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**Op-Ed Columnist**

**Death by Gadget**

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***“Blood diamonds” have faded away, but we may now be carrying “blood phones.”***

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| [http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2010/06/26/opinion/kristof190sub.jpg](http://www.youtube.com/enoughproject)  [**[Video](http://www.youtube.com/enoughproject)I’m a Mac ... and I’ve Got a Dirty Secret (www.youtube.com)**](http://www.youtube.com/enoughproject) |

An ugly paradox of the 21st century is that some of our elegant symbols of modernity — smartphones, laptops and digital cameras — are built from minerals that seem to be fueling mass slaughter and rape in Congo. With throngs waiting in lines in the last few days to buy the latest iPhone, I’m thinking: What if we could harness that desperation for new technologies to the desperate need to curb the killing in central Africa?

I’ve never reported on a war more barbaric than Congo’s, and it [haunts me](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/opinion/31kristof.html). In Congo, I’ve seen women who have been mutilated, children who have been forced to eat their parents’ flesh, girls who have been subjected to rapes that destroyed their insides. Warlords finance their predations in part through the sale of mineral ore containing tantalum, tungsten, tin and gold. For example, tantalum from Congo is used to make electrical capacitors that go into phones, computers and gaming devices.

Electronics manufacturers have tried to hush all this up. They want you to look at a gadget and think “sleek,” not “blood.”

Yet now there’s a grass-roots movement pressuring companies to keep these “conflict minerals” out of high-tech supply chains. Using Facebook and YouTube, activists are harassing companies like Apple, Intel and Research in Motion (which makes the BlackBerry) to get them to lean on their suppliers and ensure the use of, say, Australian tantalum rather than tantalum peddled by a Congolese militia.

A humorous [new video](http://www.youtube.com/enoughproject) taunting Apple and PC computers alike goes online this weekend on YouTube, with hopes that it will go viral. Put together by a group of Hollywood actors, it’s a spoof on the famous “I’m a Mac”/”I’m a PC” ad and suggests that both are sometimes built from conflict minerals.

“Guess we have some things in common after all,” Mac admits.

Protesters demonstrated outside the grand opening of Apple’s new store in Washington, demanding that the company commit to using only clean minerals. Last month, activists blanketed Intel’s Facebook page with calls to support tough legislation to curb trade in conflict minerals. For a time, Intel disabled comments — creating a stink that called more attention to blood minerals than human rights campaigners ever could.

Partly as a result, requirements that companies report on their use of conflict minerals were accepted as an amendment to financial reform legislation.

A word of background: Eastern Congo is the site of the most lethal conflict since World War II, and is widely described as the rape capital of the world. The war had claimed 5.4 million deaths as of April 2007, with the toll mounting by 45,000 a month, according to a [study](http://www.theirc.org/special-reports/special-report-congo-y) by the International Rescue Committee.

It’s not that American tech companies are responsible for the slaughter, or that eliminating conflict minerals from Americans’ phones will immediately end the war. Even the [Enough Project](http://www.enoughproject.org/), an anti-genocide organization that has been a leading force in the current campaign, estimates that only one-fifth of the world’s tantalum comes from Congo.

“There’s no magic-bullet solution to peace in Congo,” notes David Sullivan of the Enough Project, “but this is one of the drivers of the conflict.” The economics of the war should be addressed to resolve it.

The Obama administration also should put more pressure on Rwanda to play a constructive role next door in Congo (it has, inexcusably, backed one militia and bolstered others by dealing extensively in the conflict minerals trade). Impeding trade in conflict minerals is also a piece of the Congo puzzle, and because of public pressure, a group of companies led by Intel and Motorola is now developing a process to audit origins of tantalum in supply chains.

Manufacturers previously settled for statements from suppliers that they do not source in eastern Congo, with no verification. Auditing the supply chains at smelters to determine whether minerals are clean or bloody would add about a penny to the price of a cellphone, according to the Enough Project, which says the figure originated with the industry.

“Apple is claiming that their products don’t contain conflict minerals because their suppliers say so,” said Jonathan Hutson, of the Enough Project. “People are saying that answer is not good enough. That’s why there’s this grass-roots movement, so that we as consumers can choose to buy conflict free.” Some ideas about what consumers can do are at [raisehopeforCongo.org](http://raisehopeforCongo.org) — starting with spreading the word.

We may be able to undercut some of the world’s most brutal militias simply by making it clear to electronics manufacturers that we don’t want our beloved gadgets to enrich sadistic gunmen. No phone or tablet computer can be considered “cool” if it may be helping perpetuate one of the most brutal wars on the planet.