

Electric vehicles democratic republic of the congo

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Raphael was described by his family as a "bright and cheerful child" who, at the age of 12, wanted nothing more than to get an education. However, his family in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was unable to afford the monthly tuition fees required to send him to school. Like many children living in poverty in the DRC, Raphael began working in an industrial cobalt mine near Kolwezi, the southern provincial capital where booming mining industry feeds global demand for batteries that power products such as computers, smartphones and electric vehicles.

When he was 15 years old, Raphael was killed alongside 30 other workers — also known as "diggers" — when a tunnel in the cobalt mine collapsed. Along with 13 other families from the Congo, in 2019 Raphael's family joined a lawsuit filed in the United States against Google, Apple, Microsoft, Dell and Tesla that accused the companies knowingly benefiting from forced labor and child exploitation at the bottom of their supply chains.

In May 2024, a federal appeals court dismissed the case, a decision anti-labor trafficking advocates said was a setback in their effort to combat child labor in Big Tech's international supply chains. While the court recognized that certain subsidiaries of international mining companies comingled cobalt from both modern industrial mines and more abusive small-scale operations, it found that buyers could exercise little control over bad actors on the ground. The very size and complexity of the global supply chain shielded the companies from liability.

Raphael's story is just one of many from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the growing cobalt mining industry is rife with abusive child labor, hazardous working conditions, toxic pollution, and other threats to the environment and human rights, according to a new report from Public Citizen and Friends of the Congo.

"The Kolwezi region supplies the world with the cobalt that powers technological advances, but the locals are bearing the brunt of the exploitative mining industry," said Iza Camarillo, lead author of the report and research director for Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, in a statement.

The climate crisis is here, and the transition away from fossil fuels in the United States and other wealthy countries is struggling to meet the pace demanded by intensifying storms, deadly wildfires and rising seas. Global demand for cobalt used to make lithium-ion batteries for electric vehicles is exploding and only expected to grow as wealthy nations electrify transportation in order meet international climate commitments, according to the World Bank.

Up to 50 percent of the world's known cobalt reserves are found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,

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where the State Department estimates that \$24 trillion worth of copper, lithium and nickel is waiting to be exploited, according to the report. The country is a linchpin in the electric vehicle supply chain; currently the DRC supplies enough cobalt to meet about 70 percent of the global demand. But most of that cobalt produced in country is processed elsewhere, eventually making it into electronics used around the world.

Despite the mineral wealth contained within its borders, the DRC remains one of the five poorest countries in the world after more than a century of colonization and extraction.

Melinda St. Louis, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, said the United States and other wealthy nations of the Global North are historically top producers of climate altering pollution, so it's crucial that they make investments to transition their large economies toward cleaner energy. However, some of the pathways receiving the most investment — such as the move toward electric vehicles — threaten to extend the legacy of colonialism that impoverished nations across Africa and the Global South.

"It is absolutely urgent that we do make this transition, and yet we have this danger of replicating that extractive model of the fossil fuels from the past by extracting the minerals we need for these batteries without concern for Indigenous communities on the environment and so forth," St. Louis told Truthout in an interview. "In the name of our green transition we can be complicit in these violations."

Historically, resource extraction in the Congo and other parts of Africa during the colonial era was done with little regard for local communities or environmental sustainability, enriching foreign nations in the Global North while impoverishing locals and robbing them of resources.

The DRC remains burdened by extraction today, as multinational corporations operating in opaque supply chains reap the benefits as the communities that produce cobalt and other minerals contend with the ecological damage caused by mining and intense economic inequality, according to the report.

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