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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.

Congo's Riches, Looted by Renegade Troops

Militia's Grip on Tin Mine Reflects History of Exploitation

By LYDIA POLGREEN

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

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Buried Treasure, Broken Nation

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 ma-

fia, 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 unwill-

ing 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



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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 klep-

tocratic 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, ac-

cording 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 il-

legal 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



ENVIRONMENTAL SCARS

When ore is cleaned or clothes are washed, the dirty runoff goes into the fetid river coursing through Bisie.

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 wom-

an 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 com-

pany 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."

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15 and Broke in a Cut-Throat Congo Mining Town



Johan Spanner for The New York Times

Like many children in Congo, Imani Mulumeo Derwa, 15, looks younger than he is.

By LYDIA POLGREEN
Published: November 15, 2008

BISIE, Congo — The people who toil in the tin ore mine here are links in a long, global chain that reaches all the way to the cellphones and digital music players so ubiquitous in modern life.

At the very bottom of that chain, hunched beneath the blasting sun in a deep red gash near the base of a mountain, a 15-year-old named Imani Mulumeo Derwa sifted through ochre-colored earth this summer with his slender fingers.

In a small plastic bag, he stowed tiny rocks he hoped were tin ore. If the day went well, he might find enough ore to buy a plate of rice and beans. If not, he would fall asleep hungry on a dirt floor.

Every Thursday, he must hand over a day's wages to Col. Samy Matumo's men, who control the mountain and illegally extract taxes from every enterprise here. Imani arrived in July, hoping to save enough money

to return to school at the end of September. But by early August, he found himself trapped in a web of debt and despair.

“I am stuck here,” he said, his weary, almond-shaped eyes betraying traces of a war-tossed childhood otherwise invisible on his smooth, boyish face. “I want to go home but I can’t.”

On July 6, Imani arrived at the head of the winding 30-mile jungle trail leading to the mine at Bisie. He said he had joined a river of people streaming into the forest, men and women laden with crates of beer, sacks of rice and cartons of powdered milk, all destined for Bisie, a town in the middle of the jungle where, Imani had heard, a hardworking boy could earn a few hundred dollars by picking up bits of a certain heavy rock from the ground.

Like many children in this war-ravaged country, Imani looks younger than he is. He said he had spent much of his childhood in flight from the latest armed group swarming into his hometown, Walungu. The gnawing hunger of life on the run has left him stunted, a little more than four feet tall. His voice has not yet broken.

All that running meant he was far behind in school, having completed only the fourth grade. But he was determined to finish high school and go on to college. At the end of the school year, his mother, a widow, told him he would need to get a job and contribute something to the household, he said. So he left Walungu with friends on the back of a pickup truck, headed for the tin ore mine at Bisie.

Imani did not carry much with him on the journey. Everything fit in a small blue plastic bag: an extra pair of trousers, a notebook with the Unicef logo across its cover, a ballpoint pen and an empty wallet emblazoned with a fake Nike swoosh. At the entrance of the trail, he said, he took his last 200 francs, less than 50 cents, out of the wallet and handed them to the soldier watching the gate.

The walk to the mine was hard. Hills followed hills. Imani’s green plastic sandals struggled to grip the iridescent, mineral-rich mud. The mossy roots of soaring trees criss-crossed the path, creating a roopy web that battered his narrow ankles. He had brought no food and had to beg for leftovers from hungry porters, he said. To cool his parched throat he slurped water directly from the streams that bisect the trail. Many times he thought of turning back, of going home. But the lure of quick cash was strong.

“I didn’t want to give up,” he said. He could not face going home empty-handed.

Finally, after two days of walking, he arrived in Bisie, half-starved and exhausted.

The mine operates in a rigid hierarchy, and Imani struggled to find his place in it.

The highly skilled miners who work in tunnels sometimes 600 feet deep can make good money here, dividing the minerals they find 30-70 with the owner of the tunnel, usually a businessman or a soldier, with the owner getting the lion's share.

These workers sometimes toil in 48-hour shifts in narrow, airless tunnels, with no safety gear beyond their dim headlamps. Because there is no industrial equipment or electricity here, the tunnels are built by hand and lined with wood. Cave-ins are common, and toxic gases fill the tunnels at times, sickening workers. It is impossible to say how many workers have been injured or killed because there are no authorities here to keep track.

