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REPORTER: Fran Abrams

PRODUCER: Andy Denwood

EDITOR: David Ross

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“FILE ON 4”

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ACTUALITY OF CONVEYOR

ABRAMS: Congo’s mines are coming back to life after a five year war in which four million people died – and during which the country’s mineral wealth was fought over by rebels and warlords. Now a new government’s been elected, but there are fears renewed plundering of the country’s rich resources could plunge it back into conflict.

ANNEKA: Congolese people say to me, ‘We are cursed because of our diamonds, because of our gold, because of our copper.’ For most of the Congolese people that curse continues today.

ACTUALITY OF GEIGER COUNTER

ABRAMS: And the state of anarchy that prevails here has given rise to another, even more dangerous business.

ACTUALITY OF GEIGER COUNTER

ABRAMS: We've just tested this with the Geiger counter. The maximum it's gone up to is 38 milliroentgens per hour. File on 4 has found evidence of an illegal trade in uranium – highly sought after by terrorists and rogue states.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY OF LORRIES

ABRAMS: I'm standing on the border between Congo and Zambia. It's a dusty, chaotic place where drivers wait weeks for clearance and where gangs of hungry children scavenge for scraps. If there's a graphic sign that Congo's mineral business is booming, it's here, among the fast food cafes and sleazy hotels that have sprung up around the hectic crossing-point at Kasumbalesa. There are literally hundreds of trucks waiting to cross – almost all of them laden with minerals, most with copper.

ANDERSON: My name is Anderson.

ABRAMS: Anderson? And where are you from?

ANDERSON: I come from Tanzania.

ABRAMS: What are you carrying?

ANDERSON: I am carrying copper. I'm off to port Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam port.

ABRAMS: You will drive all the way to Dar es Salaam?

ANDERSON: Yes, drive then I will offload there.

LEONARD: I am Leonard, I am from Zimbabwe.

ABRAMS: And what load do you have today?

LEONARD: I have got the copper, pure copper.

ABRAMS: Pure copper? Copper bar?

LEONARD: Yes. I am going to South Africa.

ABRAMS: It can take up to a month for a driver to cross if he can't afford to pay bribes. The minerals on these trucks are one key part of what defines Congo. But there's something else happening here that's just as central to this country's existence: crime and corruption.

HARVEY: Once you stop there, the kids – eight, ten years old – they steal all your lights, they steal your hoses, they steal anything and everything.

ABRAMS: And what about the copper itself? Is it safe on the truck?

HARVEY: No, it's not safe. The bag has been cut. They thought it's food inside.

ABRAMS: Food? They were looking for food?

HARVEY: Yes, they are looking for food. The conditions are bad.

ABRAMS: And do you have to pay to cross the border? Are they wanting money?

HARVEY: Yes, they are wanting money and it's bribes and it's everything, every twenty kilometres you travel the yellow-shirted police stops you, he is angry, he hasn't been paid for three months, he wants a bribe from you. My company gives me 440 US dollars and I get a thousand South African rand – everything that I have to pay, I pay it out of that money.

ABRAMS: Do you have anything left at the end when you have paid all the bribes and the fees and the tolls?

HARVEY: No, nothing, nothing at all. I have to borrow money.

ABRAMS: And there's a good reason why these drivers are prepared to wait days or even weeks to get copper and cobalt out of Congo. There's a huge market for this stuff, and in recent years the prices on the world's metal exchanges have shot up. Today they stand at £3,000 a ton – that's three times the 2003 level. Anneka Van Woudenberg, a Congo expert with Human Rights Watch, says it's a draw for mining companies from all over the world.

VON WOUDEBERG: Congo has been described by many mining companies as the most exciting place to be at the moment in Africa – an untapped resource from which they hope to be able to make a lot of money in the future. In the northern part of Congo you find gold, in the eastern parts of the country you find coltan, something that we find in mobile phones and in computers, and in the southern parts of the country copper, cobalt, diamonds more or less throughout the country, and of course other natural resources like timber. You name it, Congo has it.

ABRAMS: But all this mineral wealth doesn't stay in Congo. Most of it's shipped out raw, because the country doesn't have the facilities to process it, hence the queues at the border. Once it's crossed into Zambia the copper has to be sampled and tested before it can be sold and shipped on.

