

# Written Testimony of Ambassador Tony P. Hall (Former United States Ambassador and Member of Congress)

Before the House Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee on Africa  
February 10, 2026

Regarding: Exploited Child Labor in Artisanal Cobalt Mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

**Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Jacobs, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:**

Thank you, Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Jacobs, for the opportunity to return to this Committee.

I appear before you today to share testimony on behalf of several important stakeholders whose voices are too often absent from discussions of geopolitics, peace accords, and critical mineral supply chains. First and foremost are the **children of the Democratic Republic of the Congo**, who ought to be the primary beneficiaries of any peace agreement affecting their country—including the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda (Washington Accords).

Peace is meant for their future. It is meant to secure their right to safety, education, health, and dignity. If peace does not first express itself in the care and development of children, then it is neither just nor durable. While the world is chasing for minerals such as cobalt, tantalum and tungsten, which will propel our transition to renewable technologies, it cannot be paid for by the exploitation occurring in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where women and children are abused in the name of a “green economy.”

To secure lasting peace in the eastern Congo and beyond, it is essential that we address the underlying sources that have driven conflict for decades. We all know that ambitions to extract cobalt and these other critical minerals from the DRC—often through opaque, corrupt, and violent means—have fueled instability, armed group activity, and human exploitation. Unless these economic drivers of conflict are confronted directly, no peace accord will fully serve the humanity of the Congolese people, and no bi-lateral agreement on minerals between the US and DRC will exempt any administration from culpability. The attention and work of this Committee could be pivotal to ensuring any peace accord actually has impact for ending the abuses and exploitation of children.

I offer this testimony as a former Member of Congress, a former United States Ambassador, and as someone who has witnessed firsthand the devastating human cost of global supply chains that lack transparency, accountability, and moral clarity. Chairman Smith, you understand the profound responsibility of bearing testimony to evil because

you and I have witnessed this together, most profoundly, in a different era, but in similar circumstances during our travels to Sierra Leone in the early 1990's when we met with the children and other victims of the vicious conflict driving what became known as "Blood Diamonds."

This testimony is grounded in more than fifteen years of documented evidence from investigative journalists, United Nations agencies, human rights organizations, academic institutions, humanitarian actors and my own personal conversations with humanitarian leaders working in the DRC. The facts are no longer in dispute. What remains in question is whether the international community—led by the United States—will act with the urgency and resolve this moment demands.

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## I. A Long-Known and Well-Documented Crisis

It is no secret, nor is it newly discovered, that children are being exploited, trafficked, and injured in the mining of cobalt in the DRC. For more than a decade and a half, hundreds of investigative journalists have documented the conditions in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sites across southern DRC, particularly in the provinces of Lualaba and Haut-Katanga.[1]

Children as young as six or seven years old dig by hand in narrow tunnels, haul heavy sacks of ore, and wash minerals in contaminated water—often without protective equipment and at grave risk of injury or death.[2]

Dozens of reports by reputable organizations—including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organization (ILO), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the World Bank, and leading universities in the United States and Europe—have detailed how child labor is embedded in the cobalt supply chain.[3] These reports consistently identify three systemic failures:

1. Corrupt and predatory mining practices at the local level;
2. The co-mingling of artisanal and industrially mined cobalt, which obscures traceability; and
3. Processing and refining that occurs far from mine sites, often beyond effective oversight or accountability.[4]

Based on the best available evidence, credible estimates indicate that **at least 40,000 children—and possibly as many as 200,000—under the age of 14 are working in the artisanal mining sector in the DRC**, many earning less than two dollars per day.[5]

## II. “Blood Batteries”

With over a decade of documented exploitation and corruption embedded in the supply chains in rechargeable batteries, this Committee must confront an uncomfortable truth: **many of the batteries powering our modern lives are, in effect, blood batteries.**[6]

Lithium-ion batteries—used in smartphones, laptops, and electric vehicles—depend heavily on cobalt. The DRC supplies roughly 70 percent of the world’s cobalt.[7] A significant portion originates in artisanal mines where child labor is prevalent. These minerals, along with tantalum and tungsten, are commonly exported to China for refining and battery production before re-entering global markets as finished components or consumer goods [8], which are required and marketed as “renewable.”

