

## CONGO LIMITED / KONGO MIT BESCHRÄNKTER HAFTUNG

### Content

April 2004: Nowak, a grumpy, moderately successful Vienna-based lawyer, investigates a friend's dubious investment in a mine on the border to Rwanda. What initially looks like a routine hunt for funds of a transfer gone lost, quickly escalates: First, the mine's main shareholder – a long-time rookie investor in the region - is denied access to the mine. The following day he is arrested, accused of murdering the head of the local mining authority. - Nowak decides to head for Goma, capital of North Kivu, a region of constant unrest and venue of recent atrocities. Instantly, he finds himself in the midst of rival networks comprising rebel leaders, war criminals, politicians, surrounded by all sorts of international white-collar crime: After the peace agreement of 2002, Russian, Chinese and German investors are now battling for mining licenses. Besides, geopolitical interests are high on the agenda: Western honorary consuls and trade representatives aggressively pursue their – not least: private – goals by means of open corruption, fraud, as well as brute force and violence. Murder is just a minor concern in a region where coffee growers rebuild their farms and miners illegally dig for rare metals just to survive, whilst militias and child soldiers still maraud around.

Nowak, increasingly obsessed with finding out what happened, is dragged into a highly dangerous game, lacking any principles or rules, with most participants certain to lose out. - His presence in the region attracts the attention of the local governor, even a minister in the capital, next to several shady, criminal characters. Finding himself in a story of constant twists and turns, with almost everyone around lying, cheating, pursuing hidden agendas, Nowak is searching for facts, whereby one question increasingly bothers him: What role did his friend play in all this?

Setting and context of *Congo Limited* were carefully researched: The story, based on facts, could easily have played out that way.

In his first novel the author processed own experience in the region as well as such gathered in the world of international business and finance.

### The Author

For more than three decades Christian Schopper has been engaged in global banking and finance, foremost in emerging markets. Besides, he is member of visiting faculties for banking, finance and capital markets at several universities in Russia and the European Union. - *Congo Limited* is his first novel.

[www.christianschopper.com](http://www.christianschopper.com)

### Categories

- Crime Fiction
- Business Crime

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*“There are only (..) decent and (..) indecent people.  
- Precisely because we know that the decent are in  
the minority, everyone is called upon to strengthen  
and support this minority.”*  
Viktor Frankl

## **Background**

For years, I carried around the idea of writing *Congo Limited*: A few of the story’s episodes actually occurred, even though not quite so. And some of the story’s characters are still around, even though their genuine personalities may differ. - The story is fiction, though its essence based on facts.

In the early 2000s, I got myself involved in a mining project in Eastern Congo: It ended badly. - And it had to. Because I had no idea about the region: North-Kivu, sharing borders with Rwanda and Uganda, is one of the world’s most virulent regions, for over a century a hotspot of repetitive crises, violence, atrocities. Besides, even today, the DR Congo, a country three times the size of France, vastly lacks basic infrastructure: For instance, there is no road connecting the eastern provinces of the country with the capital. The only way to reach Kinshasa is by plane. - I had no idea about the country, neither its history, nor its political environment.

With my investment soon gone bust, I consoled myself that I had experienced an interesting episode in my life and had met a number of extraordinary characters: For example, this former Cuban general, once Che Guevara’s deputy in Africa. He had supported a rebel leader in the overthrow of long-term dictator Mobutu. That rebel’s name was Kabila. He became president, later succeeded by his son who only recently resigned. In recognition of his loyalty, the Cuban general received mining rights across a vast region, not too far from the border to Rwanda: In *Congo Limited* this former general is the template for the character of Javier. – Prock’s character, on the other hand, was inspired by a Viennese adventurer, entrepreneur, rookie investor. He had made good money in the East-West trade of rare minerals in the 70s and 80s, prior to the Perestroika. Thereby he got acquainted with mentioned Cuban general. They teamed up, decided to develop the mine together, with none of them actually ever having done something similar before. – Dietrichstein’s tragic character is based on an already deceased, once prominent and wealthy Viennese lawyer. Initially serving as Prock’s advisor, he subsequently financed the first stages of the mine’s development, even took out loans, wrote guarantees. Then disaster struck: The atrocities in neighboring Rwanda spilled over across Eastern Congo, the mining project went bankrupt and

swiftly the lawyer with it: He lost everything, including his license to practice law, subsequently living of social allowance and occasional donations by friends. – Nowak, the main character in the plot remembers a recently deceased lawyer, who had advised our investor consortium. - Based on these and other characters, factual events, and years of research, *Congo Limited* eventually developed, embedded in the historical context as well as the political, social and economic environment that one can still find today.

The other aspect that motivated me writing *Congo Limited* is the immense amount of white-color crime-related corruption that exists (not only) across emerging markets. No doubt, our mining project was a first-hand experience: Theoretically, the license alone was worth tens of millions of dollars. Were the project properly developed, then we could reap hundreds of millions. So we thought. And hoped. - However, our access to financial sources was restrained, not least due to geopolitical risk. Trouble began, when operators across the country were required to have their licenses confirmed due to the adoption of a new mining law. Upon this, eyes immediately turned to our project. Naively we believed we could defy the efforts undertaken by global mining majors to oust us. But of course: We had no chance. Neither financially, nor politically. - Long before, our adversaries had put together networks composed of rebel leaders, politicians, civil servants and – very important! - fixers, some of them former expats, trade representatives or honorary consuls. Latter acted as formally appointed advisors. The logic was clear: In the – unlikely - case any sort of irregularity, such as bribery surfaced, the fixer would be persecuted. Whilst the mining major could claim not being responsible for that person’s actions and – hence – remain in compliance with business standards and regulations.

Such networks have long histories: For instance, during times of unrest when access to our mine was restricted, a shady German had actually succeeded in illegally extracting ore from it. Subsequently numerous truckloads were sold on to rebels. A war crime. And even though this criminal’s name and his related activities were documented in UN reports, he was able to reactivate his network the very moment the peace agreement became effective and swiftly teamed up with a well-known miner. (How he had managed to get the support by tax payer-funded German agencies in times of unrest has always remained a mystery). In *Congo Limited* this criminal is referred to as Volkens.

Of course, corruption is these days much more sophisticated than just the hand-over of suitcases packed with cash: For years, for example, Russia

bought political and commercial influence through donations in kind and training programs, mostly military- and police-related. China has made entire provinces and regions economically dependent through infrastructure projects. In most cases, debtors will be released only once all expenditures related to these projects are redeemed: Usually, by delivery of ores or other commodities - at price levels way below market. *Congo Limited* extensively refers to that.

My initial aim was writing a crime fiction story without any bloodshed. A typical business crime: Committed from desks, during meetings, through documents and papers. – I didn't succeed: A murder occurs. However, that's not *Congo Limited's* central theme. (Regardless that I tend to believe that in many cases murder committed somewhere in remote Africa will unlikely be resolved by extensive forensic investigations or meticulously puzzling together a suspect's motive). – Instead, *Congo Limited's* focus is on (bloodless) crimes and misdemeanors related to stealing, extorting, grabbing a mine (an asset, which remains hidden far behind mountains, somewhere deep in the rain forest). In that regards, focus is on observing and accompanying a set of unique characters, their respective behavior, motives, interactions as well as their swift change of and accommodation to alliances, co-options, opportunistic co-operations. - Business crimes, such as diverting funds from a bank account or taking possession of an entire project, are usually (and simply) committed by a combination of falsifying documents, abusing trust, cheating or paying bribes. Whereby the sequence of steps is often carefully choreographed as well as implemented with stunning creativity. Therefore, *Congo Limited* is about phone calls, trips, meetings and paperwork as well as regulations, laws – and lawyers. - By no means boring, I hope!

Trust is a central theme in *Congo Limited*: Nowak, the story's main character, repeatedly fails in this regards, is caught on the wrong foot, slow in detecting people's hidden agendas, easily made to believe. His dismal experience seems to find its climax, when Nowak figures out that his sole long-time friend, a medical doctor he depends on due to his incurable illness, seems to have played foul. Only in the final stages and very reluctantly does Nowak overcome his basic views, stretch his ethical standard as he starts playing along. He knows, he has to do that if he wants to get to the bottom of things, achieve some sort of justice: But how far is he willing to go?

Eventually, *Congo Limited* is a story for the people in the region, many of them living in and working under incredibly appalling conditions: After the most terrible atrocities, cruelties and civil wars, now

many get back to work, rebuild their homes, their farms, their lives and – all too rarely – try to have some fun and joy.

The case of *Congo Limited* may never be entirely resolved. However, the newspaper clippings at the very end of the story help to close some of the gaps. Not least they are a reflection on the cynicism of our times.