A worker on a productive mine can make \$200 on a good shift, but those days are few and far between. Moreover, those kinds of jobs are out of reach for boys like Imani, too young and weak to wield a steel mallet or clear heavy stones.

So Imani joined the other boys who sift earth discarded by bigger, stronger diggers, looking for bits of ore. He recorded the date of his arrival in his notebook and drew a makeshift calendar.

He recorded in his diary that he worked 2.1 hours the day he arrived and made 240 francs, less than 50 cents. That was the last entry.

"I wanted to keep track of what I earn," Imani said. "But so far I really haven't earned anything."

Because he arrived penniless, he had to borrow money to buy food and rent a room. He happened upon Daniel Mubwirano, a friend of the family, who said he had space he could rent Imani. Imani joined three other boys sleeping on the floor of his room, scarcely six feet square.

Mr. Mubwirano, a stocky man with dark, deep-set eyes, was a new arrival, too. He had borrowed \$200 from relatives to buy merchandise to sell here. Despite having a leg that is lame from an accident, he carried a sackload of salt, gin, cigarettes, powdered milk and soap through the forest into Bisie, determined to triple his money in a month and return home to his wife and three children.

But nothing had gone according to plan. He did not anticipate the inordinate expense of life here. Flooding in the tunnels meant fewer people had the cash to seek oblivion in his small plastic bottles of gin. Workers asked for credit, which he granted. He waited in vain to be paid.

"What choice do I have but to hope that someday they will pay?" he said.

And Mr. Mubwirano had not expected to have to fork over a good portion of his earnings to militiamen, who collect \$20 in illegal taxes from him each week. That is in addition to the taxes he paid along the trail getting here: 10 percent of his merchandise and cash.

So when Imani showed up, he felt no compunction about asking the boy for \$10 a month to sleep on a corner of the crowded \$20-a-month room he already shared with two other boys. They also paid \$10 each.

“We are all just trying to survive,” he said. “Everyone must look after himself.”

Imani said he had not known that Mr. Mubwirano was turning a profit on renting the floor of his squalid room, but he was not surprised. He has nowhere else to live.

Imani borrowed \$10 worth of cassava flour from a merchant who also came from Walungu, imploring the man to take pity on him. But more than a month later the man was starting to harass him for payment. Imani keeps making excuses and promises.

“I am full of debt,” he said.

Back in Walungu, Imani and his friends would play soccer after school, slipping off rubber sandals to kick around a ball made of wadded-up plastic bags.

But in Bisie there is no flat surface on which to play soccer, just hills upon hills. To pass the evenings Imani and his friends prowl Bisie’s fetid alleyways. There is no room here for the pleasures of childhood. So the boys amuse themselves spying on prostitutes and sneaking pulls of rot-gut gin.

The worst is Thursday, when the soldiers come. For boys like Imani, the tax is 500 francs, about a dollar. But that is a whole day’s wages. When he does not have the money, he runs into the forest to hide.

“If you don’t pay they will kill you,” he said.

Although Imani wants to leave, he has no money to pay the taxes along the road. And his creditors would send soldiers to arrest him if he tried to escape.

“I can’t go home,” he said.

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Battle Unfolds in a Poor Land For the Riches Beneath the Soil

By LYDIA POLGREEN

AIR MOUNTAINS, Niger — Until last year, the only trigger Amoumoun Halil had pulled was the one on his livestock-vaccination gun. This spring, a battered Kalashnikov rifle rested uneasily on his shoulder. When he donned his stiff fatigues, his lopsided gait and smiling eyes stood out among his hard-faced guerrilla brethren.

Mr. Halil, a 40-year-old veterinary engineer, was a reluctant soldier in a rebellion that had broken out over an improbable — and as yet unrealized — bonanza in one of the world's poorest countries.

A battle is unfolding on the stark mountains and scalloped dunes of northern Niger between a band of Tuareg nomads, who claim the riches beneath their homeland are being taken by a government that gives them little in return, and an army that calls the fighters drug traffickers and bandits.