ACTUALITY IN SHED

ABRAMS: I'm standing in a huge shed with open sides, copper sort of piled up in one-ton bags around us, and what they seem to be doing is pouring the copper out onto the floor. It doesn't look like copper at all, it looks more like coal or soil. Big lumps of stone in it, and then they're shovelling it and bashing it with a mallet on the concrete floor of the shed to reduce down particles. And in fact you can see where some of the particles are breaking open, the bright green copper substance inside them. Supervising this assaying process is Magnus Jacobson, a chemical engineer.

JACOBSON: Our whole job and the purpose of the job is to establish the quality as a third party and as an independent source for the quality of whatever material is described, copper or cobalt.

ABRAMS: All this takes place under the watchful eyes of both buyer and seller. There are twenty loads in this shed today, all bound for China. The buyer's representative is Jonny Li.
And the material that's being sampled here today, where has it come from?

LI: It has come from DRC, Lubumbashi.

ABRAMS: From Lubumbashi?

LI: From here it is dispatched to Johannesburg. From Jo'burg on to China.

ABRAMS: To China.

LI: Yes.

ABRAMS: And what will happen to it once it arrives in China?

LI: We process it, pure copper. China's economy because very soon we'll be needing many many materials, you know, Chinese have many many factories in China, so we need many many materials.

ACTUALITY IN LUBUMBASHI

ABRAMS: This is Lubumbashi, back across the border in Congo. It's the hub of the mineral industry in Katanga Province. It's where the drivers come to collect their loads and it's where the deals are done. It's also the focus of growing concern about an illegal trade – in radioactive material.

MBOSHI: He was becoming thinner and thinner and very weak, he was suffering from intestinal bleeding and the first exams I've done, blood exams, revealed a high rate of white cells.

ABRAMS: Philippe Mboshi is a doctor who knows the signs of radiation-related disease. He first came across it when he treated a lorry driver who'd been transporting uranium in his truck.

MBOSHI: I was convinced that there was a relation between the work as a driver and the big bags containing uranium that he has been transporting in his lorry.

ABRAMS: What happened to this driver?

MBOSHI: Unfortunately he died.

ABRAMS: Are you still seeing those same symptoms now?

MBOSHI: Yes, I saw the same symptoms from miners working at Kambove, intestinal bleeding. Some miners were exposed presented goitre and hypertrichosis, an excess of bodily hair. It is an indication of high radiation. For some other people you can find there are spots on the skin.

ABRAMS: And what are the authorities doing about this?

MBOSHI: Not much things, because officially the trades of ores containing uranium does not exist and also the uranium mines are supposed to be closed.

ACTUALITY IN CAR

ABRAMS: We've left Lubumbashi behind now and we're heading into an area of quite lush countryside, which apparently is peppered with little mines. We have got to do this early in the day, because we've been told there have been

ABRAMS: So if it's dangerous because it has uranium, that's too bad because you need the money, you need to eat?

MAN: We are parents. We want our children to go to school, eat and something. If I stay at home, my family die. We have no choice. Sometimes you are sick. For you to go to the hospital, you've got to get money. You have not money, you see your children die because they can't go to hospital. If I die, no problem, but find money for my family.

ABRAMS: It's a remote area and life here is hard. There's no proper health clinic in this district and nobody has even tried to find out how many people are suffering from radiation-related disease. And these people are mining just a few miles from something far more sinister.

ACTUALITY IN COUNTRYSIDE

ABRAMS: I'm standing in the rain on a muddy road in the middle of the countryside. It's about as close as I can get to the mine of Shinkolobwe, which is guarded by soldiers and forbidden for entry. The mine's famous because, during the 1930s, miners here dug the uranium which was used to make the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. But in recent years there have been rumours that it was been worked again by local people using shovels and their bare hands.

ACTUALITY AT LIKASI

We've come to a little settlement of brick-built houses near the town of Likasi. It's about ten miles from Shinkolobwe. And we've been told there are people here who've been to the mine recently.

