

SPECIAL COURT FOR SIERRA LEONE
PRESS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Enclosed are clippings of the latest local and international press on the Special Court and related issues obtained by the Press and Public Affairs Office as of:

Friday, February 25, 2005

The press clips are produced Monday to Friday.
If you are aware of omissions or have any comments or suggestions please contact
Ibrahim Tommy
Ext 7248
MOBILE: 232 76 645 914

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

EU: Press Nigeria to Hand Over Charles Taylor

European Parliament Calls for Taylor's Surrender to War Crimes Court

(Brussels, February 24, 2005) – The European Union and its member states should press for Nigeria to hand over former Liberian president Charles Taylor to the U.N.-backed court for war crimes in Sierra Leone, Human Rights Watch said.

Earlier today, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on the European Union and its member states to take immediate action to bring about Taylor's appearance before the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

The Special Court indicted Charles Taylor on 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in contributing to the death, rape, abduction, and mutilation of thousands of civilians during Sierra Leone's civil war from 1991 to 2002. Forced from power in August 2003, the former Liberian president is currently in exile in Nigeria.

"Today's European Parliament resolution calling for Taylor to be turned over to the Special Court is a welcome step," said Richard Dicker, director of the International Justice Program at Human Rights Watch. "The EU and its member states should press Nigeria to surrender Taylor. They should also support a Security Council resolution doing the same."

Taylor's continued presence in Nigeria not only undermines the principle that crimes against humanity in Africa should not go unpunished, but it also poses a risk to stability in West Africa, Human Rights Watch said. There are a number of allegations that Taylor remains in frequent contact with members of his former government, and that he also may be supporting an insurgency aimed at Guinea composed of fighters loyal to him. These include combatants from the former Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone, the Liberian Anti-Terrorist Unit and Special Security Service, and numerous Guinean dissidents.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone began operating in Freetown in July 2002 and is expected to function on a short time frame, approximately three years. It is funded primarily by voluntary contributions and has faced significant difficulties in raising adequate funds to operate.

"Taylor has been indicted for heinous crimes committed during the conflict in Sierra Leone, and he could continue to threaten stability in West Africa," said Dicker. "With the court's clock ticking, he should not be allowed to evade justice any longer."

The European Parliament resolution calls on the European Union and its member states "to build international pressure in order to bring about Charles Taylor's extradition." The resolution notes that EU member states have contributed more than \$30 million to support the functioning of the Special Court for Sierra Leone and that the European Union has contributed €800,000 to support the Special Court's work. The resolution also calls on Nigeria to turn Taylor over to the court, for the United Nations to work toward this objective, and for the U.N. Security Council to urgently take up this issue.

Background on Charles Taylor and the Special Court

Elected president of Liberia in 1997 after a seven-year war that ousted former president Samuel Doe, Charles Taylor gained notoriety for the brutal abuses against civilians committed by his forces in Liberia, and for his use of child soldiers organized in "Small Boy Units." Forces supported by Taylor have since been involved in conflicts

in neighboring Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire.

The Special Court has the power to prosecute those "who bear the greatest responsibility" for serious violations of international humanitarian law and certain violations of domestic law committed in Sierra Leone since November 30, 1996. The United Nations created the Special Court through an agreement with the government of Sierra Leone.

For Human Rights Watch's reports on crimes committed in Sierra Leone, see "[Sowing Terror: Atrocities Against Civilians in Sierra Leone](#)," and "[Sierra Leone: Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation, and Rape](#)."

For Human Rights Watch's letter urging Nigeria to hand Taylor over to the Special Court, please see <http://www.hrw.org/press/2003/11/nigeria-ltr11703.htm>.

