

REPORT

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

VULNERABLE WEALTH

Who will profit from Central Africa's critical minerals?

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CENTRAL AFRICA OBSERVATORY
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Acronyms and abbreviations

3Ts	Tin, tantalum and tungsten
ASM	Artisanal and small-scale mining
CAR	Central African Republic
CRMs	Critical raw materials
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
GABAC	Action Group against Money Laundering in Central Africa
JOGMEC	Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security
LSM	Large-scale mining
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
REEs	Rare earth elements
UAE	United Arab Emirates



Summary

Critical raw materials (CRMs) are indispensable to the energy transition, as well as to the digital and defence sectors.[1] As a result, competition for access to these resources has intensified, enhancing the strategic importance of regions with significant mineral wealth. This is particularly true in Central Africa. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is the world's leading producer of cobalt and coltan, Gabon is the second-largest producer of manganese, Chad produces antimony and Cameroon cassiterite, while the Central African Republic (CAR) possesses substantial untapped mineral potential. Even so, the full extent of these countries' mineral endowments remains underexplored, meaning that their significance will probably continue to grow.

Global powers, seeking to secure their strategic mineral supply chains, are increasingly re-engaging in Central Africa. China, the US, the EU, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and others are competing for the same limited resources, offering a range of political, economic and infrastructure initiatives in exchange. In this context, Central African nations endowed with CRMs have an opportunity to capitalize on their resources, increase their influence and redefine the terms of their engagement with external partners to drive employment, public revenue and economic development. More broadly, as the global order is being reshaped by the race for critical minerals, this moment offers an opportunity to reconsider Central Africa's place in international affairs, not as a mere supplier of raw materials but as a region able to turn its resource wealth into diplomatic leverage and a stronger voice in shaping the rules that govern these strategic value chains.

At the same time, however, the expansion of the CRM market and the substantial revenues it generates may create new opportunities for criminal interference. Structural vulnerabilities within the sector raise concerns that illicit practices long associated with gold and diamonds, including conflict financing, trafficking and corruption, will permeate further into CRM supply chains. These vulnerabilities include weak oversight, limited state presence in mining areas and barriers to the formalization of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). Moreover, the increasing prioritization of supply security may come at the expense of transparency and traceability requirements, creating a more permissive environment for illegal activities.

Criminal interference in CRM supply chains is already a reality. In some areas – notably eastern DRC, where the coltan trade has long been controlled by armed and criminal groups – the extraction and trade of many critical minerals is already captured by illicit networks. The concern now is one of scale. The rapid expansion of the CRM market and the growing appetite of foreign actors competing for access to these resources are likely to intensify and extend these dynamics.

Particular concerns include the growing appetite for rents and political advantage among ruling elites, the instrumentalization of organized crime for geopolitical ends, and the capture and exploitation of mining sites and trade routes by organized criminal networks. In the CAR and Cameroon's CRM sectors, the presence of actors previously associated with organized criminal practices in other sectors has already been observed, while in Chad and the DRC, documented cases of organized crime practices associated with mineral extraction and trade are already present.

The relationship between organized crime and the boom in the CRM sector has only recently begun to attract expert and policy attention and remains underexplored. Studies have either approached the issue from a global perspective or focused on specific geographical settings and manifestations, such as the involvement of armed groups.[2] This report is the first attempt to examine the nexus between organized crime and CRMs across Central Africa. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the structural vulnerabilities that facilitate criminal involvement in the region's CRM sector, while documenting a range of emerging criminal dynamics. It also sheds new light on the elite capture of Chad's growing antimony industry and on Russian geocriminal activities targeting the Western-backed Lobito Corridor.[3]

Key recommendations

- Central African governments should adopt and implement comprehensive critical mineral strategies that place organized crime risk mitigation at the core of sector governance.
- In light of the growing potential for critical mineral supply chains to facilitate money laundering, the financing of armed groups and ultimately terrorist activities, the Groupe d'Action contre le Blanchiment d'Argent en Afrique Centrale (Action Group against Money Laundering in Central Africa, GABAC) and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) should update their risk assessment and follow-up frameworks to reflect the strategic importance of critical minerals in Central Africa and the illicit financial flows linked to their extraction, trade, transport and export.
- To reduce corruption and illicit influence in critical mineral supply chains, Central African governments should prohibit direct or indirect ownership by public officials, require full beneficial ownership disclosure across the sector, eliminate undisclosed political interests and preferential access, subject traders and intermediaries to anti-money laundering obligations, and systematically pursue financial investigations linked to mineral smuggling and corruption.
- Central African governments should equip mining police, customs and financial intelligence units with the tools to investigate illicit critical mineral flows, while strengthening safeguards against corruption, collusion and criminal infiltration within enforcement institutions. They should support regional intelligence-sharing and joint investigations to target the networks, not just the traffickers.
- In line with the G7's Évian commitments, governments of mineral-importing countries should align their political, diplomatic and financial support for critical mineral projects in Central Africa with robust governance and integrity standards.



The new mineral order

The smartphone in a pocket, the battery in an electric vehicle, the capacitors underpinning AI hardware and the electronics in a fighter jet share a common dependency: critical raw materials (CRMs), many of which lie beneath Central African soil. Long treated as a geopolitical periphery, Central Africa now finds itself at the centre of a global race for the resources that will power the energy transition, the digital economy and modern defence.

Demand for CRMs, including coltan, cobalt, copper, graphite, lithium, manganese, nickel, tungsten and rare earth elements (REEs), has grown steadily in recent years.[4] Securing reliable access to them has become a central strategic objective for global powers. This competition is set to intensify: according to the International Energy Agency, over the next 10–15 years, demand is projected to rise by 28% for copper and by more than 350% for lithium.[5]

For countries holding significant deposits, this creates leverage and opportunity. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gabon, Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) are seeking to use their mineral wealth to renegotiate the terms of their external partnerships and to turn CRMs into drivers of revenue, industrialization and development.

Critical wealth

Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the regions richest in CRMs, holding approximately 30% of the world's critical mineral reserves.[6] As a subset, Central Africa holds significant potential in key CRMs; the five states covered in this brief, in particular, are poised to play a key role in the global competition for access to these resources. Together, they are reported to have deposits of antimony, bauxite, cobalt, copper, coltan, gallium, germanium, lithium, manganese, nickel, niobium, phosphates, REEs, rutile, scandium, silver, tin (extracted from cassiterite), titanium, tungsten, uranium and zinc.

