

Coltan is the main cause of a conflict which has claimed the lives of four million people since 1997 and as also caused the disappearance of several populations of gorillas.

The extraction of coltan, a very rare mineral used mainly for technological purposes, has led to a long internal conflict in Congo, that since 1997 (more than a decade ago), as claimed more than four million lives. The struggle to control the mines of this mineral, as well as the diamond mines, has led to this terrible situation, which as claimed many lives before the eyes of the international community.

There have been and there still are real situations of famine in many regions of this country that supports an almost untenable external debt. However, Congo is one of the richest countries in the world, being "The basin of the Congo River", the second largest rainforest on earth.

In the mountains of Kakuzi-Biega National Park, where Coltan is extracted, the lives of hundreds of gorillas are in danger or have finished this last decade, causing the loss of important groups of this endangered species, compromising its long term survival.

When the area was declared National Park, many indigenous tribes were expelled from their territories. These tribes live in very difficult conditions: children frequently die of disease and malnutrition due to scarcity of equipment in the hospitals. Thousands of civilians have fled into the jungle, where they face hunger and disease. In less than a decade it is estimated that four million people have died, mostly from hunger and disease caused by this unending conflict. This war has generated more deaths than the Second World War, with a thousand daily mortal victims. And a thousand others victims have suffered innumerable abominations: mutilations, rapes, cannibalism... This present day conflict is a real hell that the world pretends not to see, clearly looking out for several economic interests.

Foreign mercenaries fuel the clashes between opposite tribes or rebel groups exchanging the precious metals for weapons. These mercenaries are paid by the so called civilized world, the same world that uses the raw materials impregnated with the death odor, the same world that pretends to be horrified by the killings, and which commanded the UN peacemakers' troops to do nothing.

The Great Ape Project has asked both the government of Spain and the International Community, to cancel the debt of this blood stained country, helping the population to fight hunger and disease, asking in exchange that the government respects human rights, supports effectively the civilians, and works to preserve their valuable forests, benefiting not only the great apes (bonobos, chimpanzees and gorillas) and other living creatures, but also humanity.

Leonardo Da Vinci: a hidden prophecy.

While reading one of Leonardo's notebooks, in one of the sections devoted to his various prophecies, I was surprised to find a clear and concise warning about the destruction of the rain forest and its inhabitants, which fully agrees with the situation caused by the Coltan conflict.

Certainly no one had so far understood the importance of this hidden message, which clearly warns us about our mismanagement, our devastating impetus, our destructive spirit. Leonardo (1452-1519) warned us clearly and persistently, with no secret codes, but openly in one of his books left as his legacy contribution to science:

“Creatures shall be seen on the earth who will always be fighting one with another, with the greatest losses and frequent deaths on either side. There will be no bounds to their malice; by their strong limbs a great portion of the trees of the vast forests of the world shall be laid low; and when they are filled with food, the gratification of their desire shall be to deal out death, affliction, labour, terror, and banishment to every living thing; and from their boundless pride they will desire to rise toward heaven, but the excessive weight of their limbs will hold them down. Nothing shall remain on earth, or under the earth, or in the waters that shall not be pursued, disturbed or spoiled, and that which is in one country removed into another. And their bodies shall be made the tomb and the means of transit of all the living bodies which they have slain.”

In another of his pages he says:

“Metals shall be brought forth out of dark and obscure caves, which will put the whole human race in great anxiety, peril and death. (...) O monstrous creature! How much better would it be for men that every thing should return to Hell! For this the vast forests will be devastated of their trees; for this endless animals will lose their lives.”

These metals from which Leonardo speaks may as well be the gold, diamonds and coltan. Are we fulfilling his prophecies?

Primary forests or so-called tropical forest, have now lost more than 80% of its surface. The rest harshly survives, threatened by illegal logging. Two thirds of the planet's biodiversity takes refuge in this life generating forests, which occupy only 7% of the earth's surface. Half the forests that once covered the Earth, 29 million square kilometers, have disappeared and what is more important in terms of biodiversity, about 78% of primary forests have been destroyed and the remaining 22 percent are threatened by conversion to other uses such as agriculture and livestock, speculation, mining, large dams, logging, roads and forest tracks, demographic growth and climate change. A total of 76 countries have already lost all their primary forests and another eleven will probably lose them in the next few years.

Coltan

The name 'coltan' is in fact the abbreviation of columbite- tantalite, minerals contained in this type of rock. Of this ore are extracted, niobium and tantalum, used in consumer electronic products, nuclear power, missiles, optic fiber and others, although most production is intended for the development of capacitors and other parts of mobile phones.

The prices of coltan began to escalate recently connected with the use of tantalum in the manufacture of new generation microchips allowing long-life batteries for mobile phones, video games and laptops. The prices rose even more, some years before 2000, when reserves of coltan in Brazil, Australia and Thailand started to scarce. As an example it is enough to say, that Japan's Sony had to postpone the release of the PlayStation 2 because of this

inconvenient. Given all this, eyes were turned toward the Democratic Republic of Congo, country that owns 80% of the world's reserves of coltan in its subsoil.

