

Why GAO Did This Study

Rich in minerals, the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has long been the site of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Since 1998, an estimated 5 million have died as a result of the conflict. GAO was asked to examine the connection between minerals trade and human rights abuses, and the efforts to help control the trade.

This report assesses (1) how the key minerals are mined, transported, and processed; (2) the links between the minerals trade, armed conflicts, and human rights abuses; (3) measures the United States and the international community have taken to control the trade and; (4) challenges faced in controlling the trade. GAO reviewed and analyzed reports, memorandums, and other documents and interviewed officials from the Department of State (State), other United States agencies, the United Nations (UN), and foreign governments as well as representatives from nongovernmental organizations and industry.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State, in consultation with relevant agencies, (1) provide concrete, actionable steps to help control the minerals trade, including addressing lack of security, governance, and infrastructure, and (2) work with relevant stakeholders to periodically update information on mines and armed groups. State concurred with GAO's recommendations.

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THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

U.S. Agencies Should Take Further Actions to Contribute to the Effective Regulation and Control of the Minerals Trade in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

What GAO Found

Tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold are the key minerals mined in eastern DRC. Tin, tantalum, and tungsten follow a similar supply chain; they are mined by hand, sold to small-scale traders, carried by porters, transported by truck or airplane to the border, and sold to trading houses for export. The minerals transit DRC's neighbors, such as Rwanda, and most are processed in Asia and used in technology products, such as mobile telephones. In contrast, according to U.S. officials and others, most gold is smuggled out of the DRC and is ultimately used by the jewelry industry.

Illegal armed groups and some Congolese national military units commit human rights abuses and are involved in the minerals trade. A UN official stated that approximately 50 percent of the reported human rights abuses are committed by Congolese army units; many soldiers in these units have committed violations in the past as rebels, are poorly integrated into the Congolese military, and are consistently unpaid. To varying degrees, illegal armed groups and some military units illicitly tax minerals at mines and mineral transport routes, but they also make money illicitly taxing other trades, such as trade in charcoal and timber. The minerals trade is not the root cause but one of many factors perpetuating the conflict.

The United States and the international community, particularly the UN, are working to help control the illicit minerals trade, but many efforts are in the preliminary stage. State issued a "white paper" and produced a map of mines and armed groups, but both should be improved. The white paper lacks concrete, actionable steps regarding U.S. contribution to help control the trade, and the map presents data that need updating to enhance its usefulness. Provisions in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 (Pub. L. No. 111-203) underscore the importance of U.S. agencies taking action to help address the trade. The UN has made efforts to help control the trade by imposing sanctions, deploying expert teams, and developing mineral training centers. Others, such as a global tin industry association and the DRC government, have also made efforts, but these efforts are in the early stage.

Significant challenges, which are yet to be addressed, exist to monitoring and controlling the minerals trade, including tracking the mine of origin. For example, many mines are in remote areas, lack road access, and are occupied by armed groups, making it challenging to monitor mine activities. Tracking the origin of minerals will rely on DRC mining officials, but these officials suffer from a lack of skills and from corruption. U.S. and foreign officials and others said that lack of security, weak governance, and lack of infrastructure in eastern DRC are significant challenges that, unless addressed, will likely impede efforts to control the minerals trade. Addressing these challenges requires measures to reform the security sector, improve governance, and invest in infrastructure, but little progress has been made in these areas.