Related Material

[Sierra Leone: Landmark Rulings Advance Justice](#)

Press Release, May 31, 2004

[Letter to President Obasanjo on Bringing Charles Taylor to Justice](#)

Letter, November 17, 2003

[Sierra Leone: Justice Undermined by Taylor's Absence](#)

Press Release, March 9, 2004

From: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/02/24/sierra10207.htm>

© Copyright 2003, Human Rights Watch 350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor New York, NY 10118-3299 USA

'How Kamajor laws sustained me' - *witness*

By Odilia French

In the ongoing trial of the CDF, witness TF2. 013 yesterday testified how the laws of the Kamajor militia group sustained him during the war. He said that after his initiation into the Kamajor society, "we were given rules and

regulations to abide by to help us go through the war without being affected." According to him, they were told not to kill innocent civilians; loot their properties; rape women nor eat certain food. The witness said that because he stuck to this set laws, "I survived the war

and no bullet entered my body." He said further that most of his friends were affected during the war because some ignored the laws; adding that others never adhered to the laws. Led in evidence by Prosecutor- Joseph Kamara, the witness also

Contd. Page 2

How Kamajor laws sustained me

From Front Page

explained how Kamajors killed one Chief Brima Conteh at Lalehun, Lower Bambara Chiefdom. The witness said that on that day, he was at the Security Post "looking out for enemies," when Chief Brima Conteh was brought to Lalehun from Tongo where he had been arrested by Chief Baimba Aruna, the Chief Hunter. He went on, "the Chief had a cement block on his head and the

Kamajors went with him round the town." He said that an order was passed by Chief Baimba to kill Chief Brima because he was the Chief of the rebels. When they came back from the town, he went on, the Kamajors took the Chief within some banana trees- not far from where he was sitting at the Post; adding: "I could see them clearly as the Post was on top of a hill and they were below me." Explaining further, he said that when

one Kamajor, Fayia Yamoto, summoned him, he saw that the Chief's head had been cut off. "The Kamajors then took the head of the Chief to town in celebration. It was taken from house to house and they finally dumped it at the home of the Chief Hunter," he narrated. The witness further revealed that he had an encounter with the first accused at the Bo Waterside where he addressed a meeting and an attack on Zimmi was planned.

Awoko

Friday February 25, 2005

The TRC, A Success or Failure?

We have raised the concern about those negative aspects in society which culminated into a bloody civil strife but which today have again started to resurface in the face of an abysmal retrogression and uncontrollable misbehaviour on the part of some members of the public.

The very essence of setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the wake of the end of the rebel wars being lost in the quagmire of total disregard of fair play and total disregard for the very tenets of the rule of law, otherwise, how can any one justify a violent confrontation between members of the same political party outside the seat of judicial power in the Law Courts of Freetown. If out of political considerations the very security of individuals is threatened and if it comes out clearly that political tolerance is still not part of the political culture then of course, one would begin to ask the relevant question as to why the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was brought into being in the first place.

There are some people who during the early days of the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission came up with the suspicion that if the TRC was given second place priority in the nation's effort to wipe out the scars of the war and to promote constructive reconciliation then, it was as good as not having a Truth and Reconciliation Commission at all.

When the Special Court gained dominance on the minds of the people as a way of promoting reconciliation and addressing matters related to impunity, there was no doubt that the TRC was actually going to continue to be seen as a sad number 2 institution in the race to bring about sanity into the country.

Furthermore, unlike what obtained in South Africa, the TRC in Sierra Leone was not homegrown in two respects, principally because those people who called the tune and those who determined who should be employed in the TRC were located in distant Switzerland, people who never understood the main causative factors for the war in Sierra Leone as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had no equivalent of Desmond Tutu in Sierra Leone.

For want of sensible research material to explain the war, Sierra Leone's donor partners, especially governments in the European Community and North America simplistically explained away the war as a series of battles for diamonds. This simplistic conclusion did not take into consideration of the fact that when the war was fermenting in readiness for eventual explosion, only four districts out of twelve districts and the Western Area could actually be described as active diamond mining districts and these districts included Kenema, Kono, Bo and parts of Pujehun.

How it could be assumed that the battles that were fought in the non-diamondiferous districts of Bonthe, Moyamba, Tonkolili, Koinadugu, Kambia and Bombali were also blood diamond battles, defies all possible logic.

True, Charles Taylor and Foday Sankoh discovered that in their escapade to seize political power by force, they also traversed diamond-mining areas and because of the breakdown in law and order, both the NPFL and the RUF found a good occasion to enrich the leaderships of those two organizations.