BINENE-MULAVI (VIA INTERPRETER): We went into the hole of Shinkolobwe. We went there on Tuesday and we went on the hole on Wednesday.

ABRAMS: Shinkolobwe was closed in the early 1960s and its deep shafts were filled with concrete. But Norbert Binene-Mulavi was one of a large number of local people drawn there more recently. Mining was again taking place on the site and dealers were paying four dollars for every 50-kilo sack that was filled.

BINENE-MULAVI (VIA INTERPRETER): We didn't have much money in our family, so we were obliged to go and look for some money. My elder brother and his friend was working in Shinkolobwe mining and he took us and we went together for digging and earn some money there.

ABRAMS: What did you know about the mine before you went there?

BINENE-MULAVI (VIA INTERPRETER): Of course, we went there for money. We didn't know that we weren't supposed to dig and to be in the hole, but for us maybe we thought maybe to just outside the hole, just dig somewhere and you earn some money. And we didn't know that we shouldn't be in the hole.

ABRAMS: Did you know that this had been a uranium mine?

BINENE-MULAVI (VIA INTERPRETER): We didn't know anything about mining, about uranium, we didn't know it before.

ABRAMS: Do you know who was buying the minerals from the site? Who bought them?

BINENE-MULAVI (VIA INTERPRETER): Right now I cannot say okay, this man buys or this one doesn't buy. So what I know is there's big mining companies here that buy things and export them abroad.

ABRAMS: Norbert and his brother were working with a gang of others, some as young as thirteen. The site was honeycombed with tunnels which had weakened the ground and left it dangerously unstable.

BINENE-MULAVI (VIA INTERPRETER): We were all working in a shaft and my brother sent me to buy an iceblock outside. But when I left the pit, the hole was moving, it was shaking. On my way back with an ice-block I was three metres into the shaft then it has collapsed. But my brother was far away, 100 metres deep, and it was really impossible for him to survive.

ABRAMS: Were you buried under the soil yourself?

BINENE-MULAVI (VIA INTERPRETER): There were other diggers just around us. To pull out from the soil it took us six hours. I was like a phantom, like a half-dead person, it's really strange to explain here. They brought many corpses to the mortuary, but we could not find the corpse of my brother.

ABRAMS: Norbert said the guards on the site, who were organising the mining activity, didn't even try to help. Some estimates put the death toll as high as fifty, but the grim truth is no-one really knows. The mining at Shinkolobwe was so uncontrolled, there was no way of knowing how many people were in the tunnel when it collapsed. A UN mission did visit the site. But it was too dangerous for them to go down the shafts, and they couldn't confirm uranium was being mined. They did say the whole area was highly radioactive.

READER IN STUDIO: All measurements taken showed high levels of radioactivity. There is no regulation or control of radiological protection. The site is littered with items that may well be heavily contaminated.

ABRAMS: The UN's team said the site should be cleaned up and secured. It wanted international agencies to work with the Congolese authorities to ensure better control. It was reported measures had been taken to prevent further mining. But later UN missions found little had been done to make the site safe. File on 4 approached three different UN agencies who'd been to Shinkolobwe, but none of them wanted to be interviewed. But we track down a geologist who had worked with the latest UN mission to visit the mine. Its report has yet to be published, but Rene Kitwa told us they'd confirmed mining was still going on.

KITWA: Officially they said that the mine is closed, but when we arrived on site we found some diggers who continue - not officially but in clandestine - to continue to dig the copper or cobalt ore that contains a high grade of uranium.

ABRAMS: Who would want to buy that very highly radioactive ore and for what?

KITWA: They know very well that this is a copper or cobalt ore that contains a high grade radioactivity, and they buy it, I don't know, it's for copper or for uranium?

ABRAMS: But it's possible people are buying it for uranium?

KITWA: Of course. There is plenty of copper without uranium in. If they prefer to buy copper or cobalt with uranium, it means they want to take also uranium.

ABRAMS: Officially, there aren't supposed to be any exports of uranium from Congo. But there's growing evidence of a traffic in radioactive material. There've been rumours the material could have been bound for Iran or North Korea, but none of them have been substantiated. It's an issue about which Mr Kitwa is deeply concerned.

