

THE CURSE OF ALLUVIAL DIAMONDS IN AFRICA

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Abstract

"A diamond is forever." Depending on where a person is from, this advertising slogan for diamonds can mean very different things. In consumer nations, a diamond symbolizes romance, love, and wealth. In the developing nations of Africa, many associate diamonds with violent atrocities and prolonged civil war. To those who have been murdered, mutilated, raped, and starved, to those who have suffered the effects of government mismanagement and kleptocracy, diamonds are regarded as the financial support for rebel armies and government elite. The gems have allowed both warring sides to engage in conflict and create a perfect environment for severe underdevelopment and humanitarian crisis. Sierra Leone, Angola, and Democratic Republic of Congo have all experienced the natural resource "curse," wherein rebel armies have exploited the land's resources, in particular diamonds, to finance war efforts and line the pockets of corrupt elite.

Globally, there is a pattern of conflict and violence in countries with abundant natural resources like timber, water, natural gas, oil, and industrial minerals. The wars over alluvial diamonds in Africa were particularly unique because diamonds are non-essential to human survival or comfort, and yet, they have resulted in three of the most brutal wars of the 1990s. Though abundant in rich diamond fields, Sierra Leone, Angola, and Democratic Republic of Congo remain today at the very bottom of the United Nations Human Development index. All three countries have similar histories of resource exploitation, government corruption, and civil war. Coupled with the political and economic situations and the wealth of alluvial diamond deposits, rebel armies waged their wars against these governments. Physical, economic, social, and environmental

burdens fall on the civilians, not on those fighting the war. Millions were murdered, mutilated, and displaced. The irresponsible and outdated mining techniques have left the environment heavily damaged. Areas covered by tropical forests have been clear-cut, bulldozed, and ravaged in the search for diamonds resulting in the loss of biodiversity and suitable agricultural land. This is a severe problem in regions where sustenance farming is the major nutritional support for many.

Even after war has concluded, positive development continues to be a problem. All three countries remain the world's leading producer of diamonds but remain the least developed. First, smuggling remains rampant, especially since alluvial diamonds can be so easily extracted from the ground. This takes away from legitimate government revenues, which it could be directing towards social programs and services for the people. Deaths are highest from starvation and disease, health problems that could easily be cured with adequate food and medical care.

The campaign against conflict-diamonds began around 1999 when the international community and the diamond industry realized the gems were the center of three major African wars. In January 2003, the Kimberley Process was implemented, requiring all diamond exports to be accompanied with a certificate proving the stones were "conflict-free." Although effective in deterring the conflict-diamond industry, the policy does have its flaws in monitoring, certifying, and smuggling.

History cannot afford to repeat itself at the expense of innocent civilians. The international community must work together to ensure these resource-rich countries of the world aren't taken advantage of by internal and external elite. These resources are the country's natural birthright and profits should be directed back to the people.