The most significant Central African nation in terms of CRMs is the DRC. It is the world's largest cobalt and coltan producer, supplying more than 70% and 50%, respectively, of global outputs, and it ranks second globally in copper production.[7] The DRC is also home to one of the world's most promising lithium deposits, located in Tanganyika province and estimated to be worth at least US$15 billion;

the country's first lithium export was certified in July 2026.[8] Also in production in the DRC are gallium, germanium, manganese, nickel, niobium, silver, tin, tantalum and tungsten (the 3Ts), uranium and zinc.[9] Mining activities, including the mining and processing of CRMs and other materials, are central to the DRC's economy, accounting for about 95% of total exports by value and 40% of gross domestic product in 2024.[10]

Gabon is the second biggest manganese producer globally, having produced close to 7 million tonnes in 2024.[11] Manganese contributes significantly to national revenue; it is the backbone of Gabon's mining sector, which in 2020 accounted for about 6% of both GDP and exports and employed about 2 000 people.[12] Looking ahead, the country intends to diversify its CRM activities. Gallium mineralization was recently discovered, associated with zinc and lead mineralization in several zones of the Kroussou Project in the west of the country.[13] Authorities are also seeking investors for the exploitation of a polymetallic deposit in Mabounié containing niobium (reportedly the world's second largest known deposit), REEs, tantalum, scandium, phosphates and small amounts of uranium.[14]

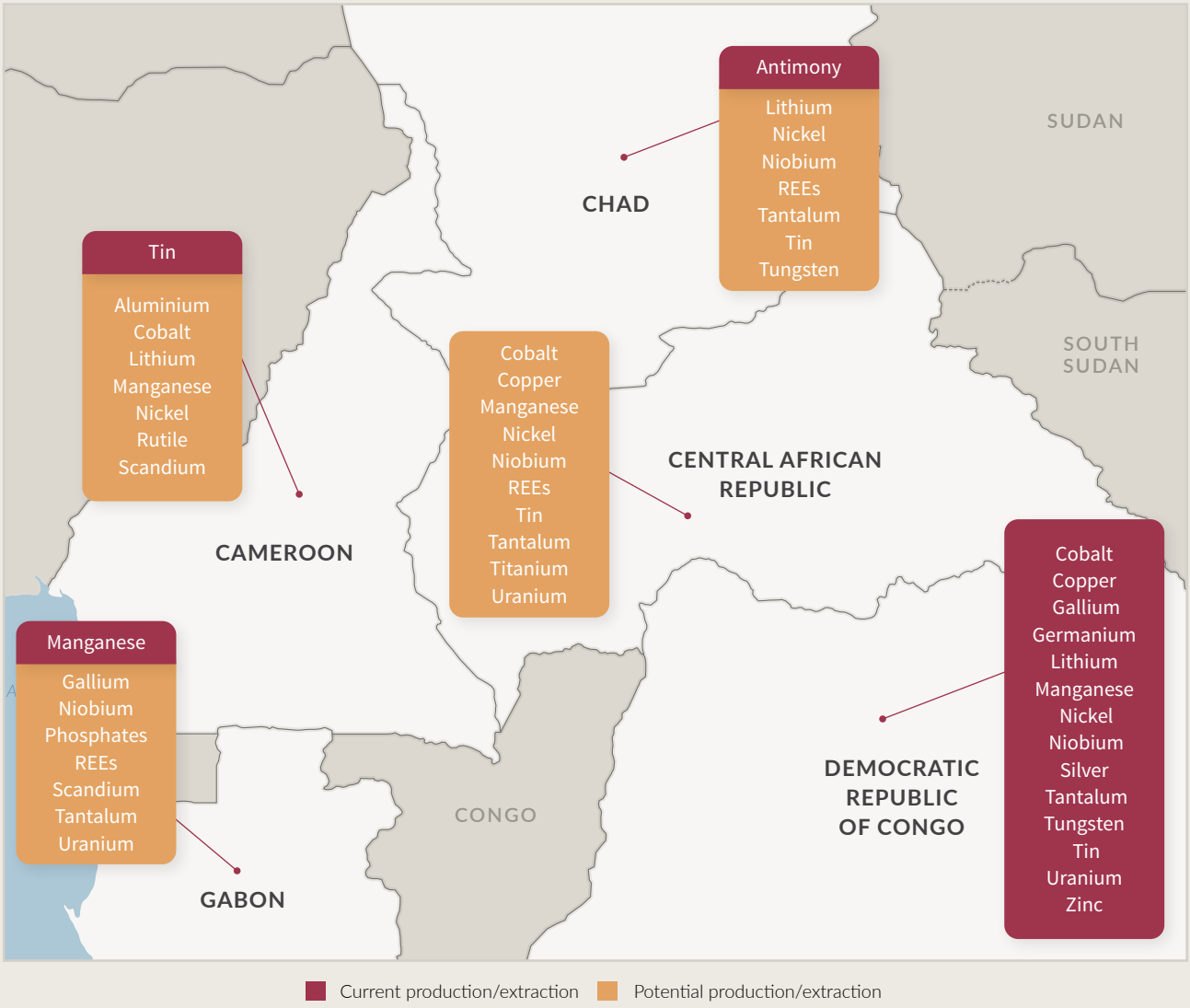
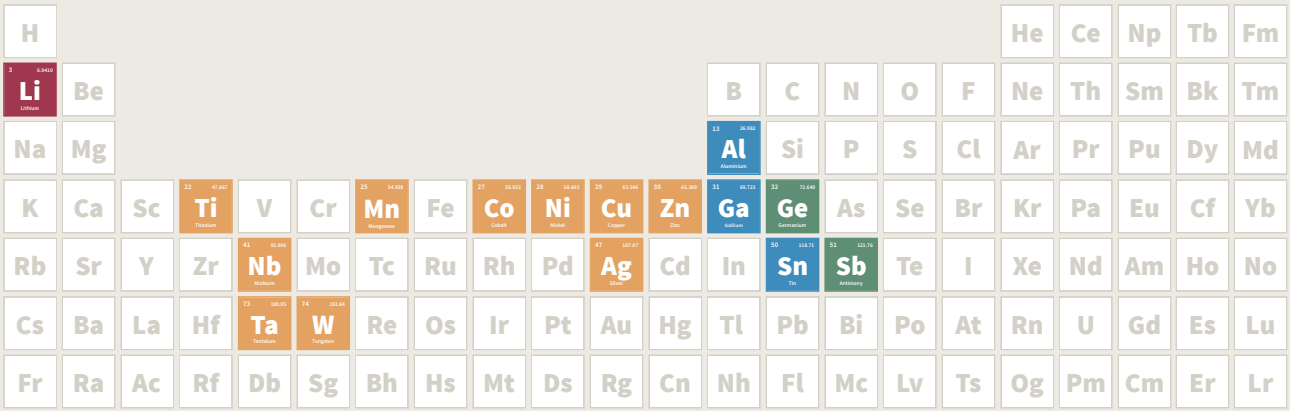


FIGURE 1 Potential and current production of critical minerals in Central Africa.



