



# Diamonds and the civil war in Sierra Leone

Jon Spaul/Panos Pictures

The 10 year-old, brutal civil war in Sierra Leone has been seen largely as a conflict over the country's rich diamond resources. They have certainly fuelled the war but are they its primary cause? Or are fundamental grievances and social injustice at the root of the conflict? Does the focus on diamonds have more to do with protecting the legitimate diamond trade and the arms industry?

David J. Francis\*

## A flawed analysis

International attention has focused rather too much on how "conflict diamonds" are fuelling civil wars in Africa. This kind of analysis has been applied not only to Sierra Leone, but to the violent and protracted civil wars in former Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo - DRC) and in Angola. It is argued that strategic minerals such as diamonds, oil, copper and gold are fuelling wars in Africa because the proceeds from their sale are used to buy arms and drugs, and even to cultivate strategic alliances at home and abroad. This analysis establishes a link between diamond exploitation on the one hand, and criminal complicity between the international diamond industry and Africa's political elites, warlords and multi-national companies on the other.

## A flawed international response

The international community has responded by targeting conflict diamonds and denying them access to the world market. The rationale is that since greed is the cause and driving

*Child diamond miners near Kenema, Sierra Leone*

force for these violent civil wars, targeting the illicit extraction and sale of diamonds would be the best way to end them. I argue in this article that the international community has wrongly diagnosed the civil war in countries such as Sierra Leone. I believe that failure to understand the root causes of African conflicts has led to inappropriate international policy responses and misguided attempts to manage and resolve these civil wars. The problem has been over-simplified.

## "Conflict diamonds"

The expression "conflict diamonds" describes those diamonds that originate from territories controlled by rebel forces fighting to overthrow a legitimate and internationally recognised government. Some analysts expand the definition of conflict diamonds to include those that originate in areas controlled by government forces trading in illegal diamonds. The crucial element in the definition of conflict diamonds is the role played by the illegal diamond trade in fuelling wars in Africa. It is a role played by the rather unusual criminal networks (forged between rebel factions, warlords, corrupt politicians and so forth). Some people also use the terms 'blood diamonds' and 'war diamonds' to describe their currency.

## "Old wine in a new bottle"

The recent international debate on how conflict diamonds or strategic resources fuel wars in Africa is nothing new. It is more like an "old wine in a new bottle", because the exploitation of war economies, as represented by conflict diamonds, is as old as warfare itself. The wars in former Zaire and Angola in the 1960s and 1970s were about the domestic

and international exploitation of strategic minerals. But the role played by these minerals – diamonds, oil, uranium, cobalt, gold and copper – in fuelling conflicts was veiled during the Cold War because of the focus on East-West ideological conflict. But superpower rivalry in countries such as Angola and Zaire was not only about ideology and shaping post-colonial African diplomacy. At its heart was control over strategic resources.

### **A security vacuum**

The issue of conflict diamonds has only now become internationally prominent because a security vacuum has been created by the absence of superpower rivalry. This vacuum has been filled by the warlords, rogue states, arms and drug traffickers and multi-national companies, who have exploited the economic opportunities of globalisation. The case of Sierra Leone is a classic example of the exploitation of war economy. The emerging informal network of barter – arms for diamonds – extends beyond the borders of war-torn Sierra Leone to include neighbouring states such as Liberia. What we see emerging is a growing informal economy, inextricably linked to the globalisation of legal trade.

### **Diamond fortunes**

Conflict diamonds as the currency of war have generated huge personal fortunes for warlords, rebel movements and their regional and international clients. According to *West Africa* magazine, the sale of conflict diamonds by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group was estimated at \$70 million by 1999. In the case of the Angolan rebel group UNITA, an estimated \$150 million worth of rough diamonds was mined in UNITA controlled territories. In the DRC approximately \$35 million worth of diamonds were produced in rebel-held territories.

The proceeds from the sale of conflict diamonds have been mainly used to buy weapons. The son of the former president of France, Jean Christophe Mitterrand, is currently under criminal investigation for his role in the sale of arms to Angola. Men like Foday Sankoh of the RUF, Charles Taylor of Liberia and Jonas Savimbi of UNITA are alleged to have set up trans-continental smuggling and commercial networks that link them to the global market.

### **Fear of a consumer backlash**

The global significance of conflict diamonds has forced the international community to target them. The focus has been on how these civil wars are financed. Some analysts argue that international policy makers have neglected this aspect. In effect they say that economic motivations, as represented by conflict diamonds, are the primary cause for wars such as Sierra Leone's.

