**D.R. Congo and the Great Lake Region.**

**Escalating Conflicts, Humanitarian Crisis and the (new) scramble for minerals**

Summary Report from the Africa Club, July 2, 2024

This report delves into the escalating conflicts, humanitarian crisis, and the renewed scramble for minerals in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Great Lakes region, as highlighted in the recent Africa Club debate**.** **Alexis Neuberg** (RATV) welcomed the participants and described the role and goals of the Africa Club, which has existed for 13 years. **Franz Schmidjell** (VIDC) warmly welcomed the speakers and participants. He highlighted the strong militarization and severe humanitarian crisis in the region, where over seven million people have been internally displaced. He also noted the new scramble for raw materials driven by the green transformations.

The moderator, **Gracia Ndona,** a freelance journalist, and co-founder of ADOE (African Diaspora Austria), structured the discussion into two main parts and provided a historical context to guide the conversation. She highlighted the activities of the M23 military group in DRC, which has been gaining ground by capturing territories and displacing individuals in the region.

**Nsula Nicolas**, representing the Association Fraternität Kongo, expressed gratitude for the opportunity to address the current political and conflict situation in DRC. He emphasized the critical link between DRC's mineral policy and its ongoing challenges. Nicolas explained that the privatization of the mineral sector in 2002, under international pressure, shifted control from state-owned enterprises to private companies. This policy change was influenced by the embargo on DRC in the 1990s, which restricted access to minerals and prompted calls for liberalization. Despite these reforms, Nicolas pointed out that the liberalization of mineral governance did not effectively regulate informal mining activities, leading to increased corruption, illegal mining, and environmental degradation. Private enterprises expanded informal mining operations without proper oversight, exploiting artificial deposits and leaving environmental consequences untreated. This situation exacerbated conflicts over mineral access due to competing interests and involvement of various groups. Nicolas highlighted international initiatives aimed at addressing conflict minerals but noted their limited success in practice. He underscored tensions between the global economy, including the US and Europe, and Rwanda, which he believes obscures the true realities within the country.

**Magdalena Pupp**, Policy Advisor on Mineral Resources for the Austrian Ministry of Finance, discussed the EU's policies on mineral resource supply chains and their evolution over time. She highlighted the critical importance of mineral resources in meeting basic needs and the high demand for these resources in Europe. Pupp pointed out that Europe's dependency on resource-rich countries, particularly those in conflict and high-risk areas like the Great Lakes region, poses significant challenges. She traced the historical shifts in attitudes towards mineral exploitation: from European colonial powers exerting direct control in the 19th century (such as Leopold of Belgium in Congo), to commercial actors taking over after African independence in the mid-20th century. In the 1990s, there was a growing emphasis on corporate accountability, followed by a shift towards consumer responsibility in the 2000s with the concept of due diligence gaining prominence. Pupp discussed international efforts such as the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (founded in 2009) and OECD guidelines on responsible mineral supply chains (initiated in 2011). These efforts culminated in the EU's Conflict Minerals Regulation in 2017, which mandates due diligence from mine to factory. Looking forward, Pupp mentioned the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act of 2024, aimed at reducing dependencies on external resources, increasing recycling, promoting domestic production, and diversifying supply chains. She emphasized the EU's commitment to ensuring that value is added in producer countries before products reach recipient countries, highlighting standards for due diligence to prevent human rights violations, child labor, and environmental degradation.

**Georg Lennkh,** former Ambassador and Africa Envoy at the Bruno Kreisky Forum, provided a comprehensive account of the historical events impacting the Great Lakes region, particularly focusing on DRC. He discussed the book "Africa's World War" by Gérard Prunier, emphasizing its detailed examination of the region's conflicts and highlighting that the story does not start or end with the war itself. Lennkh recounted the significant trigger of the 1994 Genocide Against Tutsi in Rwanda, which led to a massive influx of Hutu refugees into DRC, exacerbating local tensions. He mentioned a crucial pre-genocide conference organized by former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, attended by key figures like Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Rwanda's Paul Kagame, and leaders from Angola and Burundi, where they discussed the need to end Mobutu Sese Seko's regime in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) to stabilize the region. Laurent-Désiré Kabila, a rebel leader from northeastern Katanga, emerged as a pivotal figure in this narrative. Lennkh noted that the alliance with Museveni and Kagame was instrumental in Kabila's rise to power. With their support, he overthrew Mobutu in 1997, significantly altering Congo's political landscape. Lennkh also addressed the broader aspirations of new, young African politicians who sought to modernize and transform the region's political landscape, reflecting a shift towards progressive governance.