KEY

- Transition metals
- Alkali metals
- Metalloids
- Other metals

KEY APPLICATIONS (DEFENCE)	
Fighter aircraft	Aluminium, cobalt, copper, gallium, germanium, nickel, tantalum, tungsten, lithium, manganese, silver, zinc
Battle tanks	Aluminium, germanium, copper, nickel, tantalum, tungsten, gallium, manganese, zinc
Missiles	Aluminium, cobalt, copper, nickel, tantalum, tungsten, lithium
Submarines	Aluminium, cobalt, tungsten, lithium, silver, manganese
Warships	Aluminium, cobalt, copper, nickel, tungsten, lithium, manganese
Artillery	Aluminium, copper, germanium, nickel, tantalum, manganese
Ammunition	Aluminium, copper, germanium, tantalum
Torpedoes	Aluminium, lithium, manganese, silver

KEY APPLICATIONS (DIGITAL/AI)	
Copper	Power grids, electrical cables and data center infrastructure
Gallium	Advanced semiconductors and power electronics
Germanium	Fiber-optic networks and high-performance electronics
Tin	Semiconductor packaging and electronic connections
Tantalum	Capacitors used in electronic devices
Tungsten	Semiconductor manufacturing and specialized electronic components
Aluminium	Cooling systems, server racks and electrical infrastructure
Lithium	Battery storage and backup power
Nickel	Batteries and energy storage
Cobalt	Battery technologies
Silver	Electrical contacts and conductive components

Nb (Niobium) + Ta (Tantalum)

COLTAN Nb + Ta

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Smartphones
- Laptops
- Rockets
- Hearing aids

Ti (Titanium) + O (Oxygen)

RUTILE Ti + O

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Medical implants

ANTIMONY Sb

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Storage batteries
- Flame retardants used in children's clothing
- Car seat covers

COBALT Co

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Rechargeable batteries
- Turbine engines
- Car airbags
- Magnets

COPPER Cu

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Wiring for buildings
- Electronics
- Machinery

GALLIUM Ga

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Lasers – solar cells
- LEDs
- Circuitry – transistors
- Smartphones

LITHIUM Li

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Electric vehicle batteries
- Ceramics and glass

MANGANESE Mn

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Steel
- Batteries
- Fertilizer

NICKEL Ni

KEY APPLICATIONS

- Turbine blades
- Jet engines
- Rechargeable batteries

FIGURE 2 Key applications of critical minerals.

NOTE: Only critical minerals are shown here, not all minerals occurring in the region.

SOURCES: NATO, *L'OTAN publie une liste de 12 matières premières critiques essentielles*, 11 December 2024, https://www.nato.int/fr/news-and-events/articles/news/2024/12/11/nato-releases-list-of-12-defence-critical-raw-materials; FP Analytics, Artificial intelligence and the critical minerals crunch, October 2025, https://fpanalytics.foreignpolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2025/10/FPA-JCDREAM-October-2025-Part-2-final.pdf; Bruno Venditti, The 50 minerals critical to U.S. security, 1 March 2022, https://www.visualcapitalist.com/the-50-minerals-critical-to-u-s-security/; Aaron Foyer, The cheat sheet of critical minerals, Energy Now, 6 November 2023, https://energynow.ca/2023/11/infographic-critical-minerals-the-cheat-sheet-energyminute/.

While the DRC and Gabon have the most established critical mineral sectors in Central Africa, several other countries have CRM deposits that could provide meaningful revenue. Chad has been producing antimony for a few years in the Tibesti region.[15] A 2023 World Bank report highlighted the country's substantial potential in other CRMs, particularly lithium and REEs, while a 2025 report from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) expanded that list to include the 3Ts, niobium and nickel, among others, and noted that their presence places Chad 'in a strategic position within the energy transition's supply chain'.[16]

Cameroon hosts the Mayo–Darlé tin deposit in Adamawa Region, historically exploited but no longer producing at an industrial scale. The deposit is geologically interesting, but current activity is limited to small-scale artisanal extraction with no structured production.[17] The country has the potential to produce rutile at the Akonolinga deposit in Centre Region, lithium in Adamawa and Littoral regions, and cobalt, nickel, manganese and scandium at the Nkamouna–Lomié deposit in East Region.[18] The Nkamouna–Lomié deposit presents a particularly significant opportunity to expand Cameroon's critical minerals base, given its substantial resources of battery metals, notably cobalt, nickel and manganese. Its development could strengthen Cameroon's position in emerging battery metal supply chains and increase the prospects for domestic value addition within the critical minerals sector.[19] Bauxite is another promising resource in Cameroon, with the Minim-Martap project due to commence operations shortly, potentially establishing the country as a new producer of regional significance.

Finally, the CAR is looking to attract investment in CRM production, having previously identified at least 470 mineral occurrences, including coltan, copper, manganese, cassiterite, cobalt, nickel, niobium, REEs and titanium.[20] The country has not yet undertaken robust and systematic prospecting and exploration, but in 2025, the government tasked the Canadian company CVMR Corporation with conducting satellite-based geoscientific exploration focusing on coltan, copper, gold, nickel and uranium.[21]

A geopolitical game-changer

The increasing centrality of CRMs to broader economic development has spurred a renewed scramble among global powers for access to these vital resources. Until recently, China was the only external power to pursue a proactive, state-backed strategy to secure Central Africa's CRMs. Western involvement was largely left to private companies, such as Eramet in Gabon or Glencore in the DRC. In the past few years, however, the EU and its member states, the US, the UAE and other actors have stepped up their engagement, treating access to the region's minerals as a strategic priority. For the Central African nations keen to expand their CRM sectors, this rekindled interest has been accompanied by opportunities for development and the acquisition of new resources.

Market competition

China was the first country to invest in the critical minerals sector and has established a dominant position in most value chains. For instance, it accounts for around 60% of global REE production, about 90% of REE separation and refining, and 80–90% of rareearth permanent magnet production.[22] In Central Africa, Chinese companies have secured a dominant position in the cobalt and copper sectors of the DRC and developed interests – albeit minor ones – in Gabon's manganese.[23]

Other powers have taken steps to limit their dependence on China and to fortify their supply of CRMs. The EU and its member states, for instance, have increased their engagement. For decades, only a limited number of major mining sites in Central Africa have been operated directly by EU-based companies. These include Moanda manganese mine in Gabon, in production since 1962 and operated by Comilog,

a subsidiary of the French group Eramet, as well as several copper and cobalt mining operations in the DRC operated by Eurasian Resources Group (ERG), a Luxembourg-based mining company 40% owned by the Republic of Kazakhstan.[24] To strengthen its influence, the EU signed a partnership agreement on raw materials with the DRC in 2023, and has other agreements with Namibia, Zambia and Rwanda.[25] With France supporting and protecting its strategic interests, Eramet recently deepened its engagement in Gabon, signing an agreement with the Gabonese government in July 2026.[26] Other EU member states have also been working to develop relations with mineral-rich Central African nations.