If people are able to take materials as dangerous as uranium out of this country, what does that mean for its future stability?

KITWA: We know that uranium is a dangerous material. If we let people to have it, the country is not in security. When people buy material that contains high grade radioactivity, they can use it to make nuclear weapon. That is not very well for the security of the world.

ABRAMS: The UN's reported that in the past six years more than fifty cases of smuggled uranium have been seized in Congo. And four more consignments of uranium and cesium which left Congo illegally were seized by Customs at the Tanzanian port of Dar es Salaam. They'd travelled nearly a thousand miles across southern Africa by road. The UN's experts were clear about who was to blame:

READER IN STUDIO: The frequency of the seized consignments in the central African region leaves no doubt that the extraction and smuggling of radioactive material must be the result of organised efforts, and that these illegal activities must be highly rewarding financially. It is equally clear that the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo is at the very least tolerating these risks, since it makes neither any attempt to prevent access to the most important mining sites, nor does it credibly monitor the radioactivity of exported materials.

ABRAMS: We've seen documents which, if genuine, would suggest very senior people in the Congolese Government have been personally involved in this trade. And against that background it was always going to be difficult to control the materials leaving the country.

ACTUALITY OF LORRY NOISE

ABRAMS: In 2004, a British assaying company called Alex Stewart was awarded a contract - to test all exported minerals for radioactivity. But they ran into difficulties when they stopped a convoy of trucks owned by a major mining company.

TOMS: Several of the trucks were found to have radioactivity in excess of what we consider to be an internationally acceptable limit. We insisted that the material was not permitted to leave, and what would normally happen is that the specific radioactive material would be isolated and removed from the trucks.

ABRAMS: According to Alan Toms, Alex Stewart's manager in Lubumbashi, the radioactivity levels on some of the bags were forty times the limit allowed for export. The company concerned was called Chemaf. Its chairman, Shiraz Virji, a businessman formerly based in Britain, came to the scene with a number of his staff. They were adamant the trucks should be allowed to pass. Witnesses say one of them even brandished a gun.

TOMS: Mr Shiraz Virji was informed, he came with his personnel and he got very agitated. He was obviously requiring that his material would not be stopped and insisted that it would be permitted to leave. No shots were fired, but the threat was there.

ABRAMS: And what happened then?

TOMS: There was a government authority for the control of radioactivity called across from Kinshasa. What happened at the end of the day is that the trucks were permitted to leave.

ACTUALITY AT CHEMAF HQ

ABRAMS: We've come to the headquarters of Chemaf in Lubumbashi. We'd like to talk to its owner, Mr Shiraz Virji about what we've been told by Alan Toms. We'll have to see whether he'll talk to us.

Well that was very interesting, we've just spent about half an hour standing in the security office of Chemaf. We've asked to speak to Mr Virji and eventually we managed to speak to his secretary, who told us that Mr Virji was not here, couldn't speak to us and she was unable to give us any information at all. In fact she wouldn't even give us a telephone number, an email address or a fax number for the company.

We later found his email address and wrote to him, but we didn't receive a reply. Alan Toms says, despite difficulties with firms like this one, his company did manage to curb some of the trade in illegal radioactive material. But its relationships with mining companies continued to be fraught. And the government came under pressure to withdraw the contract altogether.

TOMS: There were several mining companies who effectively refused to use our services, and as a result a lot of transport was blocked. There were periods when up to a hundred trucks could be found at the border and the Governor had to find a solution.

ABRAMS: So in effect you were subject to a boycott by the companies?

TOMS: That's the correct word, yes.

ABRAMS: What was the decision?

TOMS: After much discussion and deliberation, Alex Stewart have no longer the rights to control for radioactivity the mineral products going out of the country. This is being transferred across to the OCC.

ABRAMS: Which is a government agency?

TOMS: That is the decision made by the interim Governor.

ABRAMS: What are your fears about that, given the history and given the lack of control – what are the risks of this current situation?

TOMS: You can see at the end of the day what happens in the next few months. Is Dar es Salaam going to find more radioactive material again? We don't know.

