

# Trading Diamonds for Guns



Rebel armies have swept through the diamond fields of Sierra Leone intimidating local populations through threats, rape, and dismemberment. (CIDA Photo: Shirley Clive)

2001-10-22

*Keane Shore*

*"In 2000, the international diamond industry produced more than 120 million carats of rough diamonds with a market value of US\$7.5 billion. At the end of the diamond chain this bounty was converted into 70 million pieces of jewelry worth close to US\$58 billion. Of total world production, rebel armies in Sierra Leone, as well as in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are estimated by De Beers to traffic in about 4 per cent. Other estimates place the number higher. Although not a significant proportion of the overall industry, four per cent of \$7.5 billion — or whatever other estimate one might use — can buy a lot of weapons."*

—Ian Smillie, Partnership Africa Canada (PAC)

Three researchers at PAC — a coalition of Canadian and African nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) — set out to show how ‘conflict diamonds’ were fuelling the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone. Their report, *The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds and Human Security*, has attracted worldwide attention since it was published last year and has contributed to major changes in the international diamond industry.

In 1999, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and several other donors supported a study by PAC of the Sierra Leone diamond trade and its international connections. The researchers — Lansana Gberie, Ralph Hazleton, and Ian Smillie — documented how rebels with Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) exchanged diamonds for arms and drugs in smuggling operations throughout West Africa.

### **Researching "Blood Diamonds"**

At first, publicly mapping the murky route of conflict diamonds — also called dirty diamonds and blood diamonds — from war zones to Belgian brokers to jewellery stores wasn't easy. Smillie says the first research was "like being in a fog at night."

Still the researchers persevered, gaining information and confidence. They documented how rebel armies have swept repeatedly through the diamond fields of Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sierra Leone, intimidating local populations through threats, rape, and dismemberment. The troops pirate vast quantities of rough gems and then smuggle their glittering plunder onto world diamond markets with the aid and complicity of leaders in nearby countries like Liberia.

The researchers found that years of strife in the region often had more to do with the economic self-interest of a few dictators and warlords than with political causes. "The whole point of the conflict is not to win it, but to continue to loot and steal," says Gberie.

### **Mobilizing Public Opinion**

*The Heart of the Matter* put a spotlight on the problem and aimed to mobilize opinion to stop the flow of conflict diamonds. Nevertheless, the writers were unprepared for the attention that came with the report's publication. Reporters and diamond industry representatives jammed an auditorium at IDRC's Ottawa headquarters for the report's release in January 2000, and PAC spent close to \$3,000 of its minimal project budget to ship copies to governments, organizations, and media. They reprinted twice in the first month to meet demand.

The findings were embarrassing, possibly damaging, to the industry and governments. For a few weeks, diamond industry representatives denied conflict diamonds were an issue. But PAC's report had built upon and publicized solid facts already unearthed independently by British NGOs, particularly Global Witness. One was that Liberia, with meagre diamond mines, was actively laundering and shipping thousands of carats of dirty gems to the big diamond markets of Antwerp, Belgium, and then on mainly to North American jewellers. The British civil society groups, with others in Sierra Leone and South Africa, helped roll out *Heart of the Matter* worldwide. Added steam came about three months later with Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations Robert Fowler's report on Angolan conflict diamonds to the UN Security Council. The industry accepted it could no longer ignore the problem.

"By then it had started to hit the mainstream. There was a critical mass," says Smillie. The UN Security Council began to take a major interest in Sierra Leone and its diamonds. When the Sierra Leonean RUF rebels kidnapped an entire army of UN peacekeepers in the diamond fields, reporters scrambled for background to the event and found *Heart of the Matter*.

## Helping Create Political Action

Next came the Kimberly Process, an international negotiation begun by governments of Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa to write an international pact to control the rough diamond trade and to bar smuggled conflict diamonds. Other national governments have joined, as have industry players and civil groups. The process has gone in fits and starts but continues, sometimes slowly. For PAC it has underlined the need for more research.

However, partly because of the work done by PAC, the UN Security Council placed an international embargo on all rough diamonds from Liberia. In addition, the increased scrutiny of Liberia's own bad behaviour has hampered its President, Charles Taylor, in his support to the RUF.

In the beginning, though, many told the researchers they were wasting their time. In 1999, the RUF had signed a peace agreement with Sierra Leone's government.

"Everybody said the war was over, so the issue of conflict diamonds was finished," Smillie says wryly. "We didn't know if the war was over, but we didn't think the issue of conflict diamonds — or just problematic diamonds — in Sierra Leone was over."

The war stayed alive in any case. Recently, the combatants in Sierra Leone signed yet another peace treaty, its effectiveness still unknown. Smillie says the latest treaty may make it harder for the RUF to smuggle diamonds with impunity, "but they still have access to the diamonds."

## Broadening the Research Effort

For PAC, the effort to quarantine blood diamonds hasn't been so much a campaign as a research effort, Smillie says. Now a second phase, also supported by IDRC, is probing beyond Sierra Leone into the Congo, southern Africa, and the business end of diamond trading, cutting, and polishing.

PAC will roll out a series of six new reports on other conflict areas where diamonds figure. The first, this fall, covers Guinea, where the RUF launched several brutal attacks in 2000. Its strategy was a carbon copy of its forays in Sierra Leone, and what Charles Taylor had done earlier in Liberia. Though it was reported as a political-military conflict, PAC has again found "significant economic motivators."

The next instalment, in January 2002, will cover Congo. The four that follow will examine the world industry and its markets. One will detail security and social lessons in Canada's diamond industry, where each diamond bears a microscopic laser-engraved trademark and serial number certifying its legitimate origins. Theft and subsequent resale are much harder. Canada has also laid groundwork to ensure indigenous people near its diamond mines in the Arctic Circle gain a fair share of their benefits.

"I think we will have pretty much done all of our work by the time this is over. There are a lot of NGOs and industry and government concerned with this. There will be a role for civil society and industry and government to play in the regulatory body for diamonds that we hope will be set up," Smillie says. "I think the UN realizes that if you don't get at the root of it, if you don't get at the way these people are paying for their weapons, it will continue. It isn't only diamonds — but you can't ignore the diamonds."

*Keane Shore is an Ottawa-based writer and editor.*

---

**For more information:**

**Ian Smillie**, 618 Melbourne Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada; Phone: (613) 728-9725; Fax: (613) 728-9725; Email: [ismillie@magma.com](mailto:ismillie@magma.com)

**Lansana Gberie**, Phone: (416) 946-0005; Email: [lg28@hotmail.com](mailto:lg28@hotmail.com)

**Partnership Africa Canada (PAC)**, 323 Chapel Street, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 7Z2; Phone: (613) 237-6768; Email: [pac@web.net](mailto:pac@web.net); Web site: [www.partnershipafricacanada.org/](http://www.partnershipafricacanada.org/)

**Partnership Africa Canada (PAC)**, PO Box 60233, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Email: [pac@telecom.net.et](mailto:pac@telecom.net.et)

IDRC supports PAC through its [Canadian Partnerships Program](#) and its [Peacebuilding and Reconstruction](#) Program Initiative.