Other countries eyeing the region's resources include the UAE, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.[27] The UAE and the CAR signed an economic agreement in 2025 aimed at deepening bilateral trade and investment, particularly in key sectors such as mineral resources.[28] The UAE company International Resources Holdings acquired a stake in a major tin producer in the DRC in 2025, and in 2023 the UAE signed a US$1.9 billion deal with the DRC's state-owned mining company to develop four CRM mines.[29] The state-owned Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security (JOGMEC) signed a minerals agreement with the DRC in 2023, building on previous agreements; the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry recently suggested that in order to stay competitive, JOGMEC should be allowed to invest in CRM projects without waiting for the participation of Japanese companies.[30] Saudi Arabia signed agreements with the DRC, Chad and several other African nations in 2023 and 2024.[31] In early 2026, Indonesia and Gabon signed a memorandum of understanding to evaluate a potential partnership in REEs.[32] Large Australian and Canadian mining companies are likewise active in the region, including Ivanhoe Mines, which is participating in the development and operation of one of the DRC's largest copper-cobalt projects, Kamoa–Kakula.[33]

The question is not whether organized crime will penetrate Central Africa's critical mineral sector, but how far it will spread.

The most striking example of the major powers' renewed interest in Central Africa's resources, however, lies in the many initiatives of the US. While the US has engaged authorities in Gabon, Cameroon and the CAR to discuss CRMs, the Trump administration has also supported peace talks between the DRC and Rwanda with a view to facilitating US access to Congolese CRMs.[34] After the two countries signed a peace agreement in the White House on 27 June 2025, Trump suggested the US would get 'a lot of mineral rights from the Congo' as part of the deal.[35] A few months later, the US and the DRC signed a strategic partnership agreement on critical minerals that established preferential treatment for the US to 'facilitate stable, predictable, long-term access for US persons and aligned persons'.[36] Under this framework, in early 2026, DRC authorities sent the US an initial list of 25 priority mining assets that could be considered for partnership agreements; the list reportedly included Rubaya, one of the world's largest tantalum sites, currently controlled by the Rwandan-backed paramilitary group M23.[37] This agreement may have contributed to increased pressure on Congolese authorities to remove artisanal mining activities from high-potential mining areas to pave the way for American or other industrial operators to access these areas. According to several sources, this context explains the relocation in October 2026 of nearly 20 000 artisanal miners from the Kamilombe copper and cobalt mine in Lualaba Province.[38]

In parallel, several US companies have made efforts to enter the DRC's CRM market. For instance, in March 2026, Virtus Minerals acquired Chemaf's nearproduction copper–cobalt mines in Kolwezi and Lubumbashi, while KoBold Metals obtained lithium exploration permits in Manono and Malemba Nkulu territories.[39] Most of these US initiatives are at an early stage of their development, but this renewed interest is already raising the stakes in the region.

Strategic development potential

As engagement on CRMs expands, Central African states are developing partnerships with the actors offering the most advantageous arrangements. These partnerships often include commitments to infrastructure development or the rebalancing of value chains through local value creation, but other arrangements have included military and security support.

One of the main examples of partners offering infrastructure development is the financial support provided by the EU, through its Global Gateway strategy, and the US for the development of the Lobito Corridor connecting Congolese and Zambian mineralproducing regions to Angola's port of Lobito. The project includes commitments to rail upgrades, renewable energy infrastructure and related investments.[40]

Gabon provides another instance of an extractive state leveraging its resources to expand infrastructure while strengthening its position within value chains. When it confirmed its engagement with Eramet in July 2026, Gabon secured renewed support from the French Development Agency and its private sector financing arm Proparco, as well as the EU and the World Bank, for the modernization and expansion of the Trans-Gabon Railway, infrastructure strategic to the country's industrial and mining development.[41] As part of the deal, Eramet committed to increasing local value creation by considering new processing facilities.[42]

The DRC provides an example of how a country in the region is seeking to move beyond being a rent-seeking economy and a raw materials exporter. In partnership with Zambia, the DRC is exploring the development of an integrated regional value chain and a cross-border special economic zone dedicated to battery production and electric mobility.[43] In June 2026, in an attempt to force domestic processing, the DRC prohibited exports of cobalt and copper concentrates.[44]



Gabon's President Brice Oligui Nguema and France's President Emmanuel Macron applaud, from left, General Director of Ogooué Mining Company Leod Paul Batolo, Gabonese Minister of Mines and Geological Resources Sosthène Nguema Nguema and Eramet CEO Christel Bories after they signed a memorandum of understanding on the manganese value chain in Paris, 20 July 2026.
© Ludovic Marin/Getty Images

The granting of mining permits has also been linked to broader strategic considerations. In the DRC, for example, the US was given preferential opportunities in the mining sector in exchange for greater support in addressing security challenges arising from the DRC's rivalry with Rwanda.[45] This approach has so far yielded limited results and has raised questions about the extent to which mineral access can translate into enhanced US security engagement.[46] Similar dynamics appear to be emerging in Cameroon, where US signals suggest that the level of security support could be adjusted depending on the extent to which Yaoundé opens its mining sector to US interests.[47] In the DRC and Cameroon, securing access to critical minerals is increasingly embedded in a broader effort to counter China's growing influence in Central Africa.[48]

The ability of these partnerships to deliver lasting development, however, will depend on whether the region's CRM sectors can be shielded from the criminal interests already circling them.



Risks, vulnerabilities and organized crime

Although the rising demand for CRMs offers considerable opportunities for Central African countries and consuming countries, the sector is also marked by structural vulnerabilities that expose it to serious risk of criminal interference. Weak oversight, persistent informality and limited state presence in mining areas create conditions in which corruption, the involvement of armed actors and cross-border smuggling can become intrinsic to the exploitation, trade and processing of minerals.

In parts of Central Africa, criminal interference in critical minerals is not a prospect but a reality: in the DRC and Chad, organized crime practices linked to the extraction and trade of critical minerals are already documented, involving armed groups, politically protected networks and members of the security apparatus. In the CAR and Cameroon, where CRM sectors are still emerging, actors previously associated with criminal practices in other sectors are already present, and conditions are ripe for similar dynamics to take hold.

Critical vulnerabilities

As with other natural resource sectors, the CRM sector's vulnerability and exposure to illicit activity is linked to the structural deficits of the countries and governance systems in which it operates.[49] Where regulatory authority is weak and state capacity limited, extraction and trade systems become vulnerable to the same patterns of criminal behaviour observed in gold, diamonds and other resource sectors. Barriers to formalization, limited access to legal markets and weak oversight can leave artisanal miners and traders vulnerable to exploitation by illicit actors. Criminal networks with influence over state institutions can impede oversight and facilitate the capture of resources. Under these conditions, the sector's strategic importance does not protect it from criminal penetration; instead, it amplifies incentives for illicit extraction, trafficking and revenue diversion.

Weak state governance

Weak state governance is by far the main vulnerability of Central African countries when it comes to critical minerals and other economic activities. Many countries in the region suffer from weak institutions, chronic insecurity, pervasive corruption and a challenging business environment, all of which leave them vulnerable to exploitation by organized criminal groups.[50] This is particularly true when it comes to the mining sector.

