

Landslides kill 227 at Democratic Republic of Congo coltan mines at the centre of Washington's struggle to control vital mineral resources

Jean Shaoul
9 February 2026

At least 227 Congolese workers were killed last week when landslides collapsed several coltan mines in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Heavy rains triggered cave-ins at the artisanal Rubaya site in North Kivu province.

This follows a similar collapse last June, when at least 12 miners died at another artisanal coltan site near Rubaya. *Global Witness* has documented at least four deadly landslides in the area over the last 18 months.

The Rubaya mines are in territory seized in 2024 by the M23 rebels, a Rwanda-and Uganda-backed militia. They produce around 15 percent of the world's coltan. Coltan is processed into tantalum, a heat-resistant metal essential for capacitors used in mobile phones, computers, advanced medical equipment, aerospace components and gas turbines. Global demand for rechargeable batteries is expected to triple between 2024 and 2030, driven by electric vehicles and grid-scale energy storage.

Rwandan President Paul Kagame claims his intervention in the DRC is aimed at protecting Congolese Tutsis from the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), formed from remnants of the forces responsible for the 1994 genocide. This is a thinly veiled justification for a land grab in one of the most resource-rich regions of the country, where Rwandan-backed forces now dominate and displace local authorities.

Artisanal mining

Artisanal mining—sites without recognised corporate operators—employs hundreds of thousands across eastern Congo. These workers produce a significant share of the region's mineral output under the most hazardous conditions for minimal pay. They typically work with basic hand tools, digging deep, unstable tunnels without proper structural reinforcement. Underground water can rapidly flood shafts or slowly erode their integrity. Most sites lack pumps, drainage systems, personal protective equipment, ventilation, early-warning systems or emergency plans.

M23's control of the region includes a 15 percent tax on coltan production and strict control over access to mining sites. This creates a regulatory vacuum in which safety is non-existent. Pay is tied to output, pushing miners to work faster and take greater risks. The extraction process also releases toxic chemicals, harming wildlife, polluting waterways, contaminating crops and damaging workers' health.

The conditions highlight the extreme dangers faced by artisanal miners amid the rapacious exploitation of conflict-zone resources. While industrial mines typically record fewer than one fatality per million hours

worked, artisanal operations suffer casualty rates 30–40 times higher, according to UN Environment Programme research.

Health insurance and injury benefits are virtually non-existent. Injured miners receive no compensation and face financial ruin if they cannot work. Families of those killed—like the 227 lost in Rubaya—receive no formal support.

Yet artisanal coltan mining remains a vital economic lifeline in a region with few alternatives. A miner may earn \$3–10 per day, depending on their findings—more than many other local occupations. This income supports extended families and sustains local economies through food vendors, transport services and small-scale trading.

Desperate conditions force families to send children as young as 10 into mining-related work, especially sorting and processing.

While miners earn a pittance—capturing just 1–3 percent of the final value of the minerals they extract—the rest of the supply chain reaps enormous profits.

The supply chain from mine to market

The supply chain for coltan and other strategic minerals is long, opaque and deliberately fragmented. Each layer adds distance between the ultimate beneficiaries—giant tech corporations such as Apple, Tesla, Samsung, Intel, Nokia, Motorola, Google, Microsoft, Dell, Sony and BMW—and the armed violence that secures their raw materials.

Minerals first pass through a network of intermediaries: local pit bosses, traders, armed groups operating roadblocks, and regional smugglers. These actors collectively capture 5–10 percent of the final value before the minerals reach Rwandan exporters. From there, they are shipped to capital-intensive refineries in China and Malaysia. With only a handful of companies globally capable of processing tantalum, these refiners set prices and capture 20–40 percent of the final value — giving Beijing a chokehold over global supply.

The processed minerals are then sold to specialised manufacturers that produce capacitors and other electronic components under long-term contracts with major tech firms. These manufacturers capture 15–25 percent of the value. The tech giants—which largely design and market the final products rather than manufacture them—take the lion's share: 40–60 percent of total value. To cite but one example, a smartphone retailing for \$800 contains only a few dollars' worth of tantalum. Apple alone reported \$112 billion in net profits last year.

Numerous reports by UN agencies, the US government, the European Union and NGOs have exposed the dependence of these multinationals on conflict minerals. In December 2024, the DRC filed an unprecedented case against Apple, accusing its subsidiaries in Belgium and France of using conflict minerals and fuelling violence.

Robert Amsterdam, the lawyer representing the Congolese government, stated that Western governments and corporations bear ultimate responsibility: “The tech industry has funded Rwanda’s war crimes.” Apple denied the allegations, claiming it instructs suppliers not to source minerals from the DRC or Rwanda.

Regional militias fighting for control of DRC’s mineral-rich eastern provinces

In January last year, during a lightning offensive, heavily armed militias—backed by the DRC’s eastern neighbours, nominally fighting to overthrow President Félix Tshisekedi and defend the Congolese Tutsi minority—seized more mineral-rich territory. This advance marked the collapse of previous peace negotiations and triggered the most serious political crisis in decades. M23 and allied forces now control North and South Kivu, bordering Rwanda and Burundi, and much of Ituri, with its lucrative gold mines, bordering Uganda.

The conflict, reignited when M23 resurfaced in 2021, has displaced millions, killed tens of thousands, and severely strained relations between the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi. UN investigators have documented widespread atrocities—executions, sexual violence and other abuses—committed by militias on all sides.

After three decades of war, the DRC faces one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. More than 6.9 million people are internally displaced, including over 5 million in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri. Nearly one million Congolese refugees and asylum-seekers are scattered across Africa. The DRC also hosts more than 517,000 refugees fleeing violence in neighbouring states, most living outside formal camps.