Our cell phones and electric vehicles are therefore subsidized by the labor of exploited people—especially children. There is a tremendous and unacceptable cost to human life embedded in the pursuit of cheap electronics and rapid decarbonization. These technologies are powered not only by cobalt and lithium, but by human suffering.[9]

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## III. Lessons from Conflict Diamonds

Chairman Smith, nearly thirty years ago, you and I saw with our own eyes what conflict diamonds were doing to the children of Sierra Leone. Armed groups used forced labor and violence to control diamond mines, fueling a civil war that brutalized an entire generation.[10] The diamond supply chain was polluted by what the world came to call “blood diamonds.”

At the time, many argued that the problem was too complex and too global to solve. Yet you, Congressman Frank Wolf, Members of this Committee, myself and others in Congress refused to accept that argument.

Over the next five years, you played a constructive and principled role in bipartisan efforts to shut down the mechanisms that allowed blood diamonds to enter U.S. and international markets.[11] That work—done in partnership with civil society, faith leaders, and foreign governments—eventually led to the **Kimberley Process Certification Scheme**.

While imperfect, the Kimberley Process demonstrated that transparency requirements can change corporate behavior, that international coordination can reduce the flow of tainted minerals, and that consumers can be protected from unwittingly supporting terrorism, trafficking, slavery and exploitation.[12]

The parallels to today’s cobalt supply chain are unmistakable.

## IV. Cobalt, Critical Minerals, and the DRC's Paradox of Wealth

The mining of cobalt and other critical minerals in the DRC is not clean, and the vast majority of companies that profit from products containing these minerals know that the system is fueled by exploited labor.[13]

The tragedy is compounded by the DRC's extraordinary natural wealth. The country is estimated to possess **more than \$24 trillion in untapped mineral resources**, including cobalt, copper, lithium, coltan, and rare earth elements.[14] If developed transparently, this wealth could transform the economic prospects of Congolese families, communities, and the state.

Instead, local officials have too often colluded with corrupt foreign businesses to extract these minerals using exploited labor, enriching a narrow elite while deceiving global consumers.[15] The result is a devastating paradox: despite immense resource wealth, **approximately 73 percent of the DRC's 109 million people live below the international poverty line**. [16]

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## V. The Role of the United States and the International Community

I thank the Committee—and particularly Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Jacobs—for examining how to improve this situation. A durable solution will require political will within the DRC, stronger governance, and sustained international engagement. The United States has a unique role to play through its moral leadership, market power and continued interest in protecting human lives and human rights.

I respectfully urge the Committee to consider the following actions:

### 1. Enforce Transparency Requirements for Critical Minerals

Congress and the Administration should enforce robust transparency and traceability requirements for cobalt and other critical minerals entering the United States, building on existing authorities such as Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Act and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.[17] Additionally, stronger language must be added to ensure real action, more than just the current requirement of due diligence, in order to create real changes in the actual mining and practices of mineral extraction, refinement and resale. Dodd-Frank Section 1502 while well-intentioned is not enough as we have seen through the myriad of journalists and first hand reports over the past fifteen years.

### 2. Coordinate with Other Governments

The United States should work with the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, and other partners to enact kindred regulations, ensuring accountability across all major consuming markets.[18] Several members of other parliaments, especially our friends in the British Parliament (under the leadership of Lord Russell Rook and MP

Brendan O’Hara) have taken up this cause to work with the Congress, Parliament, the European Union and others to accelerate, replicate and scale any of the outcomes of this committee that will clean up the critical mineral supply chain and end the exploitation of children.

### 3. Convene DRC and Industry Leaders

The Administration (and/or Congress) ought to convene Congolese officials, mining and technology companies, and civil society to formalize artisanal mining, provide alternative livelihoods and education for children, strengthen labor inspections, and support long-term economic stability [19] in the DRC, which will improve outcomes for the people of the DRC and the resilience of necessary critical mineral supply chains.

### 4. Require and Enforce Clean Supply Chains

U.S. technology and automotive companies must be required to adhere to clean supply chains, supported by credible audits and meaningful penalties for noncompliance.[20] While many companies claim that they only use clean cobalt supply chains, free from exploited or trafficked labor, the reality is that the problem persists, the supply chains are not clean and the situation on the ground worsens. Over the past eight months in the DRC there have been at least four major mine collapses taking the lives of over 1000 people – many of them children and their mothers.

The horrors of exploited labor and resources in the DRC continue with very little recourse, accountability or change. These abuses are brought to global attention once again in great detail in Nicholas Niarchos’s just released book, *The Elements of Power, a Story of War, Technology and the Dirtiest Supply Chain on Earth*. Even this past week I met with representatives of the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and DRC National, Dr. Denis Mukwege who affirmed in the clearest of terms that the facts are not changing on the ground, despite the reporting, the current due-diligence regulations provided by Dodd-Frank, and despite the good intentions of the Responsible Mining Initiative and other actors.

