Similar to Sierra Leone with the notorious “Blood Diamond” conflict, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has also been cursed with an abundant amount of mineral wealth, estimated to be as much as $24 trillion. Because of a weak government coupled with a lack of economic opportunity, the mineral mines are now controlled by illegal armed rebels. These rebels exploit the natural resources of the Congo. They sell the minerals they steal from the Congolese government to smelting companies all over the world. The companies use these “blood minerals” to create the small necessary parts that make up our favorite electronic devices. So when the electronics companies buy these parts from the companies and combine them in our electronics, they are also endorsing the illegal rebel groups. "An Act Relative to Congo Conflict Minerals" aims to discourage the state – and state agencies – from contracting with companies who either don’t track their supply chains or whose supply chains are tainted by human rights abuses. In this manner, the government can ensure that the economic interests of the state are not directly funding the armed militia groups responsible for the murder and sexual abuse of over 5,400,000 civilians.

**The Bill**

H2898: *An Act relative to Congo conflict minerals.*

**Excerpt from Storybook**

Martin migrated from the DRC 11 years ago. The violence and atrocities of the war drove him away from his home. He tells us that some of these people in the armies used to be civilians who joined forces to protect the people in the villages, to protect their daughters and their wives. Now they’re the ones raping the women. And for what? Control of the mines. That’s exactly what’s going on in that part of the country, the soldiers break in the people’s homes, and the first thing they do is loot and rape the women: ‘They don’t just take money, they come in your house and take...everything.’ The women are raped, the children are soldiers in the militia, the men...
once they enter the mines, they work to their death. If you look around, you will see people on their phones and their laptops and you will see there is a connection between us in America and the situation in the DRC. ‘We have a population that is completely defenseless and they need help...from the outside.’ So it’s up to real people to make an effort and end this.

■ Elevator Speech

My name is Gina and this is my colleague Gabrielle. We are working with the coalition group Congo Action Now! and we are advocating for Bill H.2898: An Act relative to Congo conflict minerals. We are concerned that the local electronics companies in Massachusetts are funding illegal rebel groups who enslave and terrorize civilians in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. That means that the state is indirectly endorsing human rights abuses. That is not something we should have in Massachusetts, a state that has been a longstanding defender of human rights. It was the third state to abolish slavery and the sixth jurisdiction in the world to legalize same-sex marriage, and those are only a couple of many achievements. We can’t have this long history of honoring human rights challenged by our very own electronics industry.

How are electronics companies funding these human rights violations? All our electronics contain certain minerals and the Democratic Republic of Congo has plenty of them. Because of a weak government coupled with a lack of economic opportunity, the mines containing the minerals are now controlled by illegal armed rebels who enslave Congolese citizens who have nowhere else to turn to making a living. These rebels exploit the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as its people. They sell the minerals they steal to smelting companies all over the world. The companies use these “blood minerals” to create the small necessary parts that make up our favorite electronic devices.

We are in support of Bill H.2898: An Act relative to Congo conflict minerals which would prohibit the Commonwealth of Massachusetts from doing business with companies who either don’t track their supply chains or whose supply chains are tainted by these blood minerals. We are asking you and your committee members to give a favorable report to H. 2898. That way you can help make sure that we are not profiting from the mass murder and sexual abuse of millions and maintain the state’s role as a defender of human rights.

■ Op-Ed

Technology is a big part of our lives. Not a day goes by when we don’t check our smart phones for the latest updates, send a quick email, or have a chat with a friend. Through them we buy things, we plan events, we make friends – we fuel war. Something as harmless as your smart phone, your laptop, or your mp3 player can fuel war. But the problem is that most of the world is blind to this truth because the problem is all the way in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, half a world away in central Africa.

All our electronics contain certain minerals and the Democratic Republic of Congo has plenty of them. Because of a weak government coupled with a lack of economic opportunity, the mines containing the minerals are now controlled by illegal armed rebels who enslave Congolese citizens who have nowhere else to turn to making a living. These rebels exploit the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as its people. They sell the minerals they steal to smelting companies all over the world. The companies use these “blood minerals” to create the small necessary parts that make up our favorite electronic devices.

That’s where you come in as the consumer. You visit Apple or Best Buy or Amazon and you browse through the products. What you see is a smart phone, but what you don’t see is that it contains coltan that comes from the blood of the young boy who was killed when he tried to run away from the illegal rebels. You see a laptop, but not the suffering civilians it took to harvest the minerals it contains. You see an mp3 player, but not the copper stained with the tears of the woman who was sexually abused in front of her husband.