ABRAMS: Four weeks ago, UN experts called for temporary sanctions, which would force the Congo government to clamp down on the trade in illegal minerals – but its Secretary General rejected the suggestion.

ACTUALITY IN HOUSE

ABRAMS: In a cavernous ante-room at his luxurious home, Moise Katumbi, the newly elected Governor of Katanga province, is preparing to take office. He's a new broom - a former businessman who's become a popular political figure. He says this issue is a serious concern. But now he's in charge, he believes things will change.

KATUMBI: There is raw material going, I no want to lie. You have got uranium and what they are putting down the trucks you don't know, anything, you understand? If those material went that time, myself I didn't participate, I was in

BRUCE: It's the stuff of adventure movies, isn't it? I mean, there's a classic situation where all kinds of things are done under the counter. That's what intelligence is all about. But at the end of the day, do we really want state sponsored raids, which is one alternative, to take out supposedly terrorist or other kinds of threats, or do we want to try and establish an international rule of law or an institutional framework that will make it more and more difficult for that to happen? And ultimately what you need in these countries is a government that wants their country to be part of the international community, that wants it to develop, and for which the price is openness, transparency, good governance.

ABRAMS: We would also have liked to hear the Department of Trade and Industry's views on this illegal business, but no minister was available for interview. The uranium trade's disturbing – and it's indicative of a complete lack of control over the minerals that are dug up in Congo. But the truth is, the future stability of the country will stand or fall, not on this highly dangerous material, but on its most abundant resource – copper.

ACTUALITY IN KOLWESI

ABRAMS: This is Kolwesi. It's a copper town - and the signs of how central mining is to its existence are everywhere. Every street seems to have a mineral factory or a warehouse. Fifteen years ago, copper prices collapsed, and so did the state mining company, Gecamines. But now, with prices sky high again, Kolwesi's a boom town - even though the country's still far from stable. Not far north of here the Mai Mai rebels, infamous for extreme violence and even cannibalism, are still active. And last week renewed fighting broke out in the east of the country between Congolese and Rwandan troops.

Anneke Van Woudenbourg, Human Rights Watch's Congo expert, believes the country's reached a critical point in its development. She says it's vital that in these early days of its new democracy, it makes the best possible use of its mineral wealth.

VON WOUDENBORG: Mining companies have started to move into Congo. It's still pretty slow, but it's starting to pick up speed very very quickly and, with the elections now, this is going to speed up dramatically. Congo is the place where mining companies want to be.

ABRAMS: Isn't that a good thing for the country? A new government, a new democracy – they want that investment.

VON WOUDENBURG: Absolutely, Congo desperately needs business investment in order for this country to pick itself up and rebuild after this devastating war. But that business needs to be good business, it needs to be business that's going to help development, that's going to help the Congolese people, that's going to move this country away from conflict. What Congo doesn't need is bad business that benefits the elite, that is just murky in bad deals and that doesn't benefit the average Congolese person. That's not what Congo needs. Congo needs to really start on a new footing and I'm not sure that that's happening.

ACTUALITY OF MINING BELT

ABRAMS: We're standing in the middle of the most enormous pit that I've ever seen in my life. The bottom of it is a lake that's tinged greeny-blue, presumably from the copper. I couldn't even begin to guess how high the sides are, they must be hundreds of feet high. And they're stepped like terraces, it's just as if there was a huge mountain here once which is completely gone and it's been replaced with this enormous hole in the ground.

MUNANGA: What you see here is the Kov pit or the Kov mine, which has not been in operation for many years, over fifteen, and what you see here is water, natural from the ground or from the rain, which has accumulated over the years.

ABRAMS: Ben Munanga's the chief engineer at the Kov mine – recently bought by a British-registered group called Nikanor. After years of wartime neglect which left it flooded, the company hopes to restore it to its former glory. How much water do you have to pump out of here before you can begin to mine again?

MUNANGA: The quantity estimated is twelve million cubic metres.

ABRAMS: Twelve million cubic metres?

MUNANGA: It is a technical challenge, yes, but we are on track to do that. It's a very exciting project, a good mine, good reserves. We are ready to tackle the challenge. Everybody is excited about it, from the top executive to all the employees.