**Charles Barisa**, a practitioner in Child Protection, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration, discussed ongoing initiatives aimed at mitigating violence and preventing escalation in DRC. Barisa emphasized that the conflict predates 2022, underscoring its longstanding nature in the region. During this period, DRC engaged in military agreements with countries like Uganda and Burundi, targeting groups such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), with the goal of reducing conflict escalation. These agreements were part of broader regional cooperation efforts to stabilize the situation. Barisa also noted DRC's participation in regional bodies like the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), seeking support from neighbouring countries and regional organizations. The Nairobi Peace Process focused on armed groups and called for a ceasefire and repatriation of foreign militaries. It encouraged local armed groups to join newly established disarmament, demobilisation, community reintegration and stabilisation (DDCRS) programs. The deployed East African Community Regional Forces (EACRF) hasn‘t achieved its objectives due to its controversial composition mainly the role of Ugandan and Burundi troops. The Luanda (Angola) Peace Process addresses the DRC-Rwanda political Dimensions. Despite these efforts, Barisa highlighted challenges such as internal disputes, differing national interests, and the fragmentation of international efforts. Specifically, the involvement of SADC, led by South Africa, faced obstacles that impeded its effectiveness in addressing the conflict. The MONUSCO troops (UN Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC) started their withdrawal. They have been in DRC for 25 years but could not solve or stop the escalation of conflict

**Positions and Comments from Participant Discussions**

**Historical Context and Governance Issues**. Participants highlighted the instability in DRC since the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1960, attributing it to foreign interests primarily focused on exploiting the country's mineral resources. They discussed how the governance system in DRC has been affected by this external interference, leading to ongoing conflict and instability.

Participants criticised the **role of foreign companies** in exacerbating conflicts in DRC. They highlighted that these companies, benefiting from long-term mining concessions, perpetuate unrest and cause displacement among the local population. The Mineral Code, which heavily favours foreign companies, was identified as a major problem, stripping Congolese people of their land and natural resources.

The discussion also touched on the **historical and ethnic tensions** in the region, particularly involving Tutsis and Hutus from Rwanda, which spill over into DRC. This has been a contributing factor to the conflict dynamics in the country.

Some participants criticised **false claims that the presence of Rwandan troops** alongside the M23 (Mouvement du 23-Mars) was necessary due to the FDLR militia (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda). They argued that the FDLR ceased to be a relevant force that could destabilise Rwanda. The DR Congo had repeatedly authorised Rwanda to operate on Congolese territory in order to fight these so-called rebels. Some participants also disagreed with the statement that the Tutsi in the DR Congo are discriminated. This allegation is used by the government in Kigali as pretext to continue its presence in the DR Congo and to exploit its natural resources.

**Other participants asked Austria**, as a member of the EU, to use its influence at European level to address the plundering of natural resources.

Participants linked the root causes of conflicts in DRC and other African regions to **colonialism.** They criticized the legacy of colonial borders and governance structures that still impact local populations negatively, leading to disenfranchisement and lack of democratic participation.

**Role of the EU.** Participants argued that the EU's approach lacks consistency compared to its swift actions in other international crises, such as Ukraine. There were calls for the EU to address human rights abuses and child labour associated with mineral extraction more rigorously.

**Arms Supply and Hypocrisy**. Participants questioned the origin of weapons used in conflicts in Africa, highlighting that Africa does not manufacture these weapons. There was scepticism about the motives of Western countries in Africa's affairs, accusing them of pursuing their own interests at the expense of African development and stability.

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