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Sierra Leone: Amnesty International calls for fast and effective action on diamonds

Amnesty International is today calling on the United Nations Security Council to move quickly and effectively to prevent the flow of arms to the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, whose forces continue to perpetrate systematic human rights abuses against civilians. Military assistance to the RUF is largely funded by the trade in diamonds from rebel-held areas.

A draft resolution now being considered by the Security Council would ban the export of all rough diamonds from Sierra Leone until the government of Sierra Leone can establish a proper certification system for diamonds and regain full access to the diamond-producing areas currently under the control of the RUF. It would also require all countries to report to the Security Council what they have done to enact legislation making it a criminal offence to transport or deal in arms and ammunition to the RUF, in compliance with earlier Security Council resolutions.

Amnesty International remains concerned about the role of Liberia in the transfer of arms and ammunition to Sierra Leone and of diamonds leaving Sierra Leone. Amnesty International is reiterating its call to the Security Council to investigate the origins of diamonds exported from Liberia and other countries in West Africa to ensure that these are not from rebel-held areas of Sierra Leone. The draft resolution calls for hearings within a year on the role of diamonds in the Sierra Leone conflict. The panel of experts proposed in the draft resolution to be established and to report to the Security Council sanctions committee on Sierra Leone on any violations should have full

access to all information from governments in the region, governments in those countries where the main diamond trading centres are located, and the international diamond trading and manufacturing community.

These measures have gained urgency because progress towards cutting the link between the trade in diamonds from Sierra Leone and the provision of military assistance to the RUF remains disappointingly slow.

Amnesty International neither supports nor opposes punitive measures such as economic or other sanctions, disinvestment or boycotts, but in specific instances opposes military, security and police transfers which contribute to serious human rights abuses. Such transfers include equipment, technology, training or personnel, as well as financial and logistical support for such transfers.

Amnesty International recognizes the recent initiatives from governments and the international diamond industry to prevent the trade in diamonds from funding military assistance to armed groups who are responsible for human rights abuses.

Amnesty International remains concerned, however, that the proposals under discussion within the industry do not take into account the magnitude of the human rights crisis in Sierra Leone. The steps taken so far are necessary, but not enough, Amnesty International said.

The decision of the diamond-trading communities of Israel and India to expel any member which trades in diamonds from areas of conflict and the Belgian diamond trade initiative to work with authorities in Sierra Leone and Angola to evaluate the source of diamonds are both welcome. Without a transparent system in place, and effective monitoring of it, however, these initiatives will not be effective.

Given the scale of human rights abuses during Sierra Leone's internal armed conflict, Amnesty International expects a far greater sense of urgency from the business community involved in the diamond trade and governments. The seven-point plan agreed by the governments of major diamond importing countries in London on 28 June continues to place faith in medium- to long-term solutions to address the continuing human rights crisis in Sierra Leone. There is particular concern that some steps remain voluntary in nature, and that others are still at an exploratory stage.

"The grave human rights crisis in Sierra Leone demands effective action now," says Amnesty International, "not just in the medium and long term."

Amnesty International is calling on governments and the diamond industry to remain focussed in their efforts to develop a comprehensive, transparent and verifiable system, including a worldwide tamper-proof certification, packaging and monitoring system. The target of such a system should be the identification of those diamonds which provide resources to armed forces to acquire military assistance which in turn contributes to human rights abuses.

Without such a system in place, the recent initiatives by governments and industry groups will continue to be ineffective.

* Amnesty International acknowledges that Belgium, as the world's leading diamond trading centre, publishes more detailed statistics about its diamond trade than other diamond bourses. Amnesty International calls on Belgium to publish statistics of diamonds entering and leaving Belgian territory by the country of origin. In order to do this, the Belgian government should require members of the Antwerp diamond bourse,

and the Hoge Raad voor Diamant, (Diamond High Council) to take stringent measures to identify the country of origin of diamonds. Other diamond trading centres should provide similar statistics in a transparent manner.

** Amnesty International also calls on the United Kingdom (UK), as the host of the meeting of major diamond importing countries in London on 28 June, and as the main proponent of an embargo on diamonds from Sierra Leone, to require UK-registered companies that engage in diamond trading to divulge the country of origin of the diamonds which they import, and make trade statistics of diamonds entering and leaving the UK by country of origin widely available.*

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