

# Congo at a Crossroads

731 words

Author: Colleen Freeman, *Friends of the Earth*

President Joseph Kabila has accomplished what many believed could not be done in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A new transitional government exists and the international community is lifting a collective eyebrow at the prospect of investing millions to rebuild the country's extractive industries sector. Should peace prevail, the revenues from the country's abundance of diamonds, gold, oil and other riches could one day help to deliver the Congolese people from profound poverty. However, the Congo's natural resource wealth is a double-edged sword and is precisely the reason peace has eluded this battered, war-torn country to date.

The present conflict in the Congo began when Rwanda and Uganda launched an attack to oust Joseph's father, Laurent Kabila, from power in 1998. When Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe intervened on behalf of the Kabila government, the Great Lakes region quickly became embroiled in a six-nation war and one of Africa's deadliest conflicts where over three million people have since died from fighting, disease or starvation.

What began as a political conflict soon became a power grab among many of the warring factions to usurp the Congo's plentiful natural resources. A three-year investigation by a Panel of Experts, convened by the United Nations Security Council in 2000, found that sophisticated networks of high-level political, military and business persons in cahoots with various rebel groups were intentionally fueling the violence in order to retain their control over the country's riches.

In a series of controversial reports, the Panel exposed the vicious cycle of resource-driven conflict that has taken hold of the country, particularly in the eastern and northeastern regions. In these areas, the fighting continues today because the entrenched networks are using the revenues from illegally exploited diamonds, gold and other raw materials to purchase arms to sustain their control.

But the Panel probed deeper. In its October 2002 report, the Panel accused dozens of western companies, including several American companies, of violating a set of government-backed international standards for responsible corporate behavior known as the "*Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*." The Panel felt it was necessary to bring to light the companies' role in perpetuating the conflict by neglecting to ensure that their raw materials were not originating from the Congo.

Some governments, including the Bush administration, rejected the Panel's contention by arguing that their companies cannot be accused of violating the "*Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*" if their suppliers obtained illegally exploited resources from the Congo. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – which issued the *Guidelines* – apparently agreed and in June 2003, issued a statement clarifying when they apply to companies' commercial activities and when they do not. A troubling precedent has now been set that companies from OECD countries are not responsible for ensuring that the raw materials

or other goods they purchase from suppliers are not indirectly financing hostilities and human rights abuses in conflict areas.

Last week, the Security Council issued a statement encouraging the international community to take steps to stop the illegal plundering of the Congo's riches, but it stopped short of recommending any bold steps to achieve what will surely be a colossal undertaking.

Working closely with the transitional government, the United Nations must establish a monitoring mechanism that is empowered to enforce the arms embargo and to break up the linkages between the illegal exploitation of natural resources and the flow of arms.

The international donor community has a critically important role to play in rebuilding the Congo's institutions and governance structures. Given the role natural resources have played in fueling the conflict, the transitional government must be assisted in establishing a functioning public sector, with effective laws and institutions to monitor natural resource development, before new investments are considered in the extractive industries.

The Bush administration and other OECD governments must also formally acknowledge through a revision of the *Guidelines* that companies from OECD countries do indeed have responsibilities in helping to sever the linkages between their commercial activities and resource-driven conflicts. OECD governments, for their part, must hold companies accountable when it is discovered their commercial activities, either directly or indirectly, have helped to perpetuate violent conflict and human rights abuses.

The transitional government will need the full political and financial support of the international community to stop the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the Congo. A perfunctory effort in this regard will undermine the chances for long-term peace in the Congo.