Mining activities often take place in remote areas where state authority is uneven and enforcement is limited or absent. Government services may be present on paper but not on the ground, with insufficient personnel, resources or capacity to monitor mining activities or maintain effective oversight of extraction and trade. Where law enforcement and regulatory agencies are under-resourced, poorly supervised or inadequately remunerated, they may also become more vulnerable to corruption, rent-seeking and other integrity risks.

In Cameroon, this has manifested in the government's inability to regulate gold mining,[51] which has led to significant discrepancies between declared exports and foreign import records: in 2023, Cameroon declared only 22.3 kilograms in gold exports, while the UAE recorded imports of more than 15 tonnes of gold originating from Cameroon.[52] Chad faces similar problems; recent studies have highlighted limited operational presence and control failures in the gold sector.[53] Where state control is weak, mining sites can become spaces where armed groups establish their own systems of administration and revenue extraction. In the DRC and the CAR, for instance, armed actors control access to certain mining areas and export routes and have imposed illegal taxes on the extraction, transport and sale of minerals.[54]

Limited and confusing legislation can also leave the mining sector open to exploitation. In the CAR, for example, a new mining code was adopted in 2024 to create a more investor-friendly framework.[55] Its implementation remains incomplete, however, because implementing regulations have yet to be adopted.[56] In addition, the CAR's 2023 law on the tokenization of natural resources introduced a parallel mechanism through which land – and potentially mining rights – can be acquired on blockchain platforms, raising questions about the legal status of tokenized assets relative to licences issued under the mining code.[57]



Artisanal miners working at the Shabara mine near Kolwezi, DRC. Informality in the minerals sector is a factor that exposes it to vulnerabilities. *© Junior Kannah/AFP via Getty Images*

All these factors can fuel a complex and insecure business climate in which economic operators – local and international – are unsure of how to proceed. The rules vary depending on whom one deals with, government agencies contradict one another, and formal and informal taxes coexist. Often, companies must deal with a complex web of authorities: government agencies, political and administrative elites, security forces, armed groups and local leaders. This multiplicity of actors, combined with a lack of transparency and weak accountability mechanisms, creates continual uncertainty that discourages investment – and shapes who invests.[58] Responsible operators, bound by due diligence and compliance obligations, are the most likely to stay away, while actors comfortable with informality, political brokerage and opacity are best placed to thrive. The result is a form of adverse selection that favours the operators most likely to engage in or facilitate illicit activity.

This situation enables criminal infiltration. Across Central Africa, organized crime actors have exploited the combination of high-value commodities, dispersed production, remote extraction sites, weak oversight and limited state presence. These conditions make it possible to conceal production, circumvent regulatory controls, smuggle commodities across borders and capture revenues outside official avenues.

In the CAR, for example, criminal actors and groups have long taken advantage of the structural vulnerabilities of the gold and diamond sectors.[59] For instance, due to the controlling presence of violent armed groups throughout the country, the Kimberley Process diamond certification scheme suspended the CAR in 2013. By 2019, the diamond smuggling economy covered as much as 90% of production (valued at US$15 million), stabilizing at about 50% (valued at US$7.5 million) in 2021.[60] The Kimberley Process suspension was lifted in November 2024, but the recovery of the formal diamond trade has been slow, largely because smuggling offers more attractive returns.

Particularly worrying is the fact that actors associated with non-transparent practices in the CAR and other Central African states are investing in the CAR's emerging CRM sector. Sigma Resources CAR is among the few companies that have obtained exploration permits for CRMs in the CAR – cobalt in Borossé and Damara, copper in Alindao, nickel in Bambari and Bozoro Zéré, and lithium in Bossangoa.[61] The company is controlled by Sigma Mining, itself largely controlled by the UAE conglomerate International Holding Co, chaired by Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan, brother of President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.[62]

Sigma Mining took control of Sigma Gold in the CAR in June 2023, at a time when the company was sourcing gold from Russia's Wagner Group, including from its major active industrial concession at Ndassima, which reports no official production. Sigma Gold became the CAR's leading gold exporter that year. Mining officials interviewed in 2024 described the company as a Wagner Group front, citing instances of political interference at the highest levels whenever efforts were made to hold it accountable for possessing undocumented gold.[63]

Sigma Resources CAR is also connected to Sigma Mining Corporation in Rwanda; both companies were registered by Pakistani national Saqlain Raza, who was involved in smuggling DRC gold from Kigali to Dubai, according to the UN Group of Experts on the DRC.[64] Raza has denied these claims.[65]

Weak CRM safeguards

Safeguards in the CRM sector are weaker than those governing high-risk minerals such as gold, and there is mounting pressure to relax them, a combination that is creating a more permissive environment for criminal activity. Due diligence frameworks, initially focused on gold or specific critical minerals such as the 3Ts, have gradually expanded to cover the entire CRM category.[66] In addition to the Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Due Diligence Guidance, which applies to all minerals, CRM-specific initiatives have emerged, notably at the EU level through the 2024 Critical Raw Materials Act and the 2023 Batteries Regulation.[67] Industry initiatives such as the Responsible Minerals Initiative and the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance have also developed standards to reduce the risk of financing armed conflict and other crimes.[68] Yet these frameworks contain systemic weaknesses and are unevenly applied, and their reach is being tested in the race for supply security.[69]

Moreover, these safeguards are less uniformly enforced with CRMs than in the gold sector, in part because of the difference in the attention these sectors – apart from the 3Ts – have received from civil society until recently. There are also concerns that the urgent need for access to critical minerals might lead to a disregard for the governance frameworks that underpin responsible mining. Under President Donald Trump, the US has weakened leadership on conflict minerals due diligence by supporting efforts to repeal section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform & Consumer Protection Act, a cornerstone of global 3Ts governance.[70] US policy statements and documents focus largely on national security and countering Chinese influence by restoring American dominance, with limited to no attention paid to environmental, social and governance standards.[71] In the DRC, such concerns are fed by criticism of some of the US investors, such as Virtus Minerals, for reportedly having no significant track record in mining.[72]

Challenges regarding artisanal mining

The structural vulnerabilities surrounding ASM provide one of the main entry points for organized crime into CRM supply chains. Research shows that the risk of criminal involvement varies with extraction methods, and that ASM is significantly more exposed than large-scale mining (LSM): production is dispersed, operators are numerous, extraction sites can be remote and state oversight is often difficult to maintain.[73]

In Central Africa, the artisanal extraction of critical minerals is already captured by criminal and armed networks. In eastern DRC, armed groups control artisanal coltan sites and the routes through which the mineral is traded. In Lualaba and Haut-Katanga provinces, artisanal and illegal cobalt and copper exploitation is protected by security forces and politically connected elites.[74] Although LSM remains the dominant mode of extraction for critical minerals, ASM is feasible for several of them – including the 3Ts, and cobalt, copper, lithium and nickel, all present in significant quantities across the region.[75]

The risk is that these dynamics will scale up as CRM production expands. Artisanal miners long active in the gold and diamond sectors are likely to move into critical minerals, either alongside industrial operations, as is already the case at some cobalt deposits, or as early entrants ahead of large-scale investment, notably in emerging lithium areas and in countries such as the CAR and Cameroon. The armed groups, traders and political patrons that already control artisanal gold and diamond economies are likely to follow, bringing established smuggling routes, financing networks and protection arrangements into new CRM supply chains.

