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Gems for guns

Blood still stains symbols of love

Conflict diamonds are leading ethical buyers into a minefield, says Nick Kettles

Sunday September 7, 2003

[The Observer](#)



Conflict diamonds illegally traded for weapons by rebel armies have contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in the world's war zones in the last decade.



The Unita guerrillas in Angola alone traded gems worth between \$3 billion and \$4bn in the mid-Nineties, says the charity ActionAid. Fighters in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo were also heavily involved in the trade.



The diamond industry wants to preserve its image as purveyors of symbols of love, and avoid the association with blood and war.

A new international agreement aimed at preventing illicit mining and marketing, the Kimberley Process, (see below) is flawed, say charities.

Bethan Brookes of ActionAid says the deal is a groundbreaking step in the right direction but 'provides no ongoing provision for regulation and impartial monitoring of member countries.

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'The commitment of high street jewellers to their customers over conflict-free jewellery can only be as good as the guarantees that accompany rough diamonds.' Without independent checks the guarantees can be worthless.

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- ▶ Luke Marriott, a partner at Wint and Kidd, a bespoke diamond retailer in Notting Hill, west London, says: 'It's very difficult to recognise where a diamond comes from once it's cut and polished, so unless I've brought it rough myself, I can't be sure. Conflict diamonds may still filter into the stream.'

The World Diamond Council has a system of self-regulation under which gems have a warranty as conflict-free, 'based on personal knowledge and/or written guarantees by the supplier'.

The scheme is backed by the London Diamond Bourse and Club (dealers), British Jewellers' Association and retailers in the National Association of Goldsmiths.

Yet it does not amount to a certificate of origin. So what can consumers do?

Anyone wanting certainty should buy Canadian gems, which bear a microscopic polar bear hallmark, though NGOs are against an all-out boycott of African diamonds, as the legal trade is invaluable to poorer states.

Last year Wint and Kidd set up the Positive Diamond Initiative, in which 5 per cent of the retail price of all diamond sales helps fund an Angolan orphanage.

www.actionaid.org, www.globalwitness.org,
www.kimberleyprocess.com, www.worlddiamondcouncil.com

The Kimberley Process

Forty Governments, including those of Sierra Leone and Angola, are participating in the Kimberley Process certification scheme, which provides the basis for tracking diamonds from the mine to the jeweller's window. Each shipment of rough diamonds must be sealed in a tamper-proof container accompanied by a government-validated Kimberley Process certificate. Shipments can only be sent to a participating Kimberley Process country.

In April a plenary meeting of the Kimberley Process set up a committee to assess if members met the minimum criteria. As of 31 July, only Brazil had not met the requirements.

The committee did not assess how laws and regulations were being implemented. NGOs hope the next meeting, in October, will establish ongoing independent monitoring. Even then, consumers will not know



if their diamond was mined in dangerous conditions, or cut by children for a paltry wage.



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