But it is very simplistic to reduce the whole argument of the war to just diamonds, for there were other factors that created hate, animosity and deep seated grudge nursed by the citizens for other reasons that had nothing to do with diamonds.

A good number of Sierra Leoneans still remember how the politics of exclusion created a crop of angry Sierra Leoneans who assumed that they had been deprived of their rights to participate in the administration of their own country. Those people who attempted to use legitimate means to challenge the excesses of political exclusion were ostracized, totally deprived of the rights of participating in the political process.

In the area of unacceptable governance, many Sierra Leoneans still remember the large number of citizens who spent long years at Pademba Road Prisons for no other reason than the fact that they were perceived as enemies of the system.

Indeed, a good number of citizens, out of purely political consideration, were deprived of their lives

True, Charles Taylor and Foday Sankoh discovered that in their escapade to seize political power by force, they also traversed diamond-mining areas and because of the breakdown in law and order, both the NPFL and the RUF found a good occasion to enrich the leaderships of those two organizations. But it is very simplistic to reduce the whole argument of the war to just diamonds, for there were other factors that created hate, animosity and deep seated grudge nursed by the citizens for other reasons that had nothing to do with diamonds

in the most cheapest of manners when highly respectable members of the community, highly educated Sierra Leoneans who were seen as a threat to the status quo, were made to hang like pigs when they were executed by the state.

The point must be made that political executions contributed to a state of anger among the populace and contributed to the fermentation of a state of unrest far more than the quest for diamonds by rudderless rebels.

At a time when Sierra Leoneans were queuing up for rice or petroleum products, some holders of public offices were basking in wealth, giving rise to a development that led to a total state of anger, especially at a time when the state could not provide utilities as basic as electricity and radio and television information.

The collapse of discipline in public offices also created a clear-cut picture that state administration had collapsed. And such a collapse of administrative discipline could be witnessed down to the rural level where Paramount Chieftaincy administration had forfeited all the respect that such a system deserved. But it should also be noted that the high handed behaviour of some of the tribal chiefs who inflicted excessive punishment on their subjects and who seized property belonging to their subjects only succeeded in creating a situation of tension even at

the rural level.

There were cases of land disputes which actually created disharmony within the rural areas because some powerful chieftains wickedly confiscated land that belonged to the poor, even when such poor people were the rightful owners of the land and there was no central point of seeking redress, again, an indication that Sierra Leone was gravitating towards a state of unrest.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission must also have heard stories of how powerful men deliberately took over the wives of their subjects and in the process creating a situation of anger and animosity among the youths. The high handedness in state administration when diamonds belonging to citizens and money that rightly belonged to other hard working citizens were all illegally confiscated in the name of an economic emergency. The economic emergency itself only succeeded in enriching only a few greedy people, creating a forum for what eventually became the violent ten-year rebel war.

Today, we have started to witness once more public violence, we are beginning to also witness the politics of intolerance and we are also beginning to witness the nursing of hate to such an extent that one cannot be sure of what type of security that lies ahead. Perhaps, this will compel us to ask the question—have Sierra Leoneans benefited from the efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

Can we actually conclude that Sierra Leoneans have reconciled with each other even in the face of a sad situation in which members of the same political party can afford to openly draw daggers at each other and creating mayhem and fear in the seat of power, the national capital? Can we convince ourselves that we are truly reconciled with each other when a man who claims to be a member of a certain political party incites members of one tribe against the party of which he claims to be a member?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission may have concluded its work, but did that Commission actually succeed in coming up with acceptable suggestions aimed at ensuring that an atmosphere of peace is created in a cohesive state?

The answer to this question is not easy to find, but what is clear is that there are still too many angry people in our midst as the politics of exclusion and confrontation resurfaces in a country that needs peace and harmony more than any time before.

But perhaps, the public complaint that the TRC Report has not been treated seriously and its recommendations hidden under the bushel can now be legitimate concerns if this country should be stopped from reverting to a state of lawlessness as was exhibited recently by some so-called politicians.