In contrast, LSM operations require significant investments and infrastructure, and they produce large volumes of minerals that are challenging to traffic. A 2018 study assessed that the nature of the minerals found in Guinea was one of the reasons the country did not face widespread violence in the 1990s–2000s, unlike other resource-rich countries of West Africa.[76] Bauxite and iron extracted in Guinea were less attractive to armed groups than artisanally mined and easily smuggled diamonds from neighbouring Liberia and Sierra Leone. The same can be said of Gabon, where manganese exploitation has not been targeted by armed groups.



Miners carry bags of ore in the copper–cobalt Shabara artisanal mine near the town of Kolwezi, DRC, 20 June 2023. © *Arlette Bashizi/*The Washington Post *via Getty Images*

LSM is not immune to other types of criminal infiltration. Corrupt practices involving corporations and state actors, for instance, are widespread in the granting of mining permits. These practices include bribery, collusion, favouritism, political capture, undue influence, abuse of office and conflicts of interest, including those arising from opaque beneficial ownership structures or links to politically exposed persons.[77] Corruption may also facilitate related illicit activities, including smuggling, and tax evasion.[78]

Criminal risks

Across Central Africa, armed groups, politically connected elites, companies and state actors are using weak oversight, territorial control and opaque resource flows to capture revenues from critical minerals. As investment and demand grow, so will the rewards – and with them, the incentives for these actors to entrench and expand their control. Three risks stand out, each driven by a different set of actors: armed conflict, fuelled by armed groups competing for mineral-rich territory; geocriminality, in which states use criminal practices to pursue strategic objectives; and elite capture, through which political and security elites convert mineral wealth into private profit and political power.

Armed conflict

Increased mineral extraction has been directly linked to increased violence and conflict, with one study even finding that higher commodity prices correspond to higher probabilities of violence in mining areas.[79] The violence sparked by mineral extraction is often not limited to mining areas. A recent report by ACLED found that in the Sahel, nearly 90% of mining-adjacent conflict events occurred outside extraction sites in areas of broader economic activity,[80] while a 2017 study found that mining activity can contribute to the escalation of violence from local to large-scale.[81]

In the DRC, critical minerals have already been a major driver of armed conflict. Rubaya, in North Kivu, is one of the world's most important coltan-producing areas, estimated to account for more than 15% of the global tantalum supply, and it is under M23 control.[82] Establishing control over mineral-rich regions appears to have been a major driver for the advance of the Rwanda-backed armed group, as mining activities are key mechanisms through which M23 finances its political-military apparatus, secures local revenues and consolidates territorial influence.[83] M23 regulates access to mining sites, trade routes and collection points, and it facilitates the transfer of up to about 200 tonnes of coltan per month to Rwanda, where it is reportedly mixed with domestically produced material to conceal its origin.[84] The current situation represents a major loss of revenue for the Congolese government and has become one of the structural factors of the crisis between Kinshasa and Kigali.

There is a significant risk that similar dynamics will emerge in other countries across the region, particularly the CAR and Chad, where armed groups and local militias have long relied on their involvement in the gold and diamond sectors as a source of financing.[85]

Geocriminality

The competitive dynamics shaping the CRM market are also marked by systemic rivalry among major powers seeking to secure access, refining capacity and trade flows.[86] These dynamics heighten the sector's exposure to geocriminality, understood as the use of criminal practices by states in pursuit of economic, strategic or security objectives,[87] often involving hybrid warfare targeting natural resources.

Recent analyses have shown that Russia has deployed energy and climate-related disinformation campaigns as part of hybrid strategies targeting Europe.[88] Comparable influence tactics have been observed in the critical minerals sector. In Myanmar, influence operations have used armies of fake accounts, bots and AI-generated content on social media to exert pressure, promote economic interests or manipulate public perception of India's involvement in rare earths mining.[89] Similarly, cybersecurity firm Mandiant documented the Dragonbridge influence campaign, linked to Chinese interests, that targeted rare earth mining companies in Australia, Canada and the US in an apparent effort to hinder competitors and preserve China's dominant position in the global market.[90]

The same dynamic was recently observed in the DRC with the Lobito Corridor. From the perspective of its main backers, the US and the EU, the corridor is vital infrastructure for securing their access to critical minerals, notably copper and cobalt,[91] and in 2023 and 2024, the region became a target for hostile Russian influence operations. Africa Politology, the influence arm of the Wagner Group until it came under the full control of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service in December 2023, carried out a series of coordinated actions aimed at undermining the credibility, viability and legitimacy of the corridor.[92] Africa Politology carried out simultaneous actions in Angola, the DRC, Namibia and South Africa, disseminating fake documents, fabricating interviews, using paid commentators, manipulating local media and exploiting internal political divisions. The strategic intent was not secret: a confidential document from Africa Politology reviewed by the GI-TOC states that the aim was to introduce into Angolan public discourse the issue of Western countries' neocolonial motivations in the exploitation of the Lobito Corridor.

Elite capture

In countries where political and economic power is concentrated, weak accountability and institutional constraints can create conditions for the elite to capture political processes, consolidate their influence and secure privileged access to state resources.[93] In this context, members of the elite can influence

allocation decisions, secure access to revenues and convert access into a tool of political power, often by concealing beneficial ownership and engaging in corruption.

Examples from the DRC illustrate the pattern of capture of mineral revenues by the elite. Illegal artisanal extraction of copper and cobalt at ERG sites in Lualaba and Haut-Katanga has evolved into a quasi-industrial operation generating an estimated US$2 billion per year.[94] These operations persist because they are reportedly protected and facilitated by members of the security forces, provincial authorities and individuals linked to the political elite, who allow large volumes of mineral wealth to bypass the state and legal concession holders. Dynamics indicative of elite capture have also come to light in the emerging lithium sector, where cases of corruption and irregularities in the allocation of mining rights in the Manono area have been documented.[95]

Chad offers another example in relation to its growing antimony mining activities. Antimony, used in alloys, batteries, semiconductors and certain military applications,[96] has become a resource of significant economic and geopolitical value in Chad, and since 2024 its extraction has illustrated how a critical mineral can be co-opted by a political–security network, converted into private profit and channelled into opaque transnational circuits.[97] The antimony value chain in Chad raises concerns about transparency and oversight, notably regarding licensing, production, exports and the allocation of authorizations.[98]