ABRAMS: Nikanor's already mining on other parts of its vast site – but Kov's the real prize. The company hopes eventually to employ two thousand people in and around Kolwesi. But some people fear Congo's resources may have been sold too cheaply.

FEENEY: The concessions, particularly the ones in Kolwesi, were regarded as the crown jewels of the Congo. There are some of the highest quality graded ore in the world and they are incredibly valuable.

ABRAMS: Patricia Feeney is the director of an Oxford-based campaigning group called Rights and Accountability in International Development, or RAID. She says Kov, which was abandoned following the collapse of the state company, Gecamines, is now key to the future of mining in Congo.

FEENEY: There had been great concern that during the war, important mining concessions had been changing hands and being held by people who had no real either capacity or interest to develop the mines for the long term future of the Congo. The recommendation to the government of the Congo was don't allow any more concessions to change hands, keep Kov above all, because this is going to help get Gecamines out of debt and lead to a productive future.

ABRAMS: But despite all the warnings, Kov did change hands. It went to Nikanor in a deal which experts say would leave Gecamines with debts and few returns.

FEENEY: None of the assets – ie, the actual copper and cobalt reserves which we know are vast – had actually been factored into the sale price. The long term benefits are all going out of the country, very few of the profits will be coming back

described to us as the crown jewels of Katanga was sold to a London-listed company without any tendering. Can you revisit that?

KATUMBI: No, you see the people are talking about Kov today, madam, is the people attacking that contract. Personally I can't attack that contract. I think it's one of the best contracts. If these people didn't come to get that contract, Kov didn't suppose to exist. I'm the Governor. If it was a bad contract I'm supposed to say it is a bad contract, but Kov I think is one of the best contracts.

ABRAMS: So you don't feel that in that case Katanga got a bad deal?

KATUMBI: No, no, it is not a bad deal, it was a great deal for Kov.

ACTUALITY OF SINGING

ABRAMS: The Governor's optimism isn't shared by all the citizens of Katanga. As they emerged from their Sunday morning church service in Lubumbashi, some of them expressed scepticism about what the future might bring.

MAN (VIA INTERPRETER): The Government must see the interests of people, not only their own pocket, but they have also to think of the general interest of the people.

MAN 2 (VIA INTERPRETER): There are so many mining companies here, but sometimes the contracts are not well signed with the Government, so we hope that in coming days maybe the Government can change.

MAN 3 (VIA INTERPRETER): We have so many mining companies here and it's only they are looking for their own interests, they come, they exploit people. Their only interest is their own profits.

ABRAMS: And Anneke Van Woudenbourg of Human Rights Watch also fears the Congo's future may not be as bright as some people hope.

VAN WOUDENBORG: I think it is still early days and it is why this issue is so crucial for Congo at the moment. It is essential that in this new era, in this post conflict environment, with elections having been held, that any investment coming into the country is going to be investment that will indeed benefit the Congolese people, that are contracts, that are legitimate, transparent, above board and contracts that show a certain degree of social development is going to happen. If Congo continues to repeat its history, if it continues to be that natural resources are not for the benefit of the Congolese people but actually are only there to benefit the elite, I fear that we'll continue to see conflict in Congo and that we're not going to see this country develop.

ABRAMS: And British companies are now key to Congo's future. No fewer than seven of its major mining groups are now trading on the London markets. And Malcolm Bruce, the International Development Select Committee chairman, says the British Government should be doing more to scrutinise their activities.

BRUCE: I'm a capitalist. I'm in favour of people making money. I'm in favour of people investing and getting a return. That's not a problem for me at all. But what I am concerned about is whether money is going to benefit a small number of people to a huge degree, to the detriment of millions of people who fundamentally, as citizens in a country, share the ownership of the assets by any moral or properly legal standards, and I have to say that a company that is prepared to sign a
BRUCE cont: contract in which the public accountability in the country in which that contract applies is not apparent, in which the beneficiaries are not clear, should find themselves in a situation of being asked to explain their justification for doing that.

ABRAMS: Again, we would have liked to have talked to the DTI about these concerns, but no minister was available for interview. In a statement they said if they received any complaints they would certainly investigate them.

SIGNATURE TUNE