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AFRICA/CONGO DR - New American law on “conflict minerals” addressed by President of the Congolese Bishops' Conference

Kinshasa (Agenzia Fides) - “The Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the American Law on Conflict Minerals.” This was the title of a press conference held by Bishop Nicholas Djomo, Bishop of Tshumbe and President of the Congolese Episcopal Conference, today, August 2, at the inter-diocsean center of Kinshasa.

After explaining the U.S. law, the debate discussed the consequences of the new provisions in both Congo and the United States and the contribution offered by the Congolese Church and the U.S. Church, with the goal of creating a law to guarantee that minerals sold on international markets do not fuel African wars.

In late July, the U.S. Congress passed a new law regulating financial transactions. In the dense text (2,300 pages), a provision has been inserted that requires U.S. companies to disclose what measures are being taken to ensure that their products (including mobile phones, laptop computers, and medical equipment) do not contain the so-called "conflict minerals" from Congo, minerals sold on the international market by guerrilla groups that for over 15 years have been sowing death and destruction in eastern DRC.

It is a system similar to the "Kimberly Process," the system of diamond certification, intended to prevent international trade of gems from mines controlled by guerrilla groups in countries such as Sierra Leone and the DRC itself.

The main minerals traded illegally by guerrilla groups that operate on Congolese territory are tin, tungsten, and tantalum (which is derived from coltan, of which the DRC is the fifth largest producer), which are used in electronics and other products.

The new law requires American companies to submit an annual report to the Securities and Exchange Commission (who oversee the profits) which specify whether their products contain gold, tin, tungsten, and tantalum from Congo and neighboring countries. If so, should describe the steps taken to trace the origin of minerals.

The law imposes no penalties for companies who do not report on actions taken to prevent the purchase of "conflict minerals,” but the information must be made public on the companies' websites. Consumers can now choose whether to buy products that might contain minerals that finance the guerrilla groups that kill and rape civilians in eastern Congo.

Some experts have, however, stressed the difficulties in controlling the source of these minerals. Often, the illegally obtained minerals from the Congo are mixed with those extracted in other countries, to be sold on international markets. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 08/02/2010)

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