In September 2024, an online news outlet claimed to have obtained confidential documents showing that antimony from Tibesti was being mined by people with close ties to the state's security and political apparatus.[99] According to the report, the profits from this mining do not benefit either the national budget or local communities, but instead feed a predatory system centred on a small circle of generals and elites. In the months that followed, further revelations gradually exposed a sophisticated scheme of plunder reportedly involving international companies, offshore financial networks and banks in the UAE and Hong Kong.[100]

The control of antimony mining and trade appears to be concentrated among a small group of military officials. At the two mining sites in the Tibesti region where high-purity antimony ore is found, several companies are reportedly owned by generals with close government ties.[101] Chinese, Turkish and Libyan intermediaries play a key role in marketing the ore, buying directly from the generals' companies before exporting to China and other countries, mainly via the port of Douala in Cameroon.[102]

The government's initial reaction to reporting on this topic was silence, interpreted as a form of denial.[103] It was not until February 2026 that a decree from the Ministry of Finance imposed a 2% statistical levy and a 12.5% mining tax on antimony exports.[104] Analysts view this measure as a tacit acknowledgement of the existence of exports that had previously been undeclared or deliberately concealed.[105] After this decree, the minister estimated that future annual antimony exports will be around 19 000 tonnes.[106] According to the Chadian Institute of Statistics, the country exported nearly 10 000 tonnes of raw antimony in 2025.[107]



Conclusion and recommendations

CRMs are reshaping governance, security and the global distribution of power, and Central Africa sits at the heart of this transformation. The region's cobalt, coltan, copper, manganese and antimony underpin technologies that are transforming modern life – from batteries and semiconductors to advanced defence systems – making the resilience and sustainability of resource supply chains a shared concern for countries pursuing decarbonization and digitalization. As the strategic value of CRMs grows, countries endowed with them are moving from the margins to a more central position in the global transition.

This shift creates new opportunities for many countries in Central Africa. Mineral wealth can strengthen their leverage with external partners, allowing them to negotiate more favourable terms, secure stronger development commitments and influence regional and international agendas. The DRC ambassador to the UN captured this changing reality in his statement to the UN Security Council in March 2026, placing his country 'at the very heart of this global issue' and declaring the DRC's commitment 'to work with all its partners in order to promote equitable, transparent and responsible governance of natural resources, in the service of peace, security and sustainable development'.[108]

But mineral wealth does not automatically translate into sustainable development. Across the region, geopolitical competition, structural weaknesses and persistent governance and regulatory challenges constrain states' ability to turn resource endowments into prosperity. Weak institutions, regulatory uncertainty and a deteriorating business environment can deter investment, while inadequate oversight and expanding illicit economies create opportunities for transnational organized crime networks – sometimes associated with armed actors – to exploit the growing attractiveness of critical mineral markets.

This report shows that critical minerals are already being captured. In eastern DRC, armed groups control coltan sites and trade routes, financing conflict and fuelling regional tensions. In the copper belt, illegal extraction worth billions of dollars a year operates under the protection of security forces and political elites. In Chad, antimony was captured by a political–security network within two years, its exports largely hidden from official records. In the CAR, actors linked to documented illicit networks

have secured exploration permits for critical minerals. And beyond the region, states are using criminal and hybrid methods to secure strategic advantage in the competition for supply.

The question, therefore, is not whether organized crime will penetrate Central Africa's critical mineral sector, but how far it will spread. As demand grows and investment flows in, criminal networks and their political protectors are positioned to expand their control from individual sites to entire segments of the value chain. The race for supply security compounds this risk. By prioritizing speed of access over transparency, and by trading minerals for security support, external partners risk entrenching the very actors that undermine governance and stability in the region.

For Central African countries, the key challenge is therefore how to use their mineral endowments to drive lasting economic transformation, strengthen institutions and improve livelihoods. This requires clear political choices and strategic priorities, as well as measures to address organized crime and the structural conditions that enable illicit activities to flourish. It also calls for a business environment capable of attracting responsible investment and ensuring that the benefits of the sector contribute to inclusive development.

This responsibility, however, cannot be the burden of Central African states alone. The global forces that have elevated CRMs to a strategic priority must also make their governance a shared international responsibility. Consumers, investors, trading partners, international organizations and other stakeholders therefore all have a role to play in promoting responsible sourcing, transparency, sustainable investment and resilient supply chains.

Recommendations

Central African governments should prioritize the fight against organized crime, including through measures aimed at preventing criminal networks from exploiting vulnerabilities along mineral supply chains.

Central African governments should adopt and implement comprehensive critical mineral strategies that place organized crime risk mitigation at the core of sector governance. Access to mining rights, public support, financing mechanisms and strategic mineral partnerships should be conditioned on compliance with robust transparency, traceability and due diligence requirements. These frameworks should mandate effective anti-corruption safeguards and credible supply chain risk-management systems. Artisanal and small-scale mining requires particular attention, as barriers to formalization can create opportunities for criminal exploitation. Enhanced cooperation between mining authorities, customs, financial intelligence units and law enforcement agencies is essential. Such measures can help ensure that the development of critical mineral value chains contributes to sustainable economic transformation and strengthens state legitimacy and governance outcomes; they can also create development benefits rather than allowing opportunities for criminal infiltration, elite capture and illicit enrichment.

GABAC and the FATF should integrate critical mineral-related financial crime risks into their assessment frameworks.

In light of the growing potential for critical mineral supply chains to facilitate money laundering, the financing of armed groups and terrorist activities, GABAC and the FATF should update their risk assessment and follow-up frameworks to reflect the strategic importance of critical minerals in Central Africa and the illicit financial flows linked to their extraction, trade, transport and export.

This will require GABAC to systematically incorporate critical mineral-related financial crime risks into its mutual evaluation and follow-up mechanisms and to support member states in establishing effective traceability, oversight and financial transparency systems. Such measures should be embedded across the mineral value chain, from licensing and extraction to processing, trading and export. Their purpose should be to identify the individuals, companies and networks that control, benefit from or capture illicit mining revenues, and to prevent the diversion of mineral wealth through opaque ownership structures and financial transactions. Financial intelligence units, anti-corruption authorities, tax administrations, customs agencies and mineral sector regulators should strengthen information sharing, suspicious transaction reporting and coordinated financial investigations. These efforts should be supported by appropriate safeguards for due process, data protection and fundamental rights.

Central African governments should strengthen integrity in critical mineral supply chains by banning direct or indirect ownership by public officials.

GABAC assessments of countries covered in this report highlight weaknesses in implementing its recommendations, particularly those relating to politically exposed persons (PEPs). To reduce corruption and illicit influence in critical mineral supply chains, Central African governments should prohibit direct or indirect ownership by public officials, require full beneficial ownership disclosure across the sector, eliminate undisclosed political interests and preferential access, subject traders and intermediaries to anti-money laundering obligations, and systematically pursue financial investigations linked to mineral smuggling and corruption. Central African states should prioritize robust frameworks for the identification, verification and disclosure of beneficial owners and PEPs associated with companies operating in the mining sector. Enhanced due diligence should apply to PEPs, as well as to their family members, close associates and linked companies, in accordance with applicable legal and regulatory frameworks. This should include systematic verification of ownership structures, identification of conflicts of interest, review of asset declarations, where applicable, and monitoring of transactions involving high-risk actors and jurisdictions.

