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THE SPOILS

# Congo's Riches, Looted by Renegade Troops

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Johan Spanner for The New York Times

Men mined for tin ore in a pit in eastern Congo that is part of a lucrative operation controlled by renegade soldiers. The fighters extort and tax at will.

**BISIE, [Congo](#)** — Deep in the forest, high on a ridge stripped bare of trees and vines, the colonel sat atop his mountain of ore. In track pants and a T-shirt, he needed no uniform to prove he was a soldier, no epaulets to reveal his rank. Everyone here knows that Col. Samy Matumo, commander of a renegade brigade of army troops that controls this mineral-rich territory, is the master of every hilltop as far as the eye can see.

Columns of men, bent double under 110-pound sacks of tin ore, emerged from the colonel's mine shaft. It had been carved hundreds of feet into the mountain with Iron Age tools powered by human sweat, muscle and bone. Porters carry the ore nearly 30 miles on their backs, a two-day trek through a mud-slicked maze to the nearest road and a world hungry for the laptops and other electronics that tin helps create, each man a link in a long global chain.

On paper, the exploration rights to this mine belong to a consortium of British and South African investors who say they will turn this perilous and exploitative operation into a safe, modern beacon of prosperity for Congo. But in practice, the consortium's workers cannot even set foot on the mountain. Like a mafia, Colonel Matumo and his men extort, tax and appropriate at will, draining this vast operation, worth as much as \$80 million a year.

The exploitation of this mountain is emblematic of the failure to right this sprawling African nation after many years of tyranny and war, and of the deadly role the country's immense natural wealth has played in its misery.

Despite a costly effort to unite the nation's many militias into a single national army, plus billions of dollars spent on international peacekeepers and an election in 2006 that brought democracy to Congo for the first time in four decades, the government is unable or unwilling to force these fighters — who wear government army uniforms and collect government paychecks — to leave the mountain.

The ore these fighters control is central to the chaos that plagues Congo, helping to perpetuate a conflict in which as many as five million people have died since the mid-1990s, mostly from hunger and disease. In the latest chapter, fighting between government troops and a renegade general named [Laurent Nkunda](#) has forced hundreds of thousands of civilians here in eastern Congo to flee and pushed the nation to the brink of a new regional war.

The proceeds of mines like this one, along with the illegal tributes collected on roads and border crossings controlled by rebel groups, militias and government soldiers, help bankroll virtually every armed group in the region.

No roads lead to Bisie. This hidden town of 10,000 lies about 30 miles down a winding, muddy footpath through dense, equatorial forest. Built entirely for the mine, it is a cloistered world of expropriation and violence that mirrors the broad crisis in Congo.

This is Africa's resource curse: The wealth is unearthed by the poor, controlled by the strong, then sold to a world largely oblivious of its origins.

Under Colonel Matumo, Bisie is a Darwinian place where those with weapons and money leech off a desperate horde.

The chokehold begins far from the mine. At the trailhead, a burly soldier demands 50 cents from each person entering the narrow trail to the mine. A clamoring crowd hands wrinkled bills to the soldier, who opens the wooden gate a crack to let in those with cash.

At the other end of the trail, at the base of the mountain, another crowd forms at the gate into Bisie. Porters exhausted from the two-day trek sprawl on felled trees, waiting for soldiers to inspect their loads and extract another tribute. The price is usually 10 percent of entering merchandise and cash.

The men at the checkpoints describe these payments as taxes. But the people of Bisie do not get much in return. The village is a filthy warren of mud huts. Hundreds of haphazard latrines flood narrow, trash-filled alleyways. Disease courses through the town, carried by water from a river that is used for everything from washing clothes to cleaning ore. Jawbones of slaughtered cows and goats stud the riverbed. When it rains, the river overflows, spreading cholera and dysentery.

In some ways, Bisie is a thriving commercial town. It has makeshift theaters showing bootleg kung fu movies on televisions powered by sputtering generators. Its bars are stocked with Johnnie Walker whiskey and Primus beer, each bottle carried through the jungle. There is no telephone service, but a ham radio system passes messages between the mine and the outside world. It has hotels that double as brothels. There is even a clapboard church.

But these meager comforts do not come cheap. A bowl of rice and beans costs \$3 here, six times the price along the main road. Mud huts rent for \$50 a month or more, in part because opportunism is the town ethos.

