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Making a killing: criminality & coping in the Kivu War economy

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Abstract

Over the last four years, the eastern Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have seen the precipitous rise and fall of a lucrative economy based on artisanal mining of tantalum ore. In some ways building on older patterns of survivalist economics in Congo, it also represents a radical mutation of livelihood strategies responding to an economy profoundly destroyed by colonial and post-colonial neglect and greed, and more recently by five years of vicious war. That war has itself capitalised on the country's vast mineral wealth, progressively becoming 'economised', in that profits increasingly motivate the violence, and violence increasingly makes profits possible for all belligerents.

This article details the tantalum commodity chain from its base in the forests and uplands of the Kivus to global markets. Through an exploration of popular rumour about economic activity it also traces how the war has radically altered conventional Congolese attitudes to the survivalist tradition of 'fending for yourself, from perceptions

of the heroic to perceptions of criminal domination by ‘foreigners’ and ‘Congolese traitors’. Yet if there is criminal gain from tantalum on the part of Congolese and foreign actors, tantalum mining has also become a critical mode of survival for many at the grassroots. International action against the ‘war economy’ in the Congo must therefore be careful to punish the real villains.

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