Nobody has suggested that the small time Bishop in Freetown, Bishop Humber, is equal to the Nobel prize winning Bishop, Desmond Tutu of South Africa, but still, however small Bishop Humber's stature and status are and however poorly funded his Commission was still, his Report should be read to members of the public to teach Sierra Leoneans that peace is paramount in this nation's quest to promote happiness among the citizens and prosperity among the same citizens.

Halloran's Conviction

A Turning Point

COMMENTARY By Mohamed and David A. Jabati Jr.

The 18-month jail sentence slammed this week on Special Court investigator and Australian police officer, Peter Halloran by the High Court of Sierra Leone confirms that the law is no respecter of persons, status or nationality notwithstanding.

The ruling also marks a milestone in the history of the justice system in Sierra Leone. That Mr. Halloran was found guilty

of indecent assault of a 13-year-old girl and sentenced is indeed epoch-making in the annals of prosecution for sexual-related offences in this country in the sense that

such a crime is normally condoned under the country's traditional customary laws and practices. It is considered fairly

SEE BACK PAGE

COMMENTARY

acceptable in Sierra Leone for a man of Halloran's age to have sexual relations with a 13-year-old as long as the man provides for the girl and her parents. This is nauseating but it's the truth.

The ruling came as a big surprise to many Sierra Leoneans as it is unusual for the courts in this country to hand down such a sentence on an influential foreigner, without yielding to any local or international pressure. Cases of this nature have tended to be settled out of court.

We therefore, see the ruling as an encouraging sign that Sierra Leone's judicial system, or at least part of it, is functioning.

The judgment against Mr. Halloran is somewhat embarrassing for the Special Court in that one of its investigators of criminal offences has himself been jailed for committing such offences.

But the Special Court's embarrassment is eased by the fact that the court itself conducted the preliminary investigations into the matter when it officially came to light and referred it to the Sierra Leone Police for further investigations.

The Special Court could conceivably have succeeded in sweeping the matter under the carpet by asking for immunity for Mr. Halloran in view of the fact that the court is of a superior nature to the local courts of Sierra Leone. But despite such vast powers, it allowed Mr. Halloran to be prosecuted under the laws of Sierra Leone. This means that the Special Court has a lot of respect for our judicial system.

But could the case have reached this far had one of Halloran's colleagues at the Special Court not blown the whistle? We doubt it extremely.

The parents of the minor made attempts to kill the case notably by attempting to change the original statements they made to the police in respect of the matter, in a clear bid to keep Mr. Halloran out of trouble.

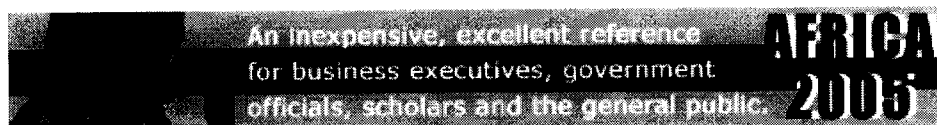
Mr. Halloran himself was also believed to have offered to pay compensation to the family so as to drop the case; an offer that the parents are said to have been enthusiastic about.

Meanwhile, as the Halloran drama continues to ignite interest in the pages of the international press and its television screens, we urge the judiciary to continue prosecuting the matter in an honest and sincere manner as the convict makes his appeal. The case presents a good opportunity to showcase to the world the fact that here in Sierra Leone, justice can be meted out without fear of favour.

Sierra Leone Times

Friday February 25th

2007



Charles Taylor's Cronies Seek Asylum in Zimbabwe

Liberian Observer (Monrovia)

NEWS

February 23, 2005

Posted to the web February 24, 2005

Monrovia

About 100 Liberians, all kinsmen of the ousted former dictator are reportedly living lavishly in Zimbabwe.

Reports out of Harare, Zimbabwe today suggests that about 100 Liberians, all kinsmen of ousted former strongman, Charles Taylor, have found a new home in Zimbabwe.

According to ZimbabweNews.com, the Liberians are said to be living lavishly in Harare's Avenues area and in uptown suburbs stoking speculation that Taylor and his close associates and family members looted Liberia's wealth before leaving their impoverished country.

