

Experts Tell Congress: As Many as 40,000 Children Trapped in China-Dominated Africa Mining Nightmare For Elon Musk Batteries

A panel of experts [testified](#) to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Tuesday that Chinese companies mining for “green” energy minerals throughout Africa – particularly in resource-rich countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), are creating a “catastrophic and unacceptable” situation for locals.

The experts urged American officials to act to contain the malignant Chinese influence destroying an entire generation of African children and the environment in which they live, stressing that the minerals in question – cobalt, lithium, tantalum, and copper, among others – are pivotal to any high-tech economy.

The hearing, hosted by the Subcommittee on Africa and chaired by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), [occurred](#) as the nation of Zambia struggles to address the virtual death of the Kafue River, drowned in toxic residue when a dam holding the residue, created through Chinese copper mining activities, collapsed. Among the specific environmental threats mentioned at the hearing were the threat to the endangered [okapi](#) and the destruction of entire communities, displaced by companies looking to mine the land and polluted to the point that no one can safely return.

In addition to environmental disasters, the growing presence of exploitative Chinese companies in the DRC, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere has brought with it growing rates of child slavery as children as young as eight are forced into mines with no protective equipment, greatly endangering their lives. Furthermore, the mineral wealth and corruption is also fueling chaotic guerrilla warfare, particularly in the DRC, where rival militias

regularly **commit** atrocities for control of the mines and violence has been exacerbated by Rwandan intervention. As of February, the death toll of the ongoing DRC conflict is **estimated** to be in the high thousands and the United Nations has documented a large number of **instances** of the use of rape as a weapon of war.

The issue of child slavery in the mines featured prominently during the hearing. Sasha Lezhnev, a senior policy adviser with the Sentry, **stated** that, in the DRC alone, “there are an estimated 25,000 to 35,000 child miners ... working at mines that send cobalt and copper to Chinese crude refiners.”

“I have witnessed the horrors of child soldiers and child miners as young as eight years old at mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” Lezhnev shared, “as well as the warlords and corrupt companies and officials making money from this system of exploitation—all in the name of getting us cheaper smart phones, jewelry, and electric vehicles (EVs). This has got to stop.”

“We see cases of child and forced labor—averaging 40,000 children—digging cobalt for Chinese buyers without adequate protective equipment and payment,” Joseph Mulala Nguramo of the Atlantic Council Scowcroft and Freedom and Prosperity Center **told** the subcommittee. “Some of these children are under 10 years old—leaving them exposed to toxic substances—causing serious health and environmental problems, per Amnesty International investigations.”

Nguramo described the situation of those children, as well as the lives of locals in areas affected by Chinese mines generally, as “catastrophic and unacceptable.”

“In the DRC, ongoing civil unrest and an unmitigated humanitarian crisis are largely due to China’s ruthless and irresponsible grip on the country’s natural resources,” Nguramo testified. “Controlling almost 90% of the Congo Mining Sector, China has failed to use its economic and financial power to defend and promote the Rule of Law, Freedom, and Quality Governance. But China has, instead, mastered strategies to take advantage of a country in chaos—often bribing government officials to acquire Mining concessions.”

The experts testified that China had spent over \$10 billion buying up mines in Africa, benefitting the most so far in Zambia, the DRC, and Zimbabwe, though the Communist Party has significantly expanded its influence elsewhere in the continent, as well. The founder of the due diligence firm Accountable Africa, Thierry Dongala, noted that widespread corruption in local governments enables this colonialism and pointed to the example of Niger to show that African governments can rapidly expel offending Chinese companies if they choose to. Niger, currently under military coup regime that **calls itself** the “National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland,” reportedly **expelled** Chinese oil executives from the country in mid-March and shut down a Chinese-owned hotel for allegedly engaging in “discriminatory practices.” “The recent case of Niger expelling Chinese management shows that when African countries get serious about their moral sovereignty in their extractive industries, Chinese actors are often the first to lose,” Dongala **observed**.

Dongala noted that local populations are well aware of the evil that illicit, slave-driven mining brings to their land, recalling that the pastor who married him to his wife conducted a “sudden sanctification prayer” to cleanse their wedding bands of evil energy, a product of their provenance, when he noticed they appeared to be made of real gold. He recommended close cooperation with locals in affected countries to track and shut down theft, slavery, and other abuses.

“We’ve been monitoring the school attendance levels, that data is very valuable because we know that if we start to see the school attendance levels drops, we have to find where these kids are going,” he said of his firm.

“The local school principal , the local fishers union, the mothers of the children,” he suggested, could be critical allies.

Rep. Smith, chairing the hearing, noted that China’s dominance of the mining industry there, in addition to facilitating unspeakable human rights and environmental atrocities, put America at a disadvantage given the importance of the minerals in question in technology.

“The reliance on China for these critical minerals is a clear vulnerability,” he emphasized in his opening remarks.

“The greatest beneficiaries of this system—China’s state-owned mining companies—remain silent, refusing to confront an undeniable reality: from dirt to battery, from cobalt to cars, the entire supply chain is built on violence, exploitation, and corruption,” he continued. “This must change—and the time for change is now.”

Rep. Smith recently [reintroduced](#) the COBALT Supply Chain Act, a bill that would, in its own words, “ensure that goods made using or containing cobalt refined in the People’s Republic of China do not enter the United States market under the presumption that the cobalt is extracted or processed with the use of child and forced labor in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” Rep. Smith first [introduced](#) a version of the bill in 2023.

Follow Frances Martel on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).