It is a new front of an old war to control the vast wealth locked beneath African soil. Niger's northern desert caps one of the world's largest deposits of uranium, and demand for it has surged as global warming has increased interest in nuclear power. Growing economies like China and India are scouring the globe for the crumbly ore known as yellowcake. A French mining company is building the world's largest uranium mine in northern Niger, and a Chinese state company is

THE SPOILS

Niger and Its Uranium



JOHAN SPANNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Fighters of the Niger Movement for Justice in May.

building another mine nearby.

Uranium could infuse Niger with enough cash to catapult it out of the kind of poverty that causes one in five Niger children to die before turning 5.

Or it could end in a calamitous war that leaves Niger more destitute than ever. Mineral wealth has fueled conflict across Africa for decades, a series of bloody, smash-and-grab rebellions that shattered nations. The misery wrought has left many Africans to conclude that mineral wealth is a curse.

Here in the Sahara, the uranium boom has given new life to longstanding grievances over land and power. For years, the Tuareg have struggled against a

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pare Tuareg tea, a potent brew poured into small glasses.

At such moments, Mr. Halil Aached for home. He thought of his newborn son, whom he had never seen. He wondered if he had made the right choice, leaving his family and taking up the way of the gun.

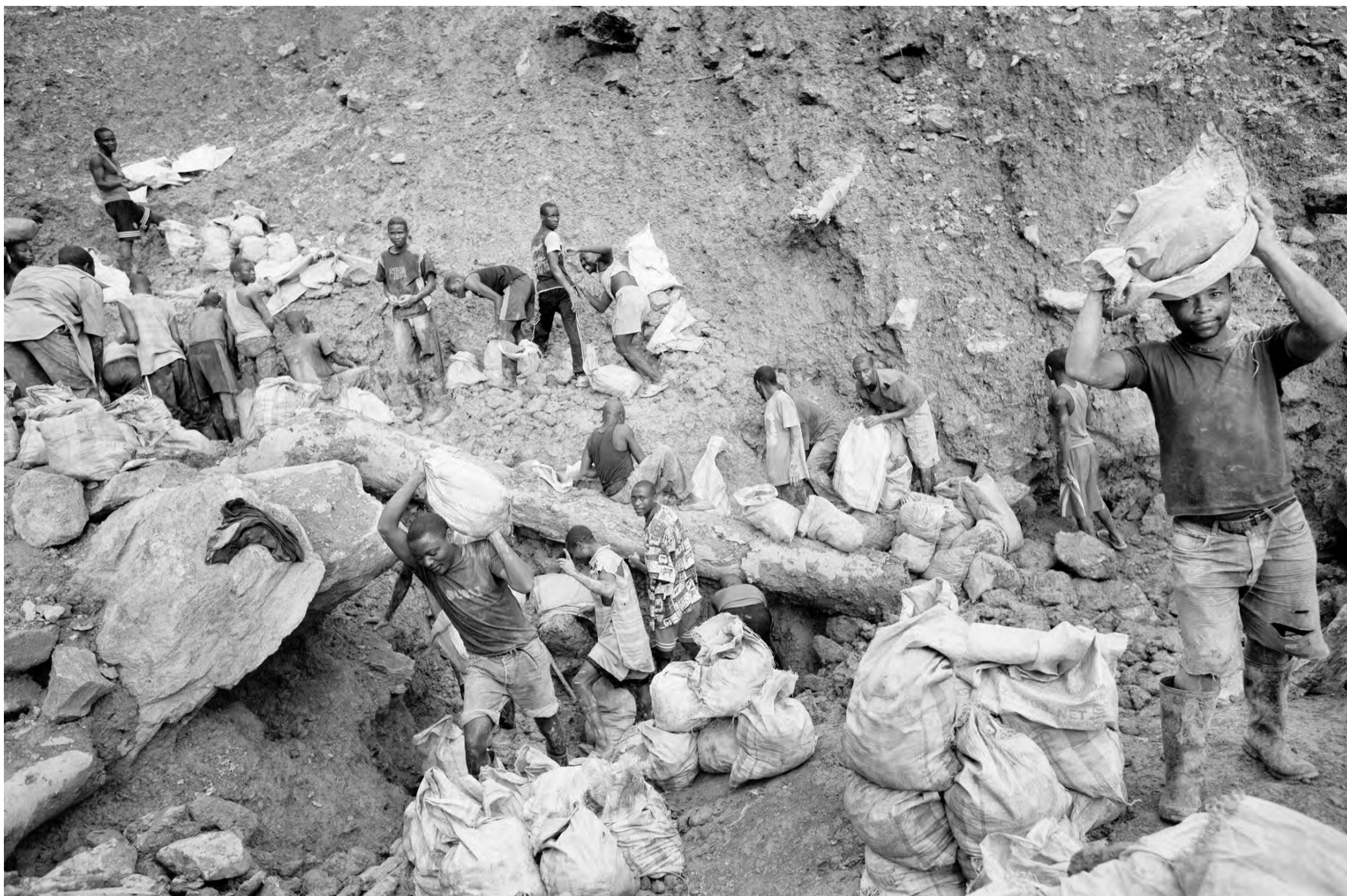
"Sometimes I have doubts," he said, stoking the embers of a campfire.

