

Charcoal 101

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The illegal charcoal trade in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo) has become one of the most lucrative enterprises for Congo's most notorious and stalwart rebel group, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). In addition to financing ongoing armed conflict, the charcoal trade is threatening Virunga, Africa's oldest national park and a protected UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Overview

Charcoal made from old-growth forest in Virunga National Park in eastern Congo is a lucrative business providing funding to armed groups and some Congolese army and police units. While conflict minerals have fueled and continue to help sustain armed violence in eastern Congo, they are not the only natural resource that contribute to conflict. Illegal charcoal trafficking has become a core revenue source for the FDLR in particular, and the strategies for addressing it vary from those for addressing conflict minerals. Because the illegal charcoal trade is fairly localized – largely contained within the central African region – the international consumer pressure model that has been so successful for supporting a conflict-free minerals trade does not fit. Additionally, many communities in Congo and the surrounding region rely heavily on charcoal for cooking fuel. This means disrupting the illegal charcoal trade would not only potentially pose risks to civilians who buy charcoal to cook with, but also threaten essential livelihoods.

Recommendations to Address the Illicit Charcoal Trade

1. Alternative fuel and Livelihood Support: Investments should be made in alternative energy initiatives to provide options for citizens reliant on the current trade. Efforts must also be improved to facilitate disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, reintegration, and resettlement (DDR/RR) for former FDLR combatants, including referrals to livelihood programs.

2. Justice and Accountability: The International Criminal Court should investigate the role of the FDLR leadership in the pillage of natural resources and lucrative organized crime in Virunga. Domestic criminal accountability processes, facilitated by the establishment of an internationalized justice mechanism, should also be undertaken to end impunity for high-level perpetrators of charcoal trafficking and related human rights abuses.

3. Military and Law Enforcement Interventions: The Congolese army and MONUSCO should conduct joint operations against FDLR strongholds, especially in charcoal production hubs. New checkpoints should be established to intercept illegal charcoal shipments in southwestern Virunga, and additional protections should be implemented for Virunga's rangers who face threats.

Nevertheless, this illegal trade must be addressed, as it is degrading Virunga's rare ecosystems and financing ongoing conflict and human rights abuses. Some have estimated the charcoal trade has an annual value of up to \$35 million. As one park ranger told Enough, "Armed groups have turned Virunga into their sanctuary."

The Congolese government and military institutions, foreign governments, finance institutions, and the United Nations all have roles to play in ending the illegal charcoal trade. A combination of complementary actions is imperative to ensuring that charcoal trafficking no longer funds violent criminal networks or threatens precious wildlife. These steps must be taken alongside one another to mitigate potentially negative impacts on communities that rely on charcoal.

Take Action

Urge your Members of Congress to support the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and [Global Anti-Wildlife Trafficking legislation](#) to increase protections for whistleblowers, anti-corruption activists, human rights defenders, and conservationists such as Virunga's park rangers, and counter crucial sources of funding for armed groups in Congo.

For more information, read Enough's June 2016 report, "[Mafia in the Park: A charcoal syndicate is threatening Virunga, Africa's oldest national park](#)"