As a result western governments and NGOs have become involved in trying to make people more aware of the role played by conflict diamonds. The international debate brought to the fore the dilemma between the protection of the legitimate diamond trade and how to stop diamonds financing wars in Africa. The World Diamond Council has collaborated with diamond conglomerates and diamond producing and importing countries to organise a series of international conferences aimed at self-regulation. The fear of a consumer backlash, as happened to the fur trade, seems to be the driving force behind their proactive stance.

It would seem common sense that, if proceeds from conflict diamonds are used to purchase arms which rebel factions then use to continue the war, the logical step would be to target the arms industry. Few key western governments have made this constructive link between diamonds and the illegal shipment or sale of arms.

### **Fundamental grievances more important than greed**

Identifying conflict diamonds or greed as the main reason for the civil war in Sierra Leone is rather simplistic. But this is the analysis that has most influenced international policy responses to the conflict. The spectacular failures of the peace settlements in Sierra Leone lend support to the belief that inadequate understanding of the war has invariably led to inappropriate responses and ill-defined solutions.

There is no denying of the fact that conflict diamonds have fuelled and perpetuated the war. But that does not make them the primary cause. A more plausible explanation is that economic and political exclusion, perceived injustice and fundamental grievances are at the heart of conflict.

### **Banning conflict diamonds**

The rationale for denying conflict diamonds access to the world market is that it must reduce the profitability of war. It provides a useful entry-point for the international community. It is realistically 'do-able' – a short-term response with an exit strategy.

It is therefore not surprising that the international community has imposed a UN ban on buying diamonds from the RUF controlled areas of Sierra Leone and from Liberia, the principal backer of the RUF insurgency. This has led to the establishment of an international certification scheme to regulate the illegal diamond trade. The purpose is to deny the RUF the financial resources needed to continue their war.

### **Practical difficulties**

But will this kind of international response succeed? The certification scheme is fraught with practical difficulties because it might show only where diamonds were bought, not where they were mined. Furthermore the gems are small, portable and easy to hide. The porous nature of Sierra Leone's

borders and the continuing border skirmishes with Guinea and Liberia create major problems in implementing the scheme. Implementation does not extend to rebel-controlled territories and the RUF continues to control the diamond areas.

**Potential for violence would remain**

But even if the UN ban and international certification scheme were effective the question would remain: will the potential for relapse into further violence remain as long as the fundamental grievances and perceived injustices are unresolved?

The answer to this must be “yes”, because the civil war in Sierra Leone is not just about greed. It is essentially about fundamental political, economic and socio-cultural grievances. In support of this view I would ask: if diamonds were the primary reason for the war why did Sierra Leone not degenerate into civil war until 1991, even though diamonds were discovered in the 1930s.

**Protecting the diamond trade and the arms industry**

I suspect that the prime motivation behind the focus on conflict diamonds is the protection of the legitimate diamond trade and of the arms industry. This approach seems to have both a public and a private face. While the public face is about international efforts to help Africa, the private face also protects the legitimate diamond industry. It is clear that no constructive effort has been made to link conflict diamonds with the need to stop the illegal shipments of arms to Africa. There seems to be a limited concern about the role of arms smuggling and drug trafficking in fuelling the civil war.

This noticeable neglect gives the impression that the West is primarily concerned to protect the legitimate diamond trade against a potential consumer backlash and to safeguard

the arms industry. Both of these are multi-billion dollar commercial enterprises vital to their economies. Some cynics would argue that the political and economic self-interest of western governments is the driving force behind the campaign against conflict diamonds.

**Diamonds are not the only currency of war**

Extensive research on the exploitation of the war economy in Sierra Leone has shown that diamonds are not the only currency of war. The focus on conflict diamonds has neglected other aspects of the war economy. A complex barter system has evolved. Timber and agricultural products such as coffee and cocoa are traded by the RUF for arms and logistical support. Although the revenue generated from this trade is limited it does contribute to the perpetuation of the war. Closing world markets to conflict diamonds will only begin to be succeed if the other range of issues involved in the war economy are addressed.

**Obscuring the search for lasting solutions**

It is clear that the excessive focus on conflict diamonds is unhelpful in understanding the fundamental causes of the civil war in Sierra Leone. It has shifted the debate away from the traditional analysis of African conflicts as mere tribal or ethnic wars to a resource-based approach. At a speech last year to the German Foundation for International Development, the former finance minister of Sierra Leone, Dr. James Jonah, described the war as “simply about diamonds”. This is perhaps not surprising given the role played by key western governments in leading the campaign against conflict diamonds. Among these governments are Sierra Leone’s main financial backers. I believe that the excessive focus on conflict diamonds has not only diverted attention from a proper understanding of the funda-

mental causes of the conflict. It has also obscured the search for lasting solutions that lead to peace and development.

*\* David J. Francis lectures in the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University (UK).*

*Kamajors, pro-government militia force.*

Jon Spaul/Panos Pictures