In late June, Mr. Halil was on a mission when the thwacking sound of helicopter rotors suddenly broke the desert silence, he said. There had long been rumors that the government had acquired attack helicopters, a power that would fundamentally change the conflict.

In the firefight, 17 rebels were killed. Mr. Halil managed to get away and fled to Algeria, leaving the rebellion and taking up his studies once again. He hoped, at last, to become a real veterinarian.

"I won't abandon the struggle, but I will continue by other means," he said.

The fighters left behind, in bases deep in the mountains, vow that they are there to stay.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHAN SPANNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

SCRAMBLING FOR HIDDEN WEALTH

A hunter discovered tin ore in eastern Congo in 2002, and miners arrived almost overnight. In the battle for control of the mine in Bisie, a militia allied with the government won out.

Congo's Riches Plundered by Renegade Troops

From Page 1

ing 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.

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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 endow-

ment 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.

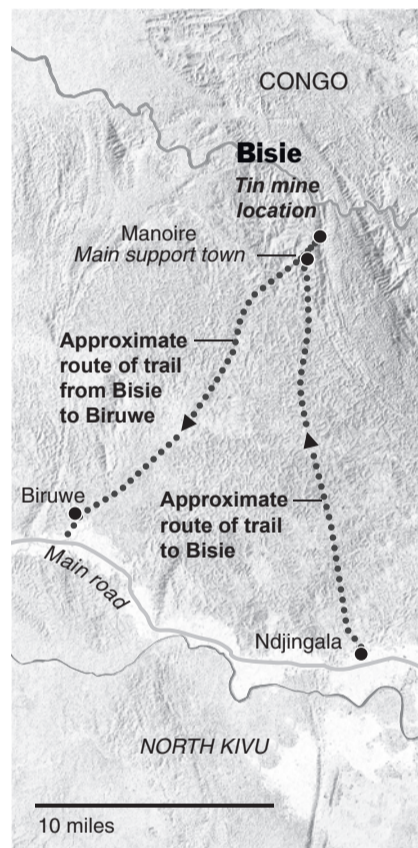
Just as the pneumatic tire was invented, King Leopold began sucking every last drop of rubber from Congo's jungles, his militia killing or maiming anyone who stood in his way. Generations later, the country's vast reserves of cobalt, a mineral essential for building fighter jets, helped the longtime 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



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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 connect-

ed 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



ENVIRONMENTAL SCARS

When ore is cleaned or clothes are washed, the dirty runoff goes into the fetid river coursing through Bisie.

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 ar-

rived 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 pro-

vincial 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



JOHAN SPANNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

CREATURE COMFORTS

Bisie, a town of 10,000, has basic businesses like bars, where prices are not cheap because each item must be hauled through the jungle.

The Spoils

This is the first article in a series examining the role of natural resources in spurring conflict and inhibiting peace in Africa.



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."

A Battle Unfolds in Northern Niger for the Riches That Lie Beneath the Soil

From Page A1

government they largely disdained. But this new rebellion has shed the parochial complaints of an ethnic minority, claiming instead that the government is squandering the entire country's resources through corruption and waste. Armed with a slick Web site and articulate spokesmen in Europe and the United States, the movement has gotten sympathy from Westerners drawn to the mysterious Tuareg and their arguments for justice.

