at full capacity. The GBA aims to "address climate change and support sustainable development", noble slogans, but this requires "unlocking the full potential", including raw materials from Congo's mines. The Belgian companies Umicore and DEME are members of the GBA, Belgian diplomats know who they are striving for.

What is the result? The whole world wants access to Congo's cobalt to (he says) conjure up this damn climate crisis once and for all. The only thing that endures (1) in Congo is colonization. 87 million Congolese are left behind, without decent employment, without

decent income, without minerals, without refineries, without a processing industry of their own. As we cool off, they sweat ink, as has always been the case for an eternity.

Raf Custers is a journalist, writer and historian. In Spanish he has published *Cazadores de materias primas*.

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(1) Translator's note: both here and in the title the word used in French is "durable", which has the double meaning of "durable, remaining" and "sustainable".

Source: <https://www.investigaction.net/fr/au-congo-seule-la-colonisation-est-durable/>

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