This Committee has the power to convene and legislate the necessary changes to enforce that batteries that enter this country must be **verifiably sourced from child- and exploitation-free sources** and those who violate such regulations are publicly held accountable and punished.

### 5. Support the Humanitarian Community and Civil Society

Regulatory action alone, while essential, is insufficient if it does not translate into measurable improvements in the daily lives of children and families affected by artisanal and small-scale mining. For this reason, Congress should ensure close coordination among agencies with complementary authorities, particularly the State Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), whose development and food security programs are critical to sustaining child-centered outcomes in mining-affected communities. The Committee should ensure that U.S. policy intentionally **reinforces and**

**scales humanitarian and civil society efforts** that address the root causes of child labor while providing immediate protection, education, and nutrition for vulnerable children.

First, the United States Government should align supply chain transparency and enforcement efforts with proven humanitarian tools that directly benefit children. One such tool is the **McGovern–Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program**, which has a long track record of increasing school attendance, improving nutrition, and reducing reliance on child labor in fragile and conflict-affected settings.[21] Strategic use of McGovern–Dole programming in mining-affected communities can help ensure that children are in school, not in mines.

Second, U.S. policy should prioritize partnerships with experienced humanitarian organizations that are already working in and around artisanal mining communities to protect children and strengthen families. Organizations such as **World Vision**, **Compassion International**, and **Africa New Day** are engaged in programs that provide education access, child protection, livelihood diversification, psychosocial support, and community-based monitoring in regions affected by ASM activity.[22]

World Vision has implemented child protection and education initiatives in mining-affected communities in the DRC designed to reduce hazardous child labor and strengthen household resilience.[23] Compassion International supports long-term child development programs that integrate education, health, and family economic support—key factors in preventing child labor.[24] Africa New Day works directly with Congolese communities to create alternatives to child labor, including schooling support and community-led development initiatives tailored to artisanal mining regions.[25] To strengthen implementation and accountability, HFAC could support the creation of a Congo Working Group composed of Congolese civil society organizations representing victims on the ground, diaspora groups in the U.S., and human rights organizations that work directly with the Department of State. This body could serve as a formal consultative mechanism, providing regular input on policy adjustments, monitoring compliance, and ensuring that regulation does not merely shift exploitation out of sight but contributes to durable, child-centered change on the ground.

Finally, Congress should require that regulatory frameworks governing critical mineral supply chains include **impact assessment and feedback mechanisms** that measure whether compliance efforts are actually reducing child labor and improving child well-being. Humanitarian and civil society partners should be consulted regularly to inform policy adjustments, ensuring that regulation does not merely shift exploitation out of sight but contributes to durable, child-centered change on the ground.

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## VI. Conclusion

The exploitation of children in the cobalt mines of the DRC is a moral stain on the global economy. We have confronted similar challenges before, and—under the leadership of

Members of this Committee, including Chairman Smith—we have shown that change is possible when political will aligns with moral clarity.

The United States must not accept a green transition built on the broken bodies and stolen futures of children. By acting decisively with our allies and with the people of the DRC, we can help end exploited labor, foster development and stability, and build a resilient and transparent supply chain for the critical minerals on which our future depends—recognizing that **lasting peace, effective regulation, sustained humanitarian investment, and positive market engagement must move together if children are truly to be the first beneficiaries of reform.**

At the same time, it is essential to affirm the constructive role that **responsible foreign investment and functioning markets** play in supporting economic growth and long-term stability. Sustainable, transparent investment—paired with enforceable supply chain accountability—creates the conditions necessary for families to earn dignified livelihoods and for children to attend school rather than descend into mines. The experience of the **Kimberley Process** has shown us that transparency and market access can coexist demonstrates that clean supply chains can protect children while preserving legitimate trade.

The United States remains a key actor in this effort. Through its leadership, its markets, and its diplomacy, our nation can help ensure that the Washington Peace Accords and related regional initiatives truly deliver peace and prosperity to the people—and especially the **children**—of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Respectfully submitted,

**Tony P. Hall**

Former United States Ambassador

Former Member of Congress

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## Footnotes

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25. Africa New Day, *Community-Based Education and Child Protection Initiatives in Mining-Affected Regions of the DRC*.