It has also pulled in a wide variety of fighters — not only illiterate herdsmen but also college students, aid workers, even former pacifists like Mr. Halil.

"This uranium belongs to our people; it is on our land," Mr. Halil said. "We cannot allow ourselves to be robbed of our birthright."

Useful or Useless

When Mr. Halil was in high school, an old French map hung in his classroom. The verdant crescent along the southern border was labeled "useful Niger." The vast, dun-colored swath across the north that he called home was labeled "useless Niger."

It was a profound lesson, in politics as well as geography. The agricultural belt along the south had all the power. The herders of the north were irrelevant.

It had not always been so. The Tuareg have plied the barren peaks here for centuries, ruling over the caravan routes that crossed the Sahara with the riches of Africa — from salt to slaves. With their camels and swords, they enriched themselves through tribute and plunder.

By the time Mr. Halil was born, that era was long gone. As a boy he dreamed of having a huge herd of camels, as his father had before the great droughts of the 1970s wiped out the herd. After excelling in school, Mr. Halil went to college in Benin, but he failed to get the Niger government to give him a scholarship to veterinary school abroad.

"My family had no connections," he said. "Unless you have a friend in government, your chances of getting a scholarship are zero."

Instead, he started a union of herders to try to get those notoriously individualistic people to band together for their common interests.

In his travels, Mr. Halil began to notice the stream of geologists from France, China, Canada and Australia scouring ever deeper into Tuareg grazing lands. Little seas of flags, used to mark potential mining areas, sprang up everywhere, he said.

"I asked myself, 'What do we Tuareg get out of this?'" he said. "We just get poorer and poorer."

An Insurgency Begins

Mr. Halil's efforts were part of a wave of civic activism that has swept over Africa in the past 15 years as the continent has become more democratic. Many of the new elected governments are deeply flawed, but because of a more youthful, urban population in touch with new technology, their citizens are often better informed and less willing to tolerate the corruption that has squandered so much of Africa's potential.

In February 2007, a group of armed Tuaregs mounted an audacious attack on a military base in the Air Mountains. A new insurgency was born. They called themselves the Niger Movement



Niger Movement for Justice fighters near Tezerzait in May. The group has demanded, among other things, that wealth generated by each region benefit its people.



Amoumoun Halil, 40, in April. He fled to Algeria in late June, leaving the rebellion and taking up his studies once again.

for Justice and unfurled a set of demands: that corruption be curbed and the wealth generated by each region benefit its people.

Far from useless, as Mr. Halil's high school map had said, Tuareg lands produce the uranium that accounts for 70 percent of the country's export earnings. But almost none of those earnings returned to those who lost access to grazing land and suffered the environmental consequences of mining, the rebels argued.

To fight the rebellion, the government has effectively isolated the north, devastating its economy. International human rights investigators have also documented serious misdeeds on both sides. The rebels use antivehicle land mines that have killed soldiers and civilians, while the army has been accused of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions and looting of livestock. In all, hundreds of people have been killed, and thousands have been pushed from their land.

Despite the violence, mining and exploration continues largely unabated, but the rebels contend that corrupt officials siphon off much of that wealth. The country's prime minister was forced to step aside after being accused of embezzling \$237,000, and last summer he was indicted.

"This wealth needs to be used to help the people, not the politicians," said Aghali Alambo, president of the rebel movement. "Otherwise it is just plunder."

The government argues that Niger is a democracy, if an imperfect one, with peaceful means of redressing grievances.

Officials dismiss the men fighting in the north as bandits and traffickers who have moved drugs, untaxed cigarettes, gaso-

line and even human cargo across the vast Sahara for decades. Some rebels admit to trafficking, especially of cheap gasoline smuggled from Algeria, to support the rebellion.

"Niger is a democratic country that is ruled by laws," said Mohamed Ben Omar, Niger's minister of information. "If someone has a grievance, let him form a political party and bring it to the ballot."

Poor Amid Riches

The Tuareg have been fighting here for centuries. The warriors cover their faces with long, blue scarves that stain their skin.

After France lost its grip on most of its Saharan colonies in 1960, the Tuareg found themselves a small minority divided among new nations created by arbitrary borders that meant little to them. Worse, droughts reduced them to penury.