### A History of Plunder

The saga of Bisie is merely another chapter in Congo's epic tragedy. Though blessed with an incomparable endowment of minerals and water and abundant fertile land, this vast nation in the heart of Africa has known little but domination and war since its founding as a colony under King Leopold II of Belgium in the 19th century.

The bloodshed and terror have always been driven in part by the endless global thirst for Congo's resources, "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience," as the novelist [Joseph Conrad](#) put it.

Just as the pneumatic tire was invented, King Leopold began sucking every last drop of rubber from Congo's jungles, his militia killing or maiming anyone who stood in his way. Generations later, the country's vast reserves of cobalt, a mineral essential for building fighter jets, helped the longtime ruler of the nation then known as Zaire, [Mobutu Sese Seko](#), keep the United States firmly behind him during the cold war despite his obstinately kleptocratic and repressive ways.

Congo's riches have played a starring role in the conflict that has unfolded in the past decade. The war began in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, when the perpetrators of that slaughter fled into neighboring Congo. Rwanda backed an effort to flush out the killers in 1996, but it soon led to a huge regional conflict that descended into a war of plunder by half a dozen nations and countless homegrown rebel groups.

A peace deal officially ended the war in 2003, and elections in 2006 brought Congo its first democratically chosen leaders in more than four decades. And in many parts of the nation, which covers an area the size of Western Europe, life is slowly returning to normal. International investors, especially China, have begun pouring billions into Congo's economy.

But here on Congo's eastern edge, the war never really ended. The unfinished battles over the Rwandan genocide play out on Congolese soil among armed groups fueled by lucrative mines like the one in Bisie and by other mines controlled by the Hutu militias that carried out the genocide.

Those fighters have been hiding in the jungles of eastern Congo for more than a decade, sowing terror and reaping profits from the nation's minerals. Other rebel groups, including Mr. Nkunda's largely Tutsi militia, have gleaned profits from illegal taxes levied when valuable minerals and other resources pass through territory they control, according to analysts and government officials in the region.

### The Discovery of Tin Ore

In 2002, a hunter discovered chunks of tin ore, known as cassiterite, lying on the slopes of a mountain deep in the jungle in eastern Congo. Almost overnight, hordes of miners arrived, driven by fevered reports of piles of ore lying around waiting to be carted away. But civilians were not the only ones interested. Armed groups fought pitched battles over who would control the area. In 2004, a group of Mai Mai fighters allied with the government took control.

Under the terms of the peace agreement that ended the war, the militia was absorbed into the national army and became the 85th Brigade. The fighters were supposed to be sent for military training and then deployed around the country to dilute the influence of regional militias.

But the 85th refused to disband. Its commander, Colonel Matumo, is known as a ruthless warrior with a keen eye for business who believes, as most Mai Mai do, that he has special powers connected to water that make him all but invincible. During the war these fighters would wear drain plugs dangling from their bulging biceps as amulets of their potency. These days the brigade's members have mostly abandoned this practice in favor of the more practical army greens.

They violently enforce a system of illegal taxation of every worker, merchant and mineral trader who comes to the mine.

That system has ensured that they and their allies have skimmed millions of dollars in the years the militia has controlled the mine — a costly, lost opportunity for a nation desperately in need of development.

Tin has replaced lead content in the solder used to make many electronic devices. And as the price shot up in recent years, to a high of \$25,000 a ton in May, Colonel Matumo and his men staked out a whole ridge of the mine complex as their personal property. Senior commanders of the brigade have built large houses and opened businesses, like hotels and bars, with the proceeds of the mine.

A company called Mining and Processing Congo bought the rights to search for tin ore at the mine in 2006. But the militia has effectively barred the company, which is owned by a consortium of South African and British investors, shooting at its helicopter and chasing its representatives from the premises.

When the company started working on a road to link the mine to the main road, local officials blocked the route. When it began working on a campsite for its geologists to begin prospecting, soldiers opened fire on the workers, injuring several, company officials said.

“We have all our documents and permits in order,” said Brian Christophers, the weary managing director of the company. “We have written to the head of the military, the minister of mines and even the president. But there are no rules in Congo, just the rule of the gun.”

