

CONGO: Keeping Track of Mineral Resources

KINSHASA, Congo, December 17, 2011 (IRIN) - In the Democratic Republic of Congo, two projects are under way to map mineral deposits in South Kivu province to facilitate traceability, amid increasing concerns in the international community that profits from the minerals trade are being illegally used to fund armed groups in the east.

The chaotic management that has plagued the mining sector since the 1980s is, however, proving a sticking point in the process. The survival of thousands of artisanal miners is one of the humanitarian issues at stake in this project.

A guide to reforming the mining sector in the east, produced by researchers at NGO Ipsis, explains that "despite calls for a map to be drawn up from the UN expert group in its December 2008 report, there is currently no reliable map available. The volatile security situation on the ground would mean that the map would have to be regularly updated."

Data is urgently needed. Although it is not yet clear how it will be enforced, the Dodd-Frank Act, passed by the US Congress in July 2010, contains a provision allowing only minerals that have been certified "DRC conflict free" to enter the US. The European Union is considering similar legislation.

According to Sara Geenen, a PhD student at the University of Antwerp, who specializes in the South Kivu artisanal mining sector, traders are "willing to back a certification and traceability system, provided they reap some sort of benefit from it, such as a tax reduction".

The International Conference for the Great Lakes Region, the UN Group of Experts, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development are unanimous in calling for the mapping and categorization process to move as quickly as possible to avoid an embargo, which could inflame an already volatile region.

Two complementary projects

The Kinshasa Group, comprising the UN Stabilization Mission (MONUSCO) and the German Federal Institute for Geo-Science and Natural Resources (BGR), is behind one of the initiatives. Michel Liete, head of the South Kivu province mining division, explains that "the aim of this project is to categorize the mining sites surrounding the 16 future mineral trading centres, which will coordinate artisanal mining within a 25km radius. These mining sites will be certified based on human rights criteria covering the presence of armed groups, illegal taxes, women's rights, and the presence of children under the age of 15."

Only one trading centre in Mugogo (in Walungo) has so far been built, and the surrounding sites have been classed as "clean" or "dirty", according to their compliance with the specifications. These classifications, which are due to be communicated by Kinshasa, are still confidential.

A separate initiative, led by Ipi and financed by the Belgian Foreign Affairs Ministry, the US government and the World Bank, via PROMINES, will continue for 18 months and cover all of South Kivu. Specifically, it will aim to map artisanal mining sites, transportation routes, and mineral trading points, reflecting the security and human rights situation on the ground, using the Geographic Information System (GIS) programme. The aim is to gradually hand over control to the Mining Cadastre (registry) as it builds up human and technical resources.

In the eye of the storm

Artisanal miners can only work in seven mining zones in South Kivu (two in Kalehe, two in Mwenga and three in Shabunda). According to Gabriel Kamundula, a researcher at the Applied Development Economics Laboratory at the Catholic University of Bukavu, "the number of artisanal miners exceeds the capacities of these seven sites". In March 2011, without taking into account "independent" miners, the regional mining department registered 52,000 in mineral cooperatives.

Kamundula explains that, "in order to alleviate social pressure on the government, the region is trying to collaborate with companies present on the ground, such as the Canadian multinational BANRO, by asking them to tolerate the presence of artisanal miners on their sites for an agreed timeframe, with guarantees in place to ensure the practice does not continue beyond this fixed period".

However, Janvier Kilosho, a researcher at the South Kivu mining sector management centre of expertise (CEGEMI), thinks that the Congolese government did not want to support and

formalize artisanal mining activity, deeming industrial operations "more favourable and more transparent".

The social stakes of the mapping project are high. In cases where the Mining Cadastre decides to disqualify artisanal sites that do not meet the criteria, the miners will be pushed out into the cold. Their only hope is a dormant licence.

Cleaning up

Past oversights are also coming back to haunt the mapping projects. According to Kamundula, "Many problems have arisen from concessions being granted by Kinshasa not corresponding to the situation on the ground; it isn't uncommon for a single concession to have been allocated twice. Moreover, some GPS coordinates correspond to locations in Lake Kivu."

The Mining Cadastre is not yet operational, and despite assurances from Martin Kabwelulu, the Mining Minister, that "blood minerals no longer exist in the Democratic Republic of Congo; the business climate is favourable and foreign investors no longer have anything to fear", Kinshasa is reluctant to disclose the results of its site qualifications, which will either displease the artisanal miners in the east, or the industrial sector and international community.

Faced with such a predicament, the government is having to adopt a long-term vision to clean up a situation that is far from being resolved. Mapping the mining sites is the first step to increasing transparency in the sector and ensuring revenue from the mineral deposits does not go towards financing armed groups.

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