The Liberians left their motherland after Taylor was forced out of Monrovia to pave way for peace in the West African country. While Taylor was offered sanctuary in neighboring Nigeria as part of the peace deal, his kinsmen left for various destinations. Most have now found their way to Zimbabwe where they are now seeking political asylum. The international community forced Taylor to step down and settle in exile to facilitate a peace deal between government forces and armed rebels known as the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). Taylor was also indicted by a United Nations backed International War Crimes' Tribunal for atrocities that were perpetrated in Sierra Leone in the early 1990's by the late Foday Sankoh's notorious rebel group which enjoyed support from Monrovia. He remains a free man because conditions of the Liberian peace deal signed to end the civil war do not permit anyone to arrest or harass him as long as he is in Nigeria and has not interfered in the internal politics of the country he ruled since 1991. The peace deal appears to be holding a year since it was signed.

Lifestyle raising eyebrows

Where is Taylor now?

He currently resides in Calabar, in the far south-east of Nigeria. He was offered asylum by the Nigerian Government.

A time trail

1989: Launches rebellion

1991: RUF rebellion starts in Sierra Leone

1995: Peace deal signed

1997: Elected president

1999: Lurd starts rebellion to oust Taylor

2004: Bows to pressure and goes into exile

Taylor's close family members were also allowed free passage from Liberia as part of the deal. The lavish lifestyles of Taylor's kinsmen in Harare have raised eyebrows. Several of them have suddenly started flourishing business enterprises around Harare and are often seen driving posh vehicles even before many of them have been granted refugees' status by authorities. Many have not yet appeared before the refugees' vetting committee, which comprises officials from the security organs, social welfare department and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). "What surprises me is that these Liberians can afford to buy posh cars even though they have not yet been given refugees' status," said one refugee close to one of Taylor's relatives seeking asylum in Zimbabwe. "They are staying in expensive flats and living large." The Liberians reportedly refused to stay at the Waterfalls Transit Center where asylum seekers awaiting refugees' status normally stay preferring to stay on their own in upmarket places around the Avenues area. Asylum seekers normally prefer to stay at the transit center where they are given basics such as accommodation, food, medical help, clothing, blankets and security.

"Very few asylum seekers"

Officials at the Harare offices of the UNHCR said they did not wish anybody to write about the presence of Taylor's kinsmen in Zimbabwe as this could endanger them. Isaac Mukaro, the Zimbabwean government commissioner for refugees in Harare, was said to be on leave and could not be reached for comment. However, a senior official from his office confirmed the presence of the Liberians saying: "Some of them have appeared before the vetting committee but the majority have not. Those who have appeared before the committee have been given refuge status." The official added: "Very few asylum seekers, including from other countries, have been denied status." He declined to give figures of those who have been granted status and those turned down. "We do not give away these figures just like that, he said. Zimbabwe is also home to former Ethiopian dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, who fled Addis Ababa as rebels led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi closed in on Addis Abbaba in 1991. Mengistu and his family are living luxuriously in Harare's upmarket Gunhill area at the expense of Zimbabwean taxpayers.

Copyright © 2005 Liberian Observer. All rights reserved. Distributed
by AllAfrica Global Media (allAfrica.com).



News

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: AFR 51/004/2005 (Public)

News Service No: 045

24 February 2005

Sierra Leone: Ending impunity and achieving justice - Amnesty International's message to the National Victims Commemoration Conference

Amnesty International welcomes the initiative taken by the Special Court for Sierra Leone to organize the National Victims Commemoration Conference on Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Freetown on 1 and 2 March 2005. This is an important opportunity for the people of Sierra Leone to assess to what extent the Special Court is contributing towards an end to impunity for some of the worst crimes ever known and also to determine what more needs to be done to achieve justice for all victims and their families for crimes committed during a decade of internal armed conflict.