Despite its immense natural wealth, the DRC suffers some of the world’s highest levels of poverty and vulnerability. Epidemics of cholera, measles and Mpox pose constant threats. Climate-related disasters—floods, landslides and extreme weather—repeatedly devastate communities, especially in the east.

Food insecurity has reached catastrophic levels. Around 15 million people are projected to need assistance in 2026—down from 25 million in 2025, but only due to changes in methodology, not improvements on the ground. The worst-affected areas remain the war-torn eastern provinces.

M23 and roughly 10,000 Rwandan troops control the fraudulent extraction, trade and smuggling of minerals from Rubaya, generating an estimated \$800,000 per month to finance the insurgency. UN experts report that more than 120 tonnes of coltan are transported monthly from the DRC into Rwanda, where it is laundered and exported as Rwandan product to China, Europe and the United States.

Rwanda has profited illicitly from Congolese mineral wealth for decades. Analysts estimate that Rwanda’s mineral exports—officially exceeding \$1 billion annually—include a substantial volume smuggled from the DRC, since Rwanda exports far more than it produces. M23 facilitates the smuggling of coltan, cassiterite, tungsten and gold (the latter rising to over 19 tonnes) into Rwanda, where these minerals are re-exported as domestic production. Rwanda’s mineral export revenues have more than tripled, from \$373 million in 2017 to over \$1.75 billion in 2024.

DRC’s critical minerals at the centre of US National Security Strategy

The vast reserves of cobalt, coltan, cassiterite (tin ore), gold and wolframite in the eastern DRC have placed the region at the centre of the escalating US-China struggle for strategic minerals and influence in Africa. Washington has grown increasingly alarmed at China’s dominant economic position on the continent: Beijing is now Africa’s largest investor, trader and infrastructure financier, and a central partner of the minerals-rich DRC.

The Trump administration’s new US National Security Strategy, published last November, openly asserts its predatory aims: “The purpose of foreign policy is the protection of core national interests; that is the sole focus of this strategy,” ensuring that the US remains “the world’s strongest, richest, most powerful, and most successful country for decades to come.”

Its section on Africa—just three paragraphs—could have been lifted from the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 that formalised the Scramble for Africa. Gone are the familiar platitudes about “development assistance,” “aid” and “capacity building.” In their place is a blunt shift toward trade, investment and resource extraction.

Washington will now seek “partnerships with capable, reliable states committed to opening their markets to US goods and services.” The strategy identifies immediate opportunities for US investment in Africa’s energy sector and critical minerals. It explicitly links US-backed nuclear energy, LPG and LNG technologies to securing access to these minerals and outcompeting rivals.

In practice, this means deploying America’s vast economic and financial power to exploit weak African states that hold more than 30 percent of the world’s critical minerals, while AFRICOM—the US military command for Africa—focuses on securing access and protecting mineral routes.

US uses peace talks to secure access to critical minerals

To this end, the Trump administration has intervened directly in the war in eastern DRC under the banner of “restoring peace.” Washington brought the Rwandan and Congolese governments together to initial an accord in June, explicitly tied to securing cobalt supplies for US corporations. A 24-page agreement—the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity—was signed at a presidential summit in December, witnessed by the leaders of Angola, Kenya and Burundi. Parallel talks between Kinshasa and M23, mediated by Qatar, produced a framework deal in November.

More significant than the nominal “peace agreement” were two accompanying economic and strategic deals. The first is the Regional Economic Integration Framework (REIF), a bilateral framework between the DRC and Rwanda. The second is the US-DRC Strategic Partnership Agreement, granting US corporations priority access to the DRC’s critical minerals and constraining China—which currently controls around 80 percent of the country’s cobalt production—from expanding further. In return, Washington promises investment in rare minerals, electricity, infrastructure and cooperation against arms and mineral traffickers.

Trump hailed the package as a “great miracle” that “paves the way for mineral investment via the Lobito Corridor.” This refers to the \$10 billion pledged to revitalise the 2,000-km Lobito Corridor, enabling minerals to be transported to the Angolan port of Lobito for export to the US and Europe. Backed by the EU and the US, the corridor is designed to counter

China's dominance in the sector.

Under the Strategic Partnership Agreement, Kinshasa will be required to use the Lobito Corridor for exporting "qualifying projects," even when alternative routes—such as the Tazara railway linking Zambia and Tanzania, soon to be refurbished by China—may be cheaper or more efficient. This binds the DRC firmly into Washington's geostrategic orbit in exchange for political and diplomatic (but not military) support against its eastern neighbours.

It is a replica of Trump's transactional approach to "peace?making" seen in Gaza: the DRC is to become a mining zone for the benefit of US imperialism and its corporations.

Despite the fanfare, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi and Rwanda's Paul Kagame refused to shake hands, and fighting has continued. M23 and Rwandan forces have seized more territory, displacing another 100,000 people.

Washington escalates its mineral strategy

On Wednesday, Washington hosted the first Critical Minerals Ministerial, attended by representatives from more than 50 countries, including President Tshisekedi and ministers from Angola, Guinea, Kenya, Morocco, Sierra Leone and Zambia. South Africa—which holds globally significant reserves of platinum, manganese, chrome and vanadium and has deepened ties with China—was pointedly excluded.

US Vice President JD Vance proposed creating a US?led FORGE alliance, a trading bloc designed to counter China's dominance in critical mineral supply chains and coordinate pricing floors to attract private investment into mining and processing. "We want members to form a trading bloc among allies and partners," he said, one that guarantees American access to industrial inputs while expanding production across the bloc.

This follows the launch of Project Vault, a \$12 billion fund to acquire equity stakes in mining and processing companies and build production facilities in the US. Trump declared the initiative essential to ensuring that "American businesses and workers are never harmed by any shortage."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact