

Different kinds of thieves

by GWYNNE DYER

What's the difference between smash-and-grab raids and protection rackets? Not all that much from the legal point of view, but protection rackets have a lower level of risk and a higher rate of returns.

Take Rwanda, for example. President Paul Kagame is running no personal risks, but the Tutsi soldiers of the M23 rebel army, which essentially works for him, are fighting an actual war in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

As in most African wars, civilians are dying in far larger numbers than the soldiers, but there is a real element of personal risk for the soldiers too. On the other hand, M23's soldiers are paid very well by local standards, and they have plenty of opportunities to loot.

If they also need a moral justification for their actions, as some may do, they can tell themselves that as Tutsis they are honorary victims of a genocide, although the real victims were Tutsis living across the border in Rwanda. (The Tutsi ethnicity also lives on the western side of the DRC-Rwanda border, in the North Kivu and South Kivu provinces.)

The current task of the M23 army is to seize control of the part of eastern DRC that borders Rwanda and steal the rich mineral reserves of that region: gold, cobalt, and above all coltan, which is essential for smartphones and almost all other sophisticated electronic devices.

This region contains up to 60 per cent of the global reserves of coltan ore, and it's easy to steal and market. It's dug out by tens of thousands of small-scale operators working landscapes honeycombed with shallow digs, and once it reaches Rwanda, they mix it with locally mined coltan and market it as a Rwandan product.

Stolen coltan currently accounts for a secret but significant share of Rwandan government income, but it's a typical smash-and-grab operation: lots of violence and a short-term perspective. At the moment they're doing well: M23 seized all of North Kivu last month, and has already conquered most of South Kivu this month.

Paul Kagame always sends some Rwandan soldiers along to back up the local thugs (4,000 Rwandan troops this time), but this is the third time in thirty years that Rwanda has sent its army into the eastern DRC to grab resources. Lots of people die, but it never lasts.

Whereas a protection racket is a long-term relationship: ?Nice little shop/country you've got here. You wouldn't want to see it smashed/destroyed now, would you? Just have the cash ready every Friday and nothing bad will happen to you.?

Or in Ukraine's case, just have half your mineral output loaded up for shipment every Friday and you won't be hurt.

?I want the equivalent of like \$500 billion worth of rare earths, and they've essentially agreed to do that,? Donald Trump says he told the Ukrainian government last week. The truth is that Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky knew the mob boss would be coming round for his cut, so he offered to pay even before Trump asked.

It caught Trump on the hop, so the first number out of his mouth in reply was \$500 billion. That's almost five times the value of US military and civilian aid to Ukraine since the Russian invasion three years ago (\$116 billion), but it's far less than Trump could really screw out of a country with its back to the wall.

In a couple of days, therefore, Trump upped the demand hugely ? but he followed Zelensky's suggestion that it should come out of Ukraine's future mineral wealth, since Kyiv currently has no spare money at all.

Trump said he now wanted 50% of Ukraine's future income from exploiting its reserves of rare metals and critical materials: titanium, uranium, lithium, beryllium, manganese, gallium, zirconium, graphite, apatite, fluorite and nickel. Half Ukraine's mineral income forever could be worth as much as \$5 trillion.

Zelensky didn't fall for that, so now they are in a negotiation. It's not just about the price Ukraine pays for survival, but also about what assurances Trump can give that paying off America will really guarantee Ukraine's survival.

The underlying difficulty is that the White House mob has farmed the enforcement work out to the Kremlin mob. The Russians may hate Ukraine enough to insist on destroying it even if Trump makes a deal with Zelensky ? which is far from agreed.

That's the downside of protection rackets. It's a crowded field, and there are always other rival mobs trying to spoil your play or cut you out completely. Don Corleone had to deal with problems like this in his (fictional) past, and Don Kagame has been handling them successfully most of his life. Don Trump is new to this game, and we shall see.