The Statute of the Special Court provides a mandate to prosecute those *"who bear the greatest responsibility"* for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law committed during Sierra Leone's armed conflict after 30 November 1996. Its jurisdiction therefore does not include all those who committed crimes under international law throughout the 10-year conflict. Only 11 of the very large number of people suspected of committing these crimes have been indicted. Two of them, including former Liberian President Charles Taylor, have yet to be arrested and surrendered to the Special Court.

Since August 2003 Charles Taylor has been harboured by the Nigerian government in violation of its legally binding obligations under international law. Its decision to grant refugee status to Charles Taylor violates Nigeria's obligations to surrender a person indicted for crimes under international law or to submit the case to its prosecuting authorities. The Nigerian government must arrest Charles Taylor and surrender him to the Special Court.

While prosecuting a few of those responsible for these crimes is a major contribution towards ending impunity in Sierra Leone, it is only a partial response. More needs to be done. While Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been important in providing a forum for victims and perpetrators to recount their experiences, creating an impartial historical record of human rights abuses committed during the conflict, identifying the reasons for those abuses, and facilitating reconciliation, it cannot be a substitute for a court of law to try alleged perpetrators of serious violations of international law.

An essential element of providing justice to the victims of human rights abuses is the

[NEWS Home](#)

[News](#)

[Reports](#)

[En Español](#)

[RSS News Feed](#)

[RSS Reports Feed](#)

[Africa](#)

[Find Region](#)

[Afghanistan](#)

[Find Country](#)



**Your Gift
Makes a
Difference**

Please join our
special Stop

Violence Against Women
Campaign. Your generous gift
now will help us save lives and
spread the word.

[Donate Now. »](#)

LATEST NEWS

**UN Commission on the
Status of Women Must
Identify Ways for
Governments to Deliver on
Commitments of Beijing**
Feb 24, 2005

Russian Federation: European
Court of Human Rights ruling
on six cases from the Chechen
Republic
Feb 24, 2005

Sierra Leone: Ending impunity
and achieving justice - Amnesty
International's message to the
National Victims
Commemoration Conference
Feb 24, 2005

Maldives: Put human rights
the heart of the political reform
process
Feb 23, 2005

[More News »](#)

LATEST REPORTS

Iraq: Decades of suffering, but
women deserve better.
Feb 21, 2005

Sudan: Amnesty International

provision of reparations. Amnesty International was disappointed that the Statute of the Special Court did not follow the example of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court by authorizing the Special Court to award reparations for victims of crimes within its jurisdiction, including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition. Such reparations are integral to achieving justice for the victims and also assisting them to rebuild their lives.

The national justice system needs to be able to work to ensure that all those who committed horrific crimes during the conflict, but who are not among the small number indicted by the Special Court, are brought to justice and that their victims have access to reparations. In this, the "legacy" bequeathed by the Special Court to the national justice system - which continues to face serious challenges in providing effective and efficient administration of justice - is crucial. Although the Special Court cannot by itself turn around the struggling national justice system, its presence, example and resources should be an important catalyst for and reinforce a committed, long-term strategy to end impunity and build an effective system of justice for the future.

A major stumbling block, however, is the general amnesty included in the 1999 Lomé peace agreement and subsequently enacted into national law. This amnesty, however, cannot apply to crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law. In a historic decision in March 2004 the Special Court refused to recognize the applicability of the amnesty provided by the Lomé peace agreement and concluded that it did not prevent international courts, such as the Special Court, or foreign courts from prosecuting crimes against humanity and war crimes. For impunity to be successfully challenged in Sierra Leone, the amnesty provision must be removed from the statute books.

A landmark and lasting legacy of the Special Court would be if its example were to be followed and the death penalty removed from Sierra Leone's statute books. The discrepancy between the Special Court, where the maximum penalty which can be imposed is a period of imprisonment, and the national courts, which continue to pass death sentences, needs to be removed. The Sierra Leone government should follow the example of the Special Court, as well as implement one of the key recommendations of the TRC, and abolish the death penalty.

