

# Is Your Christmas Gift Fueling War?

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TRISTAN MCCONNELL

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Workers dig at a gold mine in Chudja, near Bunia, northeastern Congo. The conflict in the Congo has often been linked to a struggle for control over its minerals resources.

*Lionel Healing/AFP/Getty Images*

What's the true cost of that mobile phone in your pocket?

That's the big question human rights group Enough Project wants you to ponder this year as it urges holiday consumers to be strategic when buying electronic gifts.

At issue: whether their new high-tech items were produced using "conflict minerals."

The mobile phones, laptops, tablets and other electronic gadgets that define our age are all made with tin, tungsten, tantalite and gold. Those increasingly valuable minerals are mined in eastern Congo — where their profits are blamed for fueling the region's ongoing war.

A new survey urges American consumers to press electronic manufacturers to make sure that their products do not contain minerals that cause war, mass rape, murder and exploitation in eastern Congo.

The world's top 21 electronics firms are ranked according to their efforts to make their products "conflict free" in a survey published Monday by the Enough Project, a Washington-based pressure group.

HP is the best, according to the rankings. Intel, Motorola and Nokia ranked two, three and four, respectively. Microsoft and Dell round out the top five.

At the bottom of the rankings were camera-maker Canon, electronics companies Panasonic and Sharp, and video game giant Nintendo, all of which are deemed by Enough to have done nothing.

The scores were based on the steps the companies have taken, according to their responses to a Enough's survey and publicly available information, said David Sullivan, research director for the Enough Project.

"As the scores show, we still have a long way to go but we are pleased at the positive momentum from the companies at the top of our list," Sullivan told GlobalPost. "The leaders have set the pace and pushed others to follow."

Sullivan said the industry has formed a working group to coordinate their response to the challenge and added that if the companies work together they wield a great deal of influence.

"Although Congo's conflict stems from long-standing grievances, the trade in conflict minerals provides the primary fuel for the conflict," according to the Enough Project

report, "Getting to Conflict-Free: Assessing Corporate Action on Conflict Minerals."



A boy pans for gold in a river in Iga Barriere, northeastern Congo.

*Lionel Healing/AFP/Getty Images*

As consumers worldwide stock up on Christmas gifts like mobile phones, smartphones, MP3 players, tablet readers, laptops and games consoles, activists are concerned that some of the companies making these products are failing to ensure that their products are free of conflict minerals.

Gold, tantalum, tin and tungsten are essential parts of mobile phones, laptops and other electronic gadgets. Gold is used in wiring, tantalum stores electricity, tin is used to solder circuit boards, tungsten is used to make mobile phones vibrate.

The U.S. Congress took action to improve the situation in July by passing the Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. The new law, also known as the Dodd-Frank Act, will force American companies using these minerals to prove they have taken responsible steps to ensure they are not using conflict minerals.

All these minerals are found in large quantities in the mines of eastern Congo. The mines are controlled by armed groups that levy illegal taxes and extract vast profits that run into the hundreds of millions of dollars a year. The miners are paid meager wages and work under terrible conditions. The profits from the mining are used to buy the guns and bullets that have kept eastern Congo in a near-constant state of conflict since 1996, according to human rights campaigners.

More than 5 million people have died in eastern Congo during the years of fighting, most of them killed by disease and hunger rather than violence, according to the International Rescue Committee, a New York-based organization. Although a peace deal was signed in 2003, the fighting continues. The demand for minerals and the money they earn no longer simply fuels the conflict, but has also become the cause for it, some activists claim.

Armed groups proliferate with relentless speed as militias emerge to take control of the mines. They frequently use rape as a weapon to terrify and humiliate local populations: Tens of thousands of women and girls are raped in eastern Congo every year. When more than 300 people were raped during a three-day attack this summer, the root cause was a battle between rival armed groups over control of a nearby mine, according to the United Nations.

Among those feeding Congo's instability is the country's own army, according to a recent report by the U.N. Group of Experts, a panel established to investigate infringements on the arms embargo imposed in the east.

Congolese minerals are smuggled out of Congo through its neighbors — Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda — and on across the Indian Ocean to metal-smelting companies in China, India, Malaysia and Thailand where the illicit minerals are mixed with legal ones from around the world.

Enough's stated aim is to "have companies at the top of the minerals supply chain use their buying power to influence their suppliers, exerting pressure down the supply chain, a model of change that has had success in the apparel, forestry and diamond sectors."