Mr. Christophers said that his company was prepared to help pay not just for a road to the mine but also for schools, clinics and a hydroelectric power station. It also promised to invite government agencies to enforce labor standards. But none of them have had the chance.

Indeed, some workers are suspicious of the company's plans, fearing that a road would put thousands of porters out of work and that mechanized mining would drastically reduce employment here. The militia has tapped this unease to convince some workers and local officials that the company will simply abscond with the minerals and leave the local people empty-handed.

The militia levies a tax on every enterprise here. For the small-time peddlers who sell tiny packets of laundry soap, cooking oil and powdered milk, the tax is usually \$20 a week, a hefty slice of profits. From prosperous brothels, bar owners and mineral traders, the soldiers usually take a percentage, businesspeople here say.

One Congolese intelligence official estimated that the militia took in \$300,000 to \$600,000 a month in illegal taxation alone, not including the money it made from mining tin.

The workers preyed on by the militia toil in hand-dug tunnels as deep as 600 feet that are held up precariously by wood pillars. Some of the workers are children, especially in the summer, when desperate parents send boys here to earn cash for the next year's school fees.

The tunnels are pitch-black and suffocatingly narrow. They often fill with dangerous fumes. Miners sometimes spend 48 hours straight working in the tunnels. The open pits are dangerous, too: heavy rains cause mudslides and collapses. Cave-ins, mudslides and gases kill and maim an unknown number of workers every year.

On a late-summer afternoon at the mine, a tunnel collapsed and crushed a miner's leg. Another worker carried the man on his back as the injured miner moaned in agony, his eyes darting wildly. Blood carved tracks down his forehead and cheeks.

"My wife is pregnant," the miner moaned. "Jesus, mama, please."

The man had broken his leg, and his left shoulder was sliced open. He grimaced as health workers with only minimal training worked to fashion a splint from sticks and vines.

Musamaria Luseke, 22, is what passes for a doctor here. He is one of a handful of health workers who have basic first aid training and earn cash by selling medicine to sick and injured miners.

“These kinds of injuries happen all the time,” he said.

Mr. Luseke had painkillers in his metal box, but he was charging 25 cents a tablet.

“I have to eat, too,” he said.

Solidarity is in short supply here. An argument broke out over who would pay a porter \$20 to carry the injured miner down the mountain.

“I didn’t tell him to go work,” shouted the owner of the tunnel, who nevertheless ponied up the \$20.

Hard-rock miners who work deep in the tunnels say the money they can earn on a productive day makes up for the risk. A young man who gave his name as Pypina said he made \$200 on a good shift.

But his friend Serge said such days were rare.

“We have some days where we find nothing, where we dig and dig for nothing,” he said.

Both of the young men are high school dropouts who came to the mine to work for the summer but quickly found themselves trapped in a web of debt. Serge said he hoped to go back to school, but already he had been at the mine for a year and had saved nothing.

Pypina had given up on college.

“I’ll buy a car,” Pypina said, flexing his biceps to admire the dollar sign tattooed there.

But he is a long way from buying that car. When he makes a bit of money he has to pay his debts first. With anything left, he tries to salve the loneliness of life.

“First, you need a woman,” he said. Pypina said he paid \$100 to have a woman with him for 24 hours. They go on dates to the clapboard bars in the market, and he shells out \$100 or more for whiskey, beer and gin. She cooks for him.

“She is like a wife for a day,” he explained.

“I am a man,” he said, describing why he spent so much on pleasure-seeking. “I cannot live without a woman. And only God knows what tomorrow will bring.”

### One of Many Problems

Colonel Matumo declined to be interviewed for this article. But he made no effort to conceal his control over the mine, openly supervising the production and the sale of dozens of sacks of ore. A hotel he owns doubles as an ore depot, and each morning porters arrived to carry his latest load to the main road for sale.

A major who said he had been sent by Congo’s top military brass to assess the situation said the government wanted the militia to leave but had too many other security problems to contend with. Mr. Nkunda, the renegade Tutsi general, has been waging a fierce insurgency in another part of eastern Congo, and the army has so far been unable to defeat him.

“Samy is just one of many problems,” the major, who refused to give his name, said of Colonel Matumo. “If we can’t deal with Nkunda, how can we force Samy to go when he does not want to leave?”

