



global witness

4 August 2010

DIAMONDS, SIERRA LEONE, A WAR CRIMINAL AND A SUPERMODEL

Background briefing on the trial of Charles Taylor at which Naomi Campbell will testify

What happened in Sierra Leone?

In 1991, rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) attacked Sierra Leone from Liberia, backed by Charles Taylor, a warlord who later became Liberia's president. The human cost of the conflict in Sierra Leone was staggering: tens of thousands of civilians were killed, two million people were displaced, and half of Sierra Leone's women were subjected to sexual violence including rape, torture and sexual slavery.ⁱ

Diamonds were not the initial driver of the conflict, but they were crucial to funding it. The revenues on offer in the diamond fields of eastern Sierra Leone provided a strong incentive for the rebels to keep fighting, and a cash base to buy weapons and finance their reign of terror. The RUF was able to smuggle the bulk of these diamonds out through Liberia – bringing in as much as \$125 million annually. That kind of money buys a lot of guns.

Sierra Leone is now at peace, but corruption remains endemic and poverty rife, with around 70% of the population living below the poverty line.ⁱⁱ Progress has been made in regulating the diamond trade, but large-scale smuggling continues and huge reforms are needed before the population can benefit from the riches beneath the earth.

What did Charles Taylor do?

Liberia experienced two brutal civil wars between 1989 and 2003. As rebel leader and later president, Taylor was the central figure in both conflicts, and responsible for appalling human rights abuses. He also aided the RUF in waging their campaign of terror on the civilian population in Sierra Leone.

Natural resources played a crucial role in fuelling both conflicts. Taylor gained control over Liberia's diamond trade, and combined this with revenues from Sierra Leone's diamonds to buy weapons for his own forces and those of the RUF. Timber became increasingly important to Taylor after UN sanctions were placed on the trade in diamonds, and the role of international timber companies in facilitating the conflict was crucial. Without access to these resources and willing international buyers, it would have been very difficult for Taylor and the RUF to continue fighting and brutalising the population.

Taylor was indicted by the Special Court of Sierra Leone in 2003 for his support for the RUF, and charged with war crimes including murder, rape and use of child soldiers.

What did diamonds have to do with it?

Natural resources fuelled the conflict in both Liberia and Sierra Leone. Former RUF rebels have testified that they sought to control diamond-rich areas in eastern Sierra Leone because they needed the gems to finance their war. In 2000, UN investigators found that diamonds from RUF-controlled areas were smuggled out into Liberia and from there onto the international market as if they were Liberian diamonds.

In 2000, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on the trade in diamonds from Sierra Leone in recognition of their role in funding the conflict. The following year sanctions were placed on diamonds from Liberia because of Liberia's role in laundering stones from Sierra Leone.

From this point on, logging became increasingly important to Taylor to fund the war and maintain power. International timber traders played a key role by providing a market for Liberia's conflict timber. In 2006, Guus Kouwenhoven, a Dutch timber baron and confidant of Charles Taylor, was convicted of arms trafficking to Liberia in a court in the Netherlands. Global Witness staff members testified at the trial. In 2008, this verdict was overturned. This year the case was referred by the Dutch Supreme Court back to the Dutch Court of Appeal for re-consideration.

Global Witness recently filed a claim with the French Public Prosecutor in Nantes against French logging company DLH, for purchasing illegally sourced timber from the Taylor government.

Why is Naomi Campbell being called?

It is alleged that Charles Taylor gave Campbell a diamond. The prosecution argues that if this can be proved then it would provide evidence for Taylor's links to the international rough diamond trade. Taylor denies having any such connections.

Charles Taylor was a dictator who plundered the natural resources of Liberia and Sierra Leone to finance brutal wars in both countries. Global Witness campaigns to prevent human rights abuse and the illicit exploitation of resources. It is imperative that all possible means of bringing Taylor to justice are explored, and that a message is sent to the world that such individuals will be held to account for their crimes.

The international interest in this episode has also thrown a welcome spotlight back on the issue of blood diamonds. Contrary to popular belief, this problem is not a thing of the past – diamonds are still fuelling abuse and conflict in a number of countries, in particular Zimbabwe.

What is happening now in Sierra Leone?

The country is at peace today, but it remains beset with problems. Corruption and unemployment are rife, and life expectancy is 48.ⁱⁱⁱ Efforts to increase transparency have been largely unsuccessful, and very few of the country's citizens see any benefit from its huge resource wealth.

There have been some reforms of the justice sector, but serious challenges remain: access to justice, lack of accountability, and an enduring culture of impunity must all be urgently addressed if Sierra Leone is to turn the page on its past.

And Liberia?

Progress has been made in some areas of natural resource management. The establishment of an independent General Auditing Commission (GAC) to monitor governmental institutions is a particularly welcome development. However, in its desperate attempt to rebuild the Liberian economy, President Johnson Sirleaf's government has broken its own forestry laws, and failed to implement the GAC's recommendations to improve governance in the mining sector. It currently risks a return to the corruption and mismanagement of resources that have blighted its recent past.

The government has also faced various allegations of corruption in its mining sector. The General Auditing Commission has criticised the Ministry for Land, Mines and Energy for its endemic lack of transparency and major weaknesses in the internal controls within Liberia's diamond sector. These weaknesses threaten the Government's ability to implement the Kimberley Process – the international diamond certification scheme to prevent the trade in conflict diamonds.

Liberia was recently granted debt relief by the IMF and World Bank as part of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Global Witness cautiously welcomes this move – but

without reforms to increase transparency, we fear that the benefits may well be lost to corruption and the population will continue to live in poverty.

The final report of Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission refers to economic crimes committed under Taylor's leadership and has recommended prosecutions. Global Witness looks forward to seeing this come to fruition.