What is happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo is the deadliest conflict since World War II. The number of human rights violations is shocking. The rebels have sexually abused over 400,000 women, including girls as young as 10 years old. In the past 10 years, the number of deaths has reached the 6 million mark. We are not talking about a conflict buried in history, but a preventable genocide over minerals that is ongoing as you read this story...on your smart phone or laptop.

Also ongoing today is one of the development of various efforts to solve this problem. For example, there is a bill in Massachusetts – H.2898: An Act relative to Congo conflict minerals – that would forbid the Commonwealth from contracting with companies whose supply chains are tainted by these blood minerals. These efforts are ongoing elsewhere as well. California and Maryland have passed laws that forbid electronics companies from buying minerals from the Congo.
Shockingly, the U.S Chamber of Commerce and other companies have filed suit to stop this sort of legislation from being implemented anywhere in the U.S. They argue that it would cost the private sector too much money to comply. They prefer the alternative: an economy that runs on human rights violations. We cannot ignore human rights for the sake of companies’ bottom lines. In Massachusetts, we need to push for change and pass bill H.2898 now!

It may seem like we’re too far away from the chain of events to do anything about it, but we’re not. There is a direct relationship between our consumer demand and the size of the illegal rebels’ pockets. There is also a direct connection between what we want and what the state of Massachusetts will do. That means that there is something we can do, because if we ask for a change – from our electronics companies and our legislators – they will listen. If you are a Massachusetts voter, call your legislators and tell them about your support for Bill H.2898. Right now, the bill is on the floor of the House Committee on Ways and Means. The best way you can help is by calling the House Chair, Representative Brian Dempsey, and asking him to vote favorably on the bill. You can visit this website, to find the legislator of your own district and ask for their ‘yes’ vote as well: http://www.malegislature.gov/People. If enough of us raise our voices against the genocide in the Congo, we will make a change.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Gina

In one of my meetings with Kelley Ready, she mentioned the film showing she and her coalition [Congo Action Now!] organized in the State House. She said it was a riveting success; she had legislators crying and asking her what they could do to help. A couple of those legislators were Denise Andrews and Gloria Fox, two women that left quite different impressions on me. I left class early on Thursday and met Kelley in her office at Heller. We walked to her car and after a real talk that lasted around 30-40 minutes we were at the Mass State House (note: I really appreciate Kelley’s openness, she makes me feel welcome to her visit. She respects me as an equal activist and doesn’t just see me as a student doing a project which allows me to be comfortable with her.)

I remember that I was nervous and could not stop talking, shutting up only after walking through the doors into the meeting room. We waited for everyone to arrive and in the end we had with us one familiar face [a surprise for which I was very grateful]; Germain Indjassa [a journalist from the Congo and masters student at Brandeis University, whom my colleague and I had interviewed a while back]. Everyone else I met for the first time; Rep. Andrews and Fox, Lynda [Martin Walsh’s – cosponsor who introduced the bill – staffer, Mamma Jeanne [President of Congolese Community of Massachusetts], Francis [Vice President of CCM]. Ify Amalu [activist from the Congo, really good relationship with Rep. Fox, I later discovered] and Pat Aron [leading member of CAN, note: her mastery of the facts surrounding the bill left quite an impression!]. We were a large group and once we started staffers and interns kept joining us, pulling chairs and stuffing them around the already stuffed table. The meeting started with introductions and welcomes. It continued with a brainstorming activity of what we would call a success in this situation. Ify’s and mine were identical: short term success would mean passing the bill in its current committee [State Admin.] and the long term success would be to have traceability of minerals in companies in Massachusetts. The other definitions ranged from peace in the Congo to outlining a strategy by the end of the meeting; we had quite a variety of different minds. I appreciated the various perspectives on the issue.

Gabby

This interview was very successful because we were wet behind the ears from previous interviews and were able have a more focused and effective conversation about the conflict. Also by this time, we were more confident when asking questions and had our own process for carrying out the interview. Our conversation with Mr. Martin Shitala [Congo Action Now! Member], Father William “Willie” Moka, and Father Emmanuel Bueya was especially enlightening, because they recently moved here from the Congo so their memories of the conflict were quite recent. They also seemed more upset by the conflict and gave us a very human and passionate account, which was extremely helpful in creating a sense of sympathy.

Update

As of April 11, 2013, H.2898 was in the House Committee on Ways and Means awaiting a hearing date.

For more information

Congo Action Now!
http://congoactionnow.weebly.com