For further information, see *Special Court for Sierra Leone: Statement to the National Victims Commemoration Conference, Freetown, 1 and 2 March 2005* (AI Index: 51/002/2005), 1 March 2005.

recommendations on the deployment of a United Nations peace support operation
Feb 20, 2005

Sudan: Open letter to the members of the United Nations Security Council: The situation in the Sudan
Feb 20, 2005

Nepal: A long ignored human rights crisis now on the brink of catastrophe
Feb 17, 2005

More Reports »

[Home](#) | [About](#) | [Mission](#) | [Contact](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [RSS](#) | [AI Worldwide](#)



It's not just a place on the map.

Sierra Leone: Diamonds Shine Brighter, But Remain Dull

UN Integrated Regional Information Networks

NEWS

February 24, 2005

Posted to the web February 24, 2005

Freetown

Sierra Leone, a country whose name has long been synonymous with conflict diamonds, has improved transparency in its diamond trade but has a long way to go before earnings from the precious stones benefit all the country's impoverished citizens, according to a new report.

The Ottawa based Partnership Africa Canada, which has undertaken regular research on diamond mining in Sierra Leone, and the Freetown based Network Movement for Justice and Development, released the second edition of their Diamond Industry Annual Review for Sierra Leone on Wednesday.

Their report praises the government's Gold and Diamond Department (GDD) which values diamonds for export and levies diamond export taxes, saying it functions, "with a level of transparency and professionalism unmatched by other institutions in Sierra Leone."

Official diamond exports almost doubled to 126 million dollars last year from \$74 million in 2003, but the report said this owed more to external factors forcing diamond sales to be conducted through legal channels than a clampdown on contraband diamonds within Sierra Leone.

"Hardly anyone, including government officials, attributes (the rise in diamond exports) to internal curbs on illicit diamonds mining and smuggling, both of which continue to thrive," said the report.

Citing figures from various sources, the report estimates that anywhere between \$30 million and \$170 million worth of diamonds were smuggled out of Sierra Leone last year.

However, the government's direct tax take from the diamond mining industry remains small. Its three percent tax on diamond sales brought in less than \$4 million last year.

A quarter of that went to the treasury, another quarter went back to local government in the mining areas, another quarter went to pay for the running costs of the Government's Gold and Diamond Department (GDD) and the remainder went to pay external values, GDD Director Lawrence Ndola Myers told IRIN.

Until Sierra Leone's civil war ended three years ago, virtually no diamond revenue passed through government hands.

Instead, the gems paid for the guns and drugs that fuelled Sierra Leone's brutal 1991-2001 civil war. The shallow alluvial deposits of eastern Sierra Leone can be easily mined with a pick and shovel and the gemstones are easily smuggled out of the country's porous borders.

The Diamond Industry Annual Review said the introduction of the Kimberley Process, an international

control system to certify the origin of diamonds sold in the world market, was the biggest single factor pushing more gemstones from Sierra Leone through the legal trade route last year.

The Kimberley Process Certification System was launched on 1 January 2003 by diamond-producing countries to develop an international certification scheme for rough diamonds, in order to prevent conflict diamonds - such as those mined illegally in Sierra Leone, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo - from entering legitimate markets.

The report also quoted Sierra Leonean diamond control officials as saying that the spectacular increase in official diamond exports in 2004 was also due to improved security situation in the country.

Refugees and other people displaced internally by the civil war had returned to their home communities where they could now work the alluvial diamond mines without threat, it noted.

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel movement had previously controlled the main mining areas in eastern Sierra Leone and had used illicit diamond sales to fund its war effort.

The report also noted that the traditional route for smuggling contraband diamonds out of the country via Liberia had been shut down since former Liberian president Charles Taylor, the main external backer of the RUF, had been forced to quit power in August 2003.

Although Sierra Leone's foreign exchange reserves have improved as more diamonds are sold through legal channels, the government itself derives little revenue from the mining industry and the thousands of men, women and children who get down on their hands and knees to find the gems still lead a difficult life.

Dirty work

Artisanal diamond mining accounts for 90 percent of the country's diamond exports and is Sierra Leone's second employer after subsistence farming.

The report estimated that 120,000 people work as diamond miners, but stressed that few of them strike it rich.

