

Avatar Congo

If you wanted to see Avatar in 3D, you went to the cinema. If you want to see mining companies causing the destruction of the lives of indigenous people in real life, you go to the eastern part of the Congo.

The mineral in Avatar was called Unobtainium. The mineral in eastern Congo is called coltan. Coltan is an ore containing tantalum and tantalum is used in components for mobile phones, laptop computers and video consoles. 80% of the world's coltan is in the eastern Congo, in the region of Kivu to be exact.

The war between Congolese forces and invading Rwandan forces, which I call the Coltan War, is the deadliest conflict since the Second World War. According to the International Rescue Committee, six million people have died to date. This war still continues and yet few people have ever heard of it. The Coltan War is a secret war.

These invading Rwandan forces are fighting for control of the coltan mines because coltan is very valuable. Sometimes prices are over \$400 a kilogram. Currently around 30% of Kivu's schoolchildren are working in the coltan mines and without any safety precautions. Landslides are frequent.

The Rwandan military forces sell the mined coltan to Western companies. A United Nations report in 2002 found that 85 companies, including 18 from Britain, were involved either 'directly or indirectly, deliberately or through negligence' in prolonging the war in the Congo. A former British Prime Minister has been on the board of directors of a company involved in the coltan trade. Oona King, British Member of Parliament, said to the Independent newspaper in 2006, "Kids in Congo are being sent down mines to die so that kids in Europe and America can kill imaginary aliens in their living rooms". No kid would be happy about that. Now I see why the Coltan War is kept a secret.

The Rwandan military forces involved have become very rich from the sale of coltan and they use this money to buy more guns. They continue torturing and murdering the local people of Kivu and the UN says that at least 5,400 women were attacked in South Kivu in the first nine months of 2009 alone.

If you are interested in finding out more about what is happening, there are two web sites you can visit:-

<http://www.friendsofthecongo.org/> ... all lower case – that means no capitals.

<http://www.raisehopeforcongo.org/> ... again all lower case

What can we do to help? Well, firstly, it is essential that for mineral processing companies corporate responsibility becomes more than just a beautiful section of the annual general report and web site. Secondly, makers of mobile phones, laptops and video consoles must stop contributing to this terrible situation. The Japanese company Sony has said that they do not use coltan from the Congo in their products, so that's a start. Thirdly, invading Rwandan forces must go back to Rwanda and never return.

At the end of Avatar there is a terrible battle and a lot of people are killed. Finally however, the mining company is forced to leave the area. The question is, when will there be a happy ending for the children and women of Kivu?

530 words.