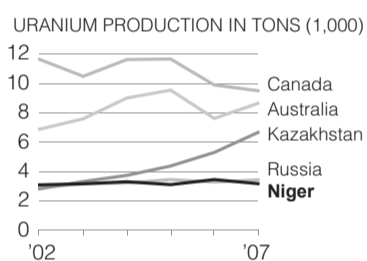
But the parched land on which they lived was valuable. A French nuclear company, Areva, was scooping hundreds of tons of uranium from northern Niger every year. Unlike southern farmers, who owned their land, nomads could use pastureland but had no title to it.

The hardships of global warming and desertification, which eats away grazing land, further impoverished the Tuareg, forcing many to abandon herding. Yet as its fertility degraded, their land became increasingly sought after as the global price of uranium rose steadily. This paradox would prove explosive.

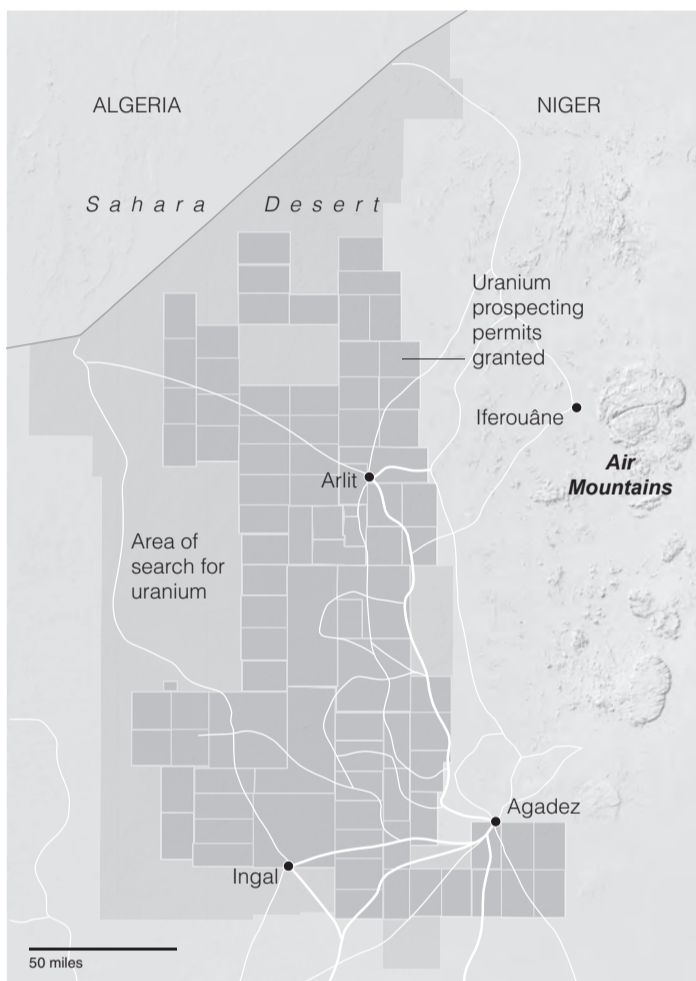
Mr. Halil sat out the last Tuareg uprising, which began in 1990 and ended with a peace agreement in 1995. Back then, he was

Resource-Rich Desert

Niger is the fifth-largest producer of uranium in the world. The uranium mining area, in the north of the country, is home to the nomadic Tuareg people.



Source: World Nuclear Association



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idealistic, hoping to avoid violence. But he knew his people's history well.

"Tuareg are fighters," he said. "It is our nature."

In June 2007, an army vehicle exploded after driving over a land mine planted by the rebels. Villagers say that the army then slaughtered three elderly men; the army says no one was killed. But the story of the slaughtered elders spread swiftly among the Tuareg.

For Mr. Halil, it was a sign that nonviolence was foolish.

"If they were going to kill old, defenseless men, how could we even talk about negotiation?" he said. "Fighting was the only way to defend our communities and our way of life."

After months of indecision, Mr. Halil sent his 2-year-old daughter and his pregnant wife to stay with her parents. He set off for the Air Mountains.

An Oath With Exceptions

Once there, Mr. Halil found a growing army. He learned to use a weapon and march in formation, but he was more useful in jobs closer to his former voca-

tions — healer and organizer.

