

11 July 2010

On April 24, 2009, Senators Sam Brownback (R-KS), Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Russ Feingold (D-WI) introduced the Congo Conflict Minerals Act into Congress. The Congo Conflict Minerals Act calls on the United States to support multilateral efforts to investigate, monitor, and stop activities involving natural resources that contribute to illegally armed groups and human rights violations in eastern Congo. According to the press release from Senator Brownback's website, "Eastern Congo is rich in lucrative natural resources including cassiterite (tin), columbite-tantalite or coltan (tantalum), wolframite (tungsten), and gold. Metals derived from these minerals are used in common technological products, including mobile phones, laptops, and digital cameras."

On May 18, 2010, an amendment to the Financial Regulatory Reform Bill relating to Congolese conflict minerals was accepted. The amendment applies to companies on the U.S. stock exchanges for which these minerals constitute a necessary part of a product they manufacture. Those companies will be required to publically disclose annually to the Securities and Exchange Commission if the minerals in their products may have originated in Congo or a neighboring country. The companies will also need to establish a process to ensure that the transactions did not finance or benefit armed groups.

Many of the minerals mined in the Congo are important parts of the defense and energy supply chains. Important uses of cobalt include Nickel-Metal Hydride, Lithium ion and Nickel-Cadmium batteries, as well as in the turbines of jet engines. Samarium-Cobalt magnets are also important parts of the defense industry. Niobium is used in alloys for automobile structures, jet engines and rocket parts. Tantalum is commonly used in capacitors in most consumer electronics.

According to the CIA World Factbook, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has the following natural resources: cobalt, copper, niobium, tantalum, petroleum, industrial and gem diamonds, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, uranium, coal, hydropower, timber. In 2008, most exports went to China (47.3%), Belgium (15.4%), Finland (9.6%) and the US (8.1%). An uncertain legal framework, corruption, a lack of transparency in government policy are long-term problems for the mining sector and the economy as a whole.

Another major issue according to the CIA is human traffic: "Democratic Republic of the Congo is a source and destination country for men, women, and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and sexual exploitation; much of this trafficking occurs within the country's unstable eastern provinces and is perpetrated by armed groups outside government control"