The war of coltan

In fact the biggest beneficiary of Congolese coltan during the war was Rwanda. During 2001 the UN sent to the area an 'expert group'. Their reports proposed as a solution to end the war, an embargo over the weapons, imports and exports of gold, diamonds and coltan coming from the invading countries. They proposed sanctions not only to the countries but also to the companies that would break this agreement. They also suggested a freeze on the financial assets of the rebel movements (allies of the invading countries) and their leaders, and the development of a process to establish a certificate of origin for gold, diamonds and coltan.

The countless reports of various NGOs and the UN, accusing Rwanda and Uganda of plundering the mineral wealth of Congo, allowed a degree of international pressure and the publication of a blacklist of companies operating in the area. 34 companies were accused of importing coltan and cassiterite, and the Belgian airline Sabena was forced to suspend the transportation of minerals from Kigali (capital of Rwanda) to Brussels. However, other alternative routes continued to operate, and a considerable percentage of Congolese coltan continued emerging in the market camouflaged as being from Brazil or Thailand.

Very few measures were taken to fight this problem, and there was no agreement in the Security Council to reach more relevant measures. Many Western countries continued to help Uganda and Rwanda either militarily or through substantial 'development aids'. For example, the UK aid agency (DFID) announced, in September 2000, a loan of 95 million dollars over a period of three years to help the Rwandan government. It is difficult to understand the need to help countries that have enough money to invade their neighbor. The 2001 reports of the UN estimated that Rwanda was spending in ammunition, supplies and flights of its army in the Congolese territory some 60 million dollars a year. Other reports also published by the UN commission and other independent commissions estimated that in the year 2000, Rwanda had won 40 million dollars in diamonds, 15 million in gold and 191 million in coltan, all extracted on Congolese soil. Uganda would have gained in areas under their control 1.8 million diamonds, gold, 105 million and 6.2 million by the coltan.

Rwanda and Uganda not only benefited from several external aids during the war period, but part of their foreign debts were canceled and both countries were regarded as models of economic development.

All these events were known and consented by the international community, who took advantage of this conflict. The ones that really suffered the consequences and that still suffer them are the people, the villages, and natives. Now, the war has ended, but the pressure of the Government and the multinational corporations operating under their protective layer, continue to devastate the forests, using cheap labor and low-paid women and children, allowing that their citizens die of hunger and lack of sanitary facilities. The Virunga National Park, home to the last gorillas on earth, has been considered World Heritage, and for that, UNESCO gives money for its maintenance. But this money, rather than being used for schools, health care or for improving the lives of the pygmies and other natives living along the shores of the National Park, is diverted to serve interests of the state that are anything but aid to the needy populations.

It is quite incongruous that a country that possess such mineral richness, that could be a developing country, with sustainable industries and farms, is home to one of the poorest

populations on earth, while their political leaders live wealthy lives. Where did all that richness come from? Who is benefiting from it? Why was there no investment in the people? Simply because development is not an interesting perspective to the multinational companies or the government. For them, it's best to maintain this situation, continue the extraction of natural resources using cheap labor, selling the material in developed countries. They have no interest in creating permanent jobs or industries because that would endanger their high profits. The government continues to enrich its members, benefiting with the low levels of education, and the high levels of poverty and anger. For them, it's better to have uneducated people, unable to fight for their rights.

This is the current situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and for this, no one should buy or trade with minerals extracted in Congo, so not to feed anger and corruption.

The Center for International Studies of Tantalum-Niobium in Belgium (a country traditionally connect with Congo), has given a recommendation to international buyers: avoid coltan from Congo for ethical reasons.

"The countries of the Central African Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda and their neighbors were often the source of significant tonnages. But the civil war, looting national parks and exporting minerals, diamonds and other resources natural to finance the militias has forced the Center for International Studies the Tantalum-Niobium to warn its members to beware of buying raw materials from legal sources. Damage, or the danger of provoking a damage to the local population, the wildlife or the environment is unacceptable. "

Measures to be taken:

We must employ all our knowledge and technique so that mankind progresses, but we must do this with respect for nature, preventing that these advances will mean destruction, desolation and death. It is important to respect the environment, local populations and to assure that the coltan recollection is made in areas with no armed conflicts and without harming other animal species such as the gorillas. The international community should define a conduct code to prevent trade in minerals, timber, etc. from areas where its exploration has led to habitat destruction, regions in conflict or where there is no respect for the fundamental right of life. Do not allow that these resources are extracted from poor countries, where hunger, war, dictatorships, human exploitation and destruction of natural resources is law, because the money will only benefit leaders and the people will continue to suffer.

We must research to find the adequate mechanisms to recycle mobile phones, reutilizing their components, and a regulation system should be developed in order to forbid trade with products from coming from suspicious areas and countries, punishing multinationals that operate and enrich themselves committing real crimes against mankind.

We still have time to stop this eco-genocide announced by Leonardo DaVinci a long time ago, and that already began to destroy the lives of millions. It's in our hands. Buyers have the power, the power to destroy multinational companies. They are not strong, we, the people how consume the products, we have the strength to demand that all products, including mobile phones, come from clean hands, doves of peace, and not of blood, death and destruction.

Our heart has to be sensitive to the suffering of the world, sensitive to take care of this unique planet where our children and the future generations have the right to live just like we do. We have the responsibility to protect the environment and all living creatures.

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