Wounded fighters sought him out under his tree in the camp. He treated infections and counseled men on splinting broken bones. Fighters started calling him the doctor.

"I felt that I was useful," Mr. Halil said.

Each new recruit must swear a three-part oath on the Koran: never betray the movement; never attack civilians or take their property; serve all of Niger's people, not just one tribe or clan.

But the oath has exceptions, and stealing from outsiders is not only tolerated but encouraged. Armed men stole a new, white Toyota truck from Unicef's offices in April. The same vehicle turned up at a rebel base a few days later, its Unicef emblem scratched off. The rebels drove it to Mali to try to sell it.

Such slips made Mr. Halil uneasy.

"I was not born to be a soldier," he said.

The fighters spend little time actually fighting. Mostly, they drive around on patrols, take shelter under the meager shade of thorny acacia trees and pre-

pare Tuareg tea, a potent brew poured into small glasses.

At such moments, Mr. Halil Aached for home. He thought of his newborn son, whom he had never seen. He wondered if he had made the right choice, leaving his family and taking up the way of the gun.

"Sometimes I have doubts," he said, stoking the embers of a campfire.

In late June, Mr. Halil was on a mission when the thwacking sound of helicopter rotors suddenly broke the desert silence, he said. There had long been rumors that the government had acquired attack helicopters, a power that would fundamentally change the conflict.

In the firefight, 17 rebels were killed. Mr. Halil managed to get away and fled to Algeria, leaving the rebellion and taking up his studies once again. He hoped, at last, to become a real veterinarian.

"I won't abandon the struggle, but I will continue by other means," he said.

The fighters left behind, in bases deep in the mountains, vow that they are there to stay.

Somalia's President Fires Prime Minister but May Not Have the Power to Do So

By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

NAIROBI, Kenya — The president of Somalia announced Sunday that he was unilaterally firing the prime minister, throwing Somalia's beleaguered government, and the nation itself, into further disarray.

President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, a warlord in his 70s who has been steadily marginalized for several months because he is widely seen as an obstacle to peace, said he was dismissing

Mohammed Ibrahim contributed reporting from Mogadishu, Somalia.

Prime Minister Nur Hassan Hussein, a former aid official, because the government had "failed to accomplish its duties."

But it is not even clear that the president has the authority to do this.

According to the transitional government's charter, only Parliament can hire or fire the prime minister. And most analysts believe Parliament — a fractious, unpredictable group that is dominated by former warlords — actually supports the prime minister, which means a high-level showdown may be coming next.

Mr. Nur said he was not going anywhere.

On Sunday, he insisted the president had no right to fire him and that only "Parliament has the authority to sack the government."

The two men have never really gotten along, constantly blaming each other for the ever-deepening crisis that Somalia has sunk into, from the current piracy problem to the Islamist resurgence to the looming famine that is threatening millions of lives.

The latest bone of contention is a peace agreement that Mr. Nur helped broker between the government and a group of moderate Islamist opposition leaders. Mr. Yusuf rejected that agreement

A showdown could be next in a nation that is already in disarray.

and called the Islamists terrorists.

Many Western diplomats are supporting Mr. Nur and have indicated in recent weeks that they are fed up with Mr. Yusuf.

But the bickering and posturing within the transitional government may, in the end, be purely academic. The transitional

government now controls no more than a few city blocks in a country almost as big as Texas. The Ethiopian troops who have been shoring it up for the past two years have said they were about to withdraw, and a small force of African Union peacekeepers in Somalia is expected to follow.

Most analysts say that as soon as the Ethiopians pull out, the Islamist insurgents who have seized control of most of the country in the past year will take over the capital, Mogadishu. The transitional government will then collapse, as did the 13 transitional governments before it, the ana-

lysts predict.

The Somali Parliament is expected to meet in the coming days. On top of the president's move to dismiss Mr. Nur, members of Parliament are also considering a measure to impeach President Yusuf.

One serious risk, though, is that Mr. Yusuf still enjoys the support of his clan, one of the biggest in the country. Many analysts worry that too drastic a move against him could ignite the type of heavy clan warfare that brought down Somalia's central government in 1991 and has kept the country mired in violent chaos ever since.