To encourage electronics companies to analyze their own supply chains and stop fueling the fighting in eastern Congo, Enough has produced a league table that names and shames those making the least progress while congratulating those making the most efforts.

Some of the companies, such as Intel, Motorola and HP, have visited their suppliers to check the provenance of the tantalum used in their products, according to the Enough Project. HP, Microsoft, Apple, Nokia, Acer and Intel have all investigated their supply chains and indentified the individual smelters where raw minerals are processed.

"These companies prove that progress is achievable," the report states. Enough argues that the progress made shows that supply chains are not so complex as to make it impossible to trace minerals to exact mines in precise locations.

The Enough report makes it clear that while some companies are making progress, more must be done if Western consumers want to be sure that the Christmas presents beneath their trees are not contributing directly to the ongoing misery in eastern Congo.

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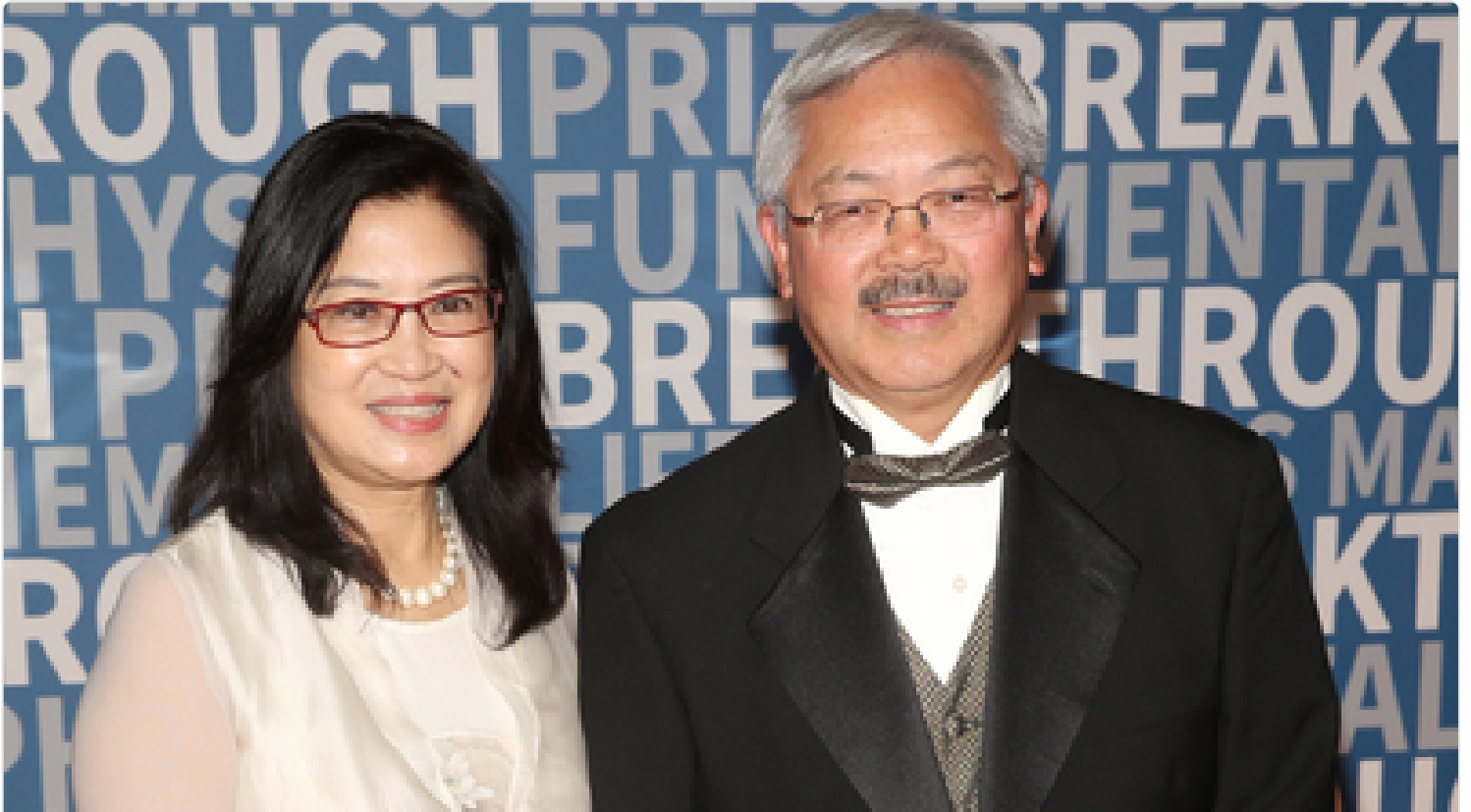
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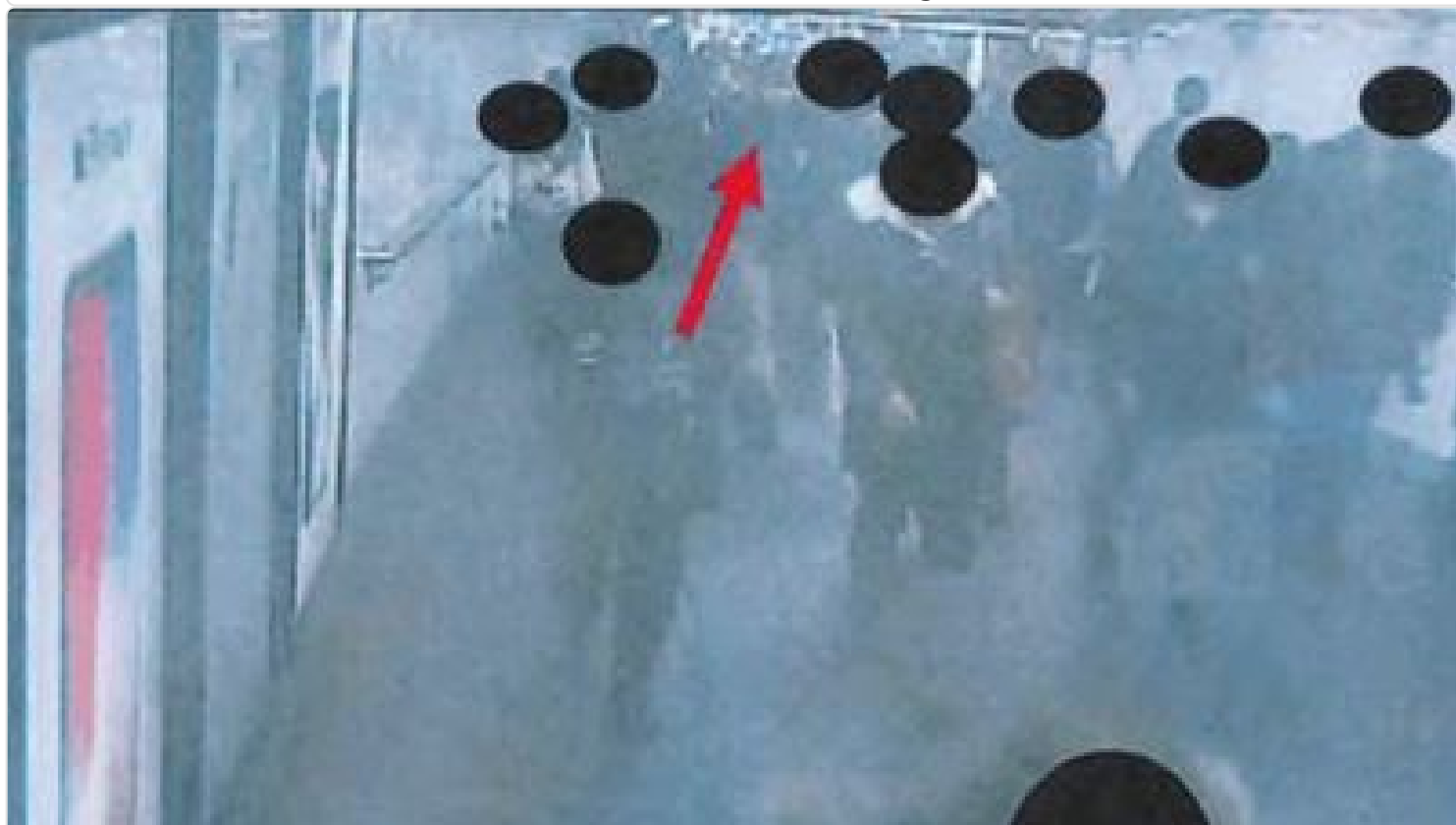
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