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Banning minerals trade could be disastrous – report

afrol News, 7 April - A newly released report has said the banning of regional trade in minerals could wreck livelihoods of more than a million people in the troubled eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

The study conducted by Resource Consulting Services of London and funded by the British Department for International Development, The London School of Economics and Political Science's Crisis States Research Centre and the Conflict Research Group at Ghent University has contradicted what many humanitarian agencies have been calling for, saying the 'blood diamonds' are fueling tension in the eastern part of the country.

The report, researched and written by Nicholas Garrett and Harrison Mitchell of Resource Consulting Services, suggests that although military gain from the trade in Eastern DR Congo's minerals, which generated at least US\$4 million to state in tax revenue in 2008, the minerals still remains not the primary cause of insecurity and violence in North Kivu.

The authors said making specific policy recommendations that counteract popular understanding of the conflict, could reduce and eventually end military gain from the minerals trade without stopping or disrupting the trade.

"In contrast to current policy approaches, security and trade issues should be addressed separately as trade-based solutions to security issues, such as sanctions, are likely to have little effect on the perpetuation of the conflict," the report stated.

The eastern DRC conflict took toll in August 2008 when Tutsi dominated armed rebels in the North Kivu province waged attacks against government forces and former Hutu militias that have allegedly perpetrated 1994 genocide. The conflict has recently forced more that 30,000 people to flee their homes as attacks intensified.

The report also said the situation in the eastern DRC differs from the blood diamonds scenario of Sierra Leone, where many people were forced by armed groups to be miners.

"Most miners choose to mine for lack of livelihood alternatives, so stopping or disrupting the trade in minerals will hit the most vulnerable the hardest," it stated.

The authors also argue that traders operating in the legal, shadow economy should not be treated as criminals, saying this could drive them deeper into trading illegally and informally.

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"Rather, they should be incentivised to move into and operate in the formal economy. This trade reform must be underpinned by improving governance structures and building a functioning national army to enable the DR Congo to control its territory," the authors said in a report.

It further calls for action by neighbouring states and the developed countries that import minerals and products containing minerals to regulate their own private sector actors and require evidence that taxes have been paid on the minerals in the DR Congo.

Harrison Mitchell of Resource Consulting Services said understanding minerals trade as informal activity operating in an insecure environment creates spaces for the Congolese government and other stakeholders to engage with the trade partners and bring it into the formal, taxable sphere.

"Trade sanctions or certification programs governing minerals are likely to have little effect on the fundamental problem of insecurity," he said.

The report has urged policy makers, the private sector and other stakeholders to commit to reforming the existing trade in minerals from DR Congo instead of completely banning or disrupting it.

By staff writer

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