Central African governments should strengthen enforcement against illicit mineral flows while hardening institutions against corruption and criminal infiltration.

Central African governments should equip mining police, customs and financial intelligence units with tools to investigate illicit critical mineral flows, while strengthening safeguards against corruption, collusion and criminal infiltration within enforcement institutions. They should support regional intelligence sharing and joint investigations to target networks, not just traffickers. Effective enforcement requires law enforcement agencies to have adequate resources, infrastructure and working conditions to carry out their duties safely and consistently. Governments should therefore prioritize the provision of essential operational equipment, including vehicles, communication systems, protective equipment, office infrastructure and other tools required for field interventions and investigations, in accordance with applicable legal requirements. Governments should ensure that existing equipment is properly maintained, replaced and regularly upgraded. Resources have limited value if they are not available and operational over time. Support should therefore include sustainable procurement and maintenance systems, reliable transport and communications, and adequate infrastructure for law enforcement personnel, particularly in remote or hard-to-reach areas where organized criminal groups may operate.

Finally, governments should strengthen institutional safeguards to prevent infiltration of state institutions and the legal mineral sector by organized criminal networks. This requires more rigorous vetting and monitoring of public officials working in customs, mining regulation, law enforcement and border management. In addition, effective asset-declaration and conflict-of-interest mechanisms should be promoted. These measures should be complemented by severe, predictable and consistently enforced sanctions – including substantial fines, confiscation of illicit assets, professional disqualification and, where appropriate, criminal prosecution – to create a credible deterrent against corruption and collusion.

Governments of mineral-importing countries should condition support for critical mineral projects on strict compliance with due diligence, anti-money laundering, anti-corruption, transparency and traceability standards.

In line with the G7's Évian commitments, governments of mineral-importing countries should align their political, diplomatic and financial support for critical mineral projects in Central Africa with robust governance and integrity standards. Access to such support should be conditional on full compliance with international requirements on due diligence, anti-money laundering, anti-corruption, transparency and traceability.

Building on existing instruments, including the OECD Due Diligence Guidance and the EU's Conflict Minerals Regulation, Batteries Regulation and Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, efforts should focus on improving coherence, implementation and enforcement, while addressing significant gaps in the coverage of critical minerals and relevant economic actors. Governments should develop an integrated governance framework connecting financial intelligence with mineral sector, customs, public procurement and commodity trading oversight.

Strategic competition – including security-for-minerals deals – must not come at the expense of exposing, disrupting and prosecuting criminal networks. Any of these arrangements must not protect illicit actors from accountability or allow a narrow circle of political and economic elites in importing and producing countries to capture the benefits.



Notes

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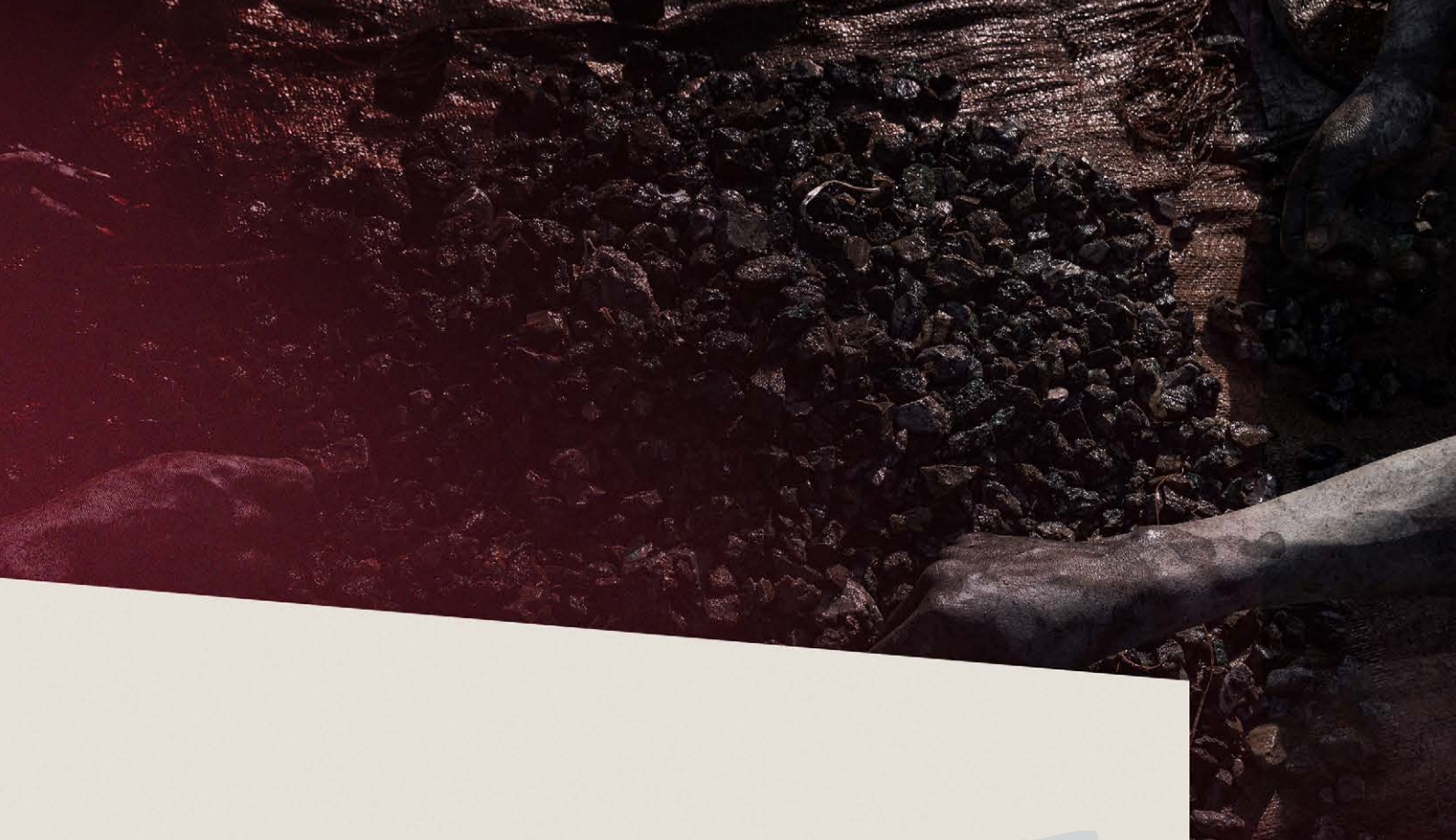
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