Bisie may be the middle of nowhere, but the ore it produces is tightly linked to the global market. After porters bear the loads, often heavier than the men themselves, the ore reaches middlemen along the main road. One such middleman, Bakwe Selomba, said he did not mind paying the militiamen because the payment guaranteed his investment.

“To be honest, it is better for us that they are there,” he said. “I can send my buyers walking through the jungle with lots of money, but nobody will touch them as long as we pay the tax. It protects us.”

The ore is then trucked a few miles down a stretch of pavement to the village of Kilambo. There, on a slightly curved stretch of road, Soviet-era cargo planes take off and land, as many as two dozen times a day. The carcasses of two planes that presumably botched this tricky maneuver lay strewn to one side of the makeshift runway, covered in black and green mold.

The flights land in Goma, the provincial capital, where other middlemen buy and process the ore for export. Alexis Makabuza’s Global Mining Company is one of these buyers. Amid the sorting and cleaning equipment of his rudimentary processing plant sit dozens of barrels of tin ore. On each is stenciled the address of Malaysian Smelting

Company Berhad, a major tin smelter. Mr. Makabuza said he sold to the company via a minerals broker.

In a handwritten contract between a local government official and a representative of Mr. Makabuza's company signed in 2006, then operating under a different name, the company agreed to pay a large percentage of its earnings from the mine in exchange for a guarantee of security. Colonel Matumo's militia is the only force operating in the area, and most of this money ended up in his hands, according to security officials in the region.

Mr. Makabuza shrugged off questions about his business dealings with the militia.

"We follow all the rules," he said. "I am just a buyer like anybody else."

### Debating a Solution

Congo's tin ore represents a relatively small slice of the world market, but in recent years supplies have been so tight that efforts to stop mining at Bisie have caused price spikes. This year, the government tried to shut down the mine, but it was quickly reopened by local authorities who feared the economic and political costs of putting thousands of miners out of work and cutting off the cash flow to a volatile renegade military commander.

Indeed, many fear banning exports of tin ore from Congo would cause more problems than it would solve.

"A blanket ban on tin from Congo is nonsense because it penalizes the millions dependent on the sector the most," said Nicholas Garrett, a mining expert who has written reports on Congo for the [World Bank](#) and other institutions. Putting those people out of work would simply invite another rebellion, Mr. Garrett said.

The government has repeatedly asked Colonel Matumo's men to leave the mine. In a written order issued in August 2007, Col. Delphin Kahimbi, deputy commander of the army in North Kivu, the province here, admitted that elements of the armed forces were profiting from the mine and laid out a plan to replace the renegade brigade with loyal soldiers. But the orders were never followed up, and the militia's grip on the mine seems tighter than ever.

Julien Paluku, the governor of North Kivu, said the government must move cautiously. Already faced with a renegade Tutsi general who has large swaths of the

region under siege, the government can scarcely afford to pick a fight with another armed group, he said.

“Solving this problem will take time,” Governor Paluku said.

Some analysts say the situation in Bisie is so blatant that its very persistence is evidence of collusion between the militia and powerful politicians.

“Unless immediate action is taken to transfer these soldiers out of Bisie mine and to prosecute those responsible for the large-scale looting of minerals, we can only conclude that these activities are sanctioned at the highest levels,” Patrick Alley of the anticorruption organization Global Witness, based in London, said in a statement.

In May, Senators [Sam Brownback](#) of Kansas and [Richard J. Durbin](#) of Illinois introduced a bill to require certifying minerals from Congo. “Without knowing it, tens of millions of people in the United States may be putting money in the pockets of some of the worst human rights violators in the world, simply by using a cellphone or laptop computer,” Senator Durbin, a Democrat, said at the time.

Here in Bisie, daily life offers few clues that such information age technology exists. Isolated and indebted, almost none of the town’s workers have any clue what tin is actually used for.

“It is for weapons,” suggested Djuma Assualani, 21. “Kalashnikov, bombs. They make war with it.”

“It’s gold,” shouted Makami Kimima, 18, who came to the mine to earn money to go back to school but ended up in debt instead. His fellow miners jeered at his ignorance.

“It is something like gold,” he said, chastened. “It goes to America. And China. It makes people rich.”

Source:

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