"In addition to hard work, the life of a diamond digger is one of exploitation. Written contracts and terms and conditions of work are non-existent, child labour laws are not enforced, health and safety regulations are either non-existent or are ignored," the report said.

The Canadian-funded report depicted the Sierra Leone diamond economy as a "casino economy," with most people gambling on finding a large diamond and diggers "betting" on a share of the "winnings".

Bubakar Ba Marra, a man in his forties with a large family to feed, is one of these.

Every morning, he and hundreds of others like him trudge out of Koidu town, the centre of the diamond mining industry, towards nearby gravel pits, equipped with their shovels and sieves.

"I cannot read, I cannot write, I don't have anything else to do other than mining to feed my five children and my wife," Ba Marra told IRIN.

"I sold one diamond for one million leones (\$2,900) last year and I have found none since," he added.

Ba Marra has been mining diamonds for 15 years.

Many other miners start as children. The US-based Christian charity, World Vision estimates there are

some 10,000 child diamond miners in Sierra Leone.

Big bucks for the select few

The contraband diamond trade, like the legal gemstone trade, is mainly controlled by the large Lebanese community in Sierra Leone. For decades that has had a virtual stranglehold over commerce in the West African country.

"Large parts of the industry are monopolised by a relatively small group of people who dictate the price of rough diamonds, reap most of the economic rewards and exploit those in the production chain below them," the Partnership Africa-Canada report said.

In 2004, a company owned by Hisham Mackie -- a Sierra Leonean-born Lebanese trader -- exported almost half of all diamonds that passed through the official process in Sierra Leone, it noted.

"Sierra Leone diamonds are for the Lebanese," one Sierra Leonean diamond exporter who left the country for Guinea because of ferocious competition from the closely-knit Lebanese community, told IRIN.

However, the Canadian-funded report noted that the combined market share of Sierra Leonean diamond exporters, was on the rise, thanks notably to Andre Hope, a Sierra Leonean lawyer and businessman who ranked second with 19 percent exports last year.

Deep diamond deposits promise rich pickings

Deep mining of high grade diamonds buried in Kimberlite pipes of rock far beneath the surface is still in its infancy in Sierra Leone.

There is only one large industrial mining company in the country producing diamonds in this way and Kimberlite diamonds represented only 11 percent of official exports in 2004.

But the prospects for setting up more of them are good, especially since Sierra Leone has diamond deposits of a consistently high quality "with an average run-of-mine carat value that is higher than almost any other diamond producing country in the world," according to the report.

Government officials told IRIN that several more international mining companies were preparing to establish operations in Sierra Leone.

Kimberlite deposits were discovered in the late 1940s, but were not exploited because of the country's abundant and more easily accessible and alluvial deposits, which could be mined on the surface simply by sifting gravel in river beds.

Deep mining operations, which require heavy investment, finally began in 2003 as peace returned after the civil war.

Koidu Holdings, a company which is 60% owned by Geneva-based Steinmetz Diamond Group, launched the initiative and has so far pumped \$21 million into opening two Kimberlite diamond mines in Sierra Leone.

It now claims to be the largest diamond mining venture in the country. By August 2004, Koidu Holdings had announced total exports of 46,000 carats, valued at \$9 million.

The company's activities also benefit the state, with 40 per cent of its profits going to the government in the form of corporation tax, surface rent and royalties.

A good start, with more to do

"Clearly, Sierra Leone requires the investment that such companies can bring in order to develop the diamond deposits buried deep in kimberlite pipes," the Partnership Africa-Canada report said.

"Most of the problems of today's diamond industry in Sierra Leone boil down less to willful corruption and mismanagement than to challenges of governance and procedure," the report said.

"State capacity is still weak, and there is a culture of bureaucratic tardiness. Government oversight in almost every matter is still significantly limited. Until there is a radical change in these respects, there will continue to be problems with the diamond industry."

But the government remains positive: "The talk that diamond is a cost to the nation no longer stands. Things have changed. Now it is a blessing," said Ndola Myers of the GDD.

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations]

Copyright © 2005 UN Integrated Regional Information Networks. All rights reserved. Distributed by AllAfrica Global Media (allAfrica.com).
