

Why battle for critical minerals is playing out in eastern Congo

The US' Strategic Partnership Agreement with the DRC aims at ensuring secure, reliable, and mutually beneficial flows of copper and cobalt to the United States from the DRC, among others.

BY ROBERT MADOI

The death of the M23 rebel group spokesperson, Willy Ngoma, on Tuesday in the restive eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has triggered a sudden swirling in a vortex of what many consider a forever war.

The ability of the Congolese army (FARDC) to sustain—for days—drone strikes against their old enemy in Rubaya, North Kivu, after previously registering—at best—fragile intermediate successes, has roused debate. The arguments for and against have been discussed under the rubric of a strategic mineral partnership meticulously tailored to have the US gain access to rare earth elements (REEs) in the DRC.

The presence of the M23 in Rubaya, which has proved extraordinarily durable, and the FARDC's recent repeated shelling of the mineral-rich area are neither a Freudian undercurrent nor a teasing mystery.

Rubaya does the heavy lifting of the DRC's coltan production, estimated—per a 2023 dataset—to account for 40 percent of the world's supply. The critical mineral, whose market value is expected to reach \$1.93 million (\$hs6.91 billion) the end of this year, is an essential component for capacitors in smartphones, laptops, and advanced electronics. It is also indispensable to the production of jet engines and military hardware.

How indispensable is coltan production to the trade of M23 rebels?

The hard evidence shows that the rebels piggyback their military operations on critical minerals and rare earths, especially coltan. The rebels are thought



Laborers dig at the Rubaya coltan mine, in the town of Rubaya, which is controlled by M23 rebels, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, on March 24, 2025. PHOTO/ REUTERS

to understand illicit trade in critical minerals in a way that none before them has ever had. The control of the supply line of coltan in Rubaya has been built with an iron grip. Thunderously hostile when one gets on their bad side, miners domiciled in the conflict-torn province of North Kivu have learned how to be in the good graces of the rebels. As a result, the illegal taxes M23 rebels impose on the miners involved in the coltan trade yield an estimated monthly figure of \$800,000 (\$hs2.85 billion). This is anything but small beer.

What is the geopolitical significance of Rubaya's coltan?

Chinese and Rwandan players have been fingered in the Rubaya coltan supply chain. The International Peace Information Service (IPIS), an independent research institute, has previously pointed out that artisanal miners are locked in a punishing embrace with Chinese buyers who refine coltan procured from Rubaya in China. They have also indicated that the critical mineral from rebel-controlled mines makes its way to Rwanda, where it is reportedly mixed with Rwandan-produced, certified minerals to throw law enforcement officers off the trail.

Why is the interest in critical minerals and rare earths so intense?

Critical minerals and rare earths are expected to be central—even foundational—to the next industrial revolution. The revolution is underpinned by the shift toward green energy, the exponential growth in AI-driven robotics, the growing appetite for advanced defence technology, and an electronic infrastructure boom. Small wonder, the value of critical minerals and rare earths is expected to increase tenfold by 2035.

So how does the US come into the picture?

It has been widely reported that the US is desirous of curtailing China's dominance of the DRC's mining sector. Besides coltan, the DRC teems with other critical, tech-essential minerals, including cobalt, copper, lithium, and tantalum.

The global energy transition has placed a premium on those aforesaid critical minerals and rare earths. Washington is alive to the fact that Beijing controls upstream, midstream, and downstream processes involving the REEs. China's dominance of production is estimated to be north of 70 percent. It commands an even higher percentage

of processing.

The US' Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with the DRC is therefore intended to, in many respects, pull the rug out from under China's feet. Tucked in the SPA is the Strategic Asset Reserve (SAR). This is an evolving list of REEs, gold assets, and unlicensed exploration areas in the conflict-torn eastern DRC from which American companies cherry-pick.

A quintessential quid pro quo, the DRC gets military support for its cooperation. Likely the drones used to take out Ngoma and company. The recent torrent of rumours suggestive of Kinshasa having dangled the Rubaya coltan mine as something of a significant catch sparks curiosity in a moment.

The US State Department's February 4 fact sheet further points to the aforementioned quid pro quo.

"Critical minerals and rare earths are essential for our most advanced technologies and will only become more important as AI, robotics, batteries, and autonomous devices transform our economies. Today, this market is highly concentrated, leaving it a tool of political coercion and supply chain disruption, putting our core interests at risk. We will build new sources of supply, foster secure and reliable transport and logistics networks, and transform the global market into one that is secure, diversified, and resilient, end-to-end," the fact sheet reads.

Adding of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Kinshasa: "[It] reflects the core objectives of the US-DRC Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) by encouraging greater US investment in the DRC's mining sector and promoting secure, reliable, and mutually beneficial flows of copper and cobalt to the United States from the DRC."

What has the response to the SPA been like within the Great Lakes region?

Besides being met with domestic hurdles within the DRC itself, the SPA has polarised the Great Lakes region. Opposition leaders within the DRC reckon the SPA makes the kind of pledge needs close and sceptical examination. Much of the criticism appears to have been aimed at the fact that the deal pays little or no heed to the fact that value addition processes to critical minerals and rare earths in Africa stand locals in good stead. It instead pushes, rather robustly, for exporting raw minerals to the US.

Legal activists have also reacted with consternation at the fact that the deal appears to violate DRC's sovereign. The response of Rwanda's President, Paul Kagame, to the deal also suggests that it risks putting regional stability jeopardy.

AT STAKE



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