Why does this kind of trial matter?

Those responsible for grave human rights abuses must be brought to justice. This trial will see Taylor held to account for the crimes committed in Sierra Leone, and send a strong message that dictators cannot use natural resource wealth to brutalise the populations that should be benefitting.

This episode has served as a timely reminder that the blood diamond problem has not yet gone away – as the current situation in Zimbabwe amply demonstrates.

So blood diamonds are still a problem today?

Yes – despite the efforts of the Kimberley Process certification scheme to eradicate blood diamonds from the international trade, diamonds are still fuelling conflict and human rights abuse in Zimbabwe. There are also problems in Angola and Côte d'Ivoire.

These diamonds are entering the international market – and because of weak controls and government oversight in countries participating in the Kimberley Process, it is very difficult for consumers to know definitively where their diamond has come from and what was done to obtain it.

So what is the Kimberley Process (KP)?

The KP is an international government-led certification scheme involving civil society, the diamond industry and participating countries. It was set up after the links between the diamond trade and civil wars in countries like Angola, Sierra Leone and Liberia were exposed by Global Witness and others.

Essentially an import-export control scheme for diamonds, it offers a strong incentive for countries to join and stay in the Kimberley Process, since members can only trade rough diamonds with other members. To join, countries must pass national laws and agree to meet the KP's minimum standards in order to guarantee that their diamond exports are conflict-free.

The KP has had a positive impact in a number of African diamond-producing countries, and brought a degree of transparency to the notoriously murky global diamond industry. However, it has not fulfilled its potential as a vehicle for change because too many member governments continue to prioritise political and economic interests rather than making serious efforts to end diamond-related abuses.

What's happening in Zimbabwe?

Three years ago one of the largest diamond finds in history was uncovered in eastern Zimbabwe's Marange area. This should have been good news for a country crippled by poverty and debt, and desperately in need of revenue for development. But instead a diamond rush by destitute citizens was swiftly followed by a savage government crackdown, as Zimbabwe's military-political elite sought to gain control of the country's new-found diamond wealth.

Over 200 informal miners were killed as the army moved in with helicopter gunships. Today, most of the Marange diamond fields are controlled by military syndicates. Civilians are forced to work in appalling conditions and subject to abuses including torture and rape. Diamonds from Zimbabwe are systematically smuggled out through Mozambique and South Africa. From there they are laundered into international markets.

Once again, diamond wealth is propping up a system of violence, abuse and illicit activity with horrendous consequences for a civilian population that should be benefitting from its country's natural resources. Global Witness has repeatedly called for Kimberley Process governments to take decisive action on the case of Zimbabwe – but so far the KP has not shown the political will to address the crisis in the country's diamond sector seriously.

What has the Kimberley Process done about it?

Not nearly enough. Despite the appalling abuses being carried out in Marange, Zimbabwe remains a member of the Kimberley Process. This crisis has driven the KP to the brink of collapse, with its credibility under scrutiny and fundamental flaws in its decision making processes exposed.

The scheme is run on a consensus basis, which has allowed Zimbabwe's regional allies to shelter it from suspension. This has resulted in a series of half-measures and compromises when decisive action was needed.

Recently, a deal has been struck which may mark a turning point. It allows Zimbabwe to export a limited number of Marange diamonds with KP approval, with any further exports conditional on measurable progress in demilitarising mine sites, ending human rights abuses and introducing proper controls on smuggling.

This last-ditch deal will only work if the Kimberley Process finally shows some teeth and is prepared to stand up for its rules and principles if Zimbabwe continues to flout them. Member governments should remember why the scheme was set up in the first place – to stamp out blood diamonds, not to advance political interests.

What about the companies?

The diamond industry's efforts to clean up the trade have been woefully inadequate. Governments shoulder much of the burden when it comes to KP implementation, and attempts at industry self-regulation have singularly failed to produce meaningful controls to help stamp out blood diamonds. This is particularly significant given that Kimberley Process certification only covers diamonds that are uncut and unpolished.

Zimbabwe's recent threat to defy Kimberley Process agreements and freely export Marange diamonds generated panic in industry bodies worried that fundamental weaknesses in the trade would be exposed. But if KP member governments and the diamond industry cannot enforce existing controls and set up effective oversight systems, the safeguards we have to prevent diamonds from bankrolling conflict and abuses are rendered meaningless.

The crisis in Zimbabwe's diamond sector has thrown into sharp relief the urgent need for credible far-reaching reforms of the KP and of the diamond industry.

So what can consumers do to make sure their purchases are not fuelling this kind of bloodshed?

It is very difficult for consumers to know for sure whether or not they are buying a blood diamond. To keep up the pressure and push for change they must ask serious, probing questions on shop floors, and continue to call for reform of the Kimberley Process and a real demonstration of willingness to address the problem from governments and the industry.

The KP must clarify its approach to human rights in the diamond sector, develop a more rigorous and independent capacity for monitoring implementation and put in place effective decision-making procedures. All these will require renewed political will and consumers can play a key role in pushing their governments – and diamond retailers – to get serious about stamping out blood diamonds. Until then, diamonds in countries like Zimbabwe will generate suffering rather than prosperity.

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- i United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, 'Conference Room Paper for the Country Specific Meeting on Sierra Leone' 10 October 2006, PBC/2/SIL/CRP.1 Paragraph 4-5; Physicians for Human Rights, War-related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone – A Population-Based Assessment, 2002, <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/documents/reports/sexual-violence-sierra-leone.pdf>.
- ii World Bank, 'Sierra Leone at a Glance', 12 September 2009, http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/sle_aag.pdf.
- iii *ibid.*