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Metals in mobile phones financing brutal war in Congo

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Metals found in everyday electronics items, such as mobile phones and computers, are being mined illegally in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and funding a conflict that has caused millions of deaths, said Global Witness on the opening day of the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona.

Despite a series of high-level UN reports documenting the links between minerals and the conflict, companies that make colossal profits selling mobile phones and other electronic goods have done next to nothing to ensure that the components in their products are not sourced from areas controlled by armed groups.

"It is time for electronics companies to show they are serious about eliminating conflict minerals from their supply chains," said Global Witness campaigner Daniel Balint-Kurti. "This means requiring suppliers that source minerals from DRC to declare exactly which mine the minerals come from, and carrying out spot checks and audits to back up these declarations. If companies cannot be sure that their minerals are conflict-free, they should not be buying them at all."

The main warring parties in eastern Congo — including the Rwandan-linked FDLR militia and the government's own army — control much of the lucrative trade in minerals that produce tin, tantalum and tungsten, as well as gold. These groups regularly commit horrific abuses against the civilian population, including mass murder, rape, torture and forced recruitment.

International smelting firms purchase minerals from Congolese trading houses which source them from zones held by armed groups and military units. Electronics companies could help stop this by demanding evidence from these processors that their products are conflict-free, as a condition of purchase. However few, if any, have taken this step. Some argue that their supply chains are simply too complex to map out, but research by NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and UN investigators disproves this.

The UN Security Council recently passed a resolution paving the way for the imposition of asset freezes and travel bans on companies that support armed groups in eastern Congo via the illicit mineral trade. Given the reluctance of international firms to face up to their responsibilities, Global Witness is urging the Security Council to start using these targeted sanctions against those that have failed to clean up their act.

"Consumers have the right to know that the products they are buying are not fuelling crimes against humanity," said Balint-Kurti, "Electronics brands and other companies that use conflict minerals now have a clear choice between showing leadership, or facing a public backlash."

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* The Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) is a predominantly Hutu militia whose members are alleged to include perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda