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Sierra Leone: Cutting the link between diamonds and human rights abuses "forever"

"Diamond manufacturers and traders, meeting in Antwerp, Belgium, from July 17-19 for their annual congress, must take new and effective action to sever the link between diamonds from rebel-held areas and weapons used to commit human rights abuses in Sierra Leone", Amnesty International said today. "Further delays lead to the possibility of more mutilations, amputations, and deaths."

Since May this year, when the long-standing crisis in Sierra Leone captured the world's attention, governments and the industry have announced a series of measures which aim to prevent so-called conflict diamonds from entering the international market-place. The United Nations has imposed sanctions on diamonds from Sierra Leone, unless they are certified as conflict-free by the Sierra Leone government.

The Diamond High Council (Hoge Raad voor Diamant) of Belgium is going to work closely with authorities in Sierra Leone and Angola to evaluate and verify diamonds. The Israeli and Indian diamond bourses say they will bar any member who knowingly trades in conflict diamonds. And De Beers, the industry's leading mining and marketing company which had in February announced that it would not buy or sell conflict diamonds, has now declared in a new strategy that its clients will have to meet high ethical standards and maintain the conflict-free guarantee through the supply chain as part of its business reorganization.

It is clear that some actors in this discussion have strong commercial interests in how the trade is structured and regulated, including the question of handling existing stockpiles of diamonds. However, for Amnesty International the priority issue must be urgent

and effective action to break the link between diamonds and human rights abuses. In particular there is a need to ensure effective scrutiny on the trade through Sierra Leone's neighbouring countries, Guinea and Liberia.

"Antwerp is not in the international spotlight because diamonds are being 'rebranded', or because the industry is trying to become more efficient, but because it is forced to clean up some dirty business," Amnesty International noted.

"The world is watching because the human rights of civilians continue to be abused in Sierra Leone with weapons bought with money from diamonds and few of the measures and policies being discussed by the industry effectively break this link."

The new measures were clearly necessary but they are not sufficient because there is no clear way to verify the industry's recent commitments.

"What is needed is transparency now," Amnesty International said. "There can be no excuse when lives and limbs are at stake."

"Traders meeting in Antwerp must take specific steps to identify the source of diamonds entering the world market, so that they can take effective action against traders continuing to trade in conflict diamonds," Amnesty International said.

De Beers must strengthen its new strategy by establishing a transparent and periodically audited system to reassure the international community that its guarantee of conflict-free diamonds is 'forever'.

And governments in the major diamond-trading countries in North America, Europe and Japan should require their local bourses and diamond and jewellery retail trade to declare the source of diamonds being imported into their countries.

"Diamond dealers meeting in Antwerp must effectively remove the stain of conflict diamonds from their business," Amnesty International said.

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