

Love hurts when war is paid for by gem trade

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Leone.

"In America, it's bling bling, but here it's bling bang."

These 10 simple words summarize the misery of a nation. Uttered by Leonardo DiCaprio's character in the recent film *Blood Diamond*, it bluntly explains how diamonds, the symbol of love and wealth to so many, have become the symbol of death and destruction in Sierra

The film focuses on a rural fisherman whose only chance at rescuing his family from the country's brutal civil war is to find a rare pink diamond before anyone else does. He has been kidnapped by rebel forces and forced to help fund the rebel army by working in its diamond mines.

We were amazed at how realistically the film portrayed the war – from the brutal amputation of thousands of children, cruelly asked to choose where they wanted their limbs to be cut, to the slave-like conditions of the open pits where people were forced to work for 16 hours a day.

And it accurately showed the role that foreign diamond traders – played by DiCaprio in the film – had in fuelling the conflict. Unlike so many wars, the one in Sierra Leone wasn't driven by political or religious differences. This one was driven by a lust for control over the country's lucrative diamond mines.



Labourers work on a diamond open cast mine near Kpetewama, Sierra Leone in this undated file picture.

In 1999 alone, at the height of the conflict, \$200 million in diamonds were smuggled out of the country and sold to help fund the war.

Much of the film unfolded in the gem-rich region of Kono, a place we have visited many times. There we met former child soldiers who described to us how "white men who spoke English would land their helicopters and trade guns for diamonds" in a cruel mix of business, violence and greed.

The irony is that until this recent film, few people knew the ugly truth behind these beautiful stones. In North America diamonds have become the ultimate symbol of happiness, and once again this Valentine's Day we've been told that they are "a girl's best friend."

But for millions in Sierra Leone, diamonds have become the worst enemy.

And they are not alone. Recent wars in Angola, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo were all fuelled by diamonds. Countries have been torn apart by the violent pursuit of the world's most sought-after gem. In the 1990s, as much as 15 per cent of the world's diamonds were blood diamonds.

That number has since dropped to less than 1 per cent, according to the World Diamond Council, thanks in part to a tracking system called the Kimberley Process. Diamond-producing countries are now required to certify that their product does not fund rebel movements. And countries that have signed on to the process – 72 in total – are forbidden from importing or exporting to those who have not.

But that doesn't mean the problem is over. The UN recently reported that more than \$20 million in blood diamonds have been smuggled out of the Ivory Coast, a country torn apart by recent civil war. The diamonds were brought to Ghana, where they were certified as conflict-free.

This happens because nations are expected to report their own violations. There is no independent monitoring of the process, so it's impossible to tell if that 1 per cent figure is entirely accurate, or if "conflict-free" diamonds are just being smuggled out of war zones. With the world's insatiable desire for these gems and the constant lure of hundreds of millions of dollars, self-regulation becomes difficult.

That was the conclusion of a report released late last year by the international organization Global Witness, which has long led a campaign against blood diamonds. The report, called "The Kimberley Process at Risk," said that despite progress, blood diamonds still enter world markets.

"Governments are blocking efforts to strengthen the Kimberley Process and the diamond industry has failed to police itself," the report said. "The Kimberley Process objective to stop the trade in blood diamonds will not be met unless these challenges are confronted."

And even if a diamond is conflict-free, that doesn't mean it hasn't contributed to grave human rights violations. Local development agencies in Kono report that upwards of 1,500 children work in dangerous slave-like conditions mining diamonds for 50 cents a day.

So as we express our love this week with diamonds, chocolates and other expensive gifts, let's take a moment to step back and remember the consequences of the products we desire. In our interconnected world, what we buy locally has an impact globally – whether it's diamonds mined in Africa, chocolate from cocoa harvested in Brazil or clothing made from cotton in Bangladesh.

That doesn't mean we have to stop buying from other countries. But by becoming informed, conscious shoppers – and by choosing ethical products – we have the power to ensure our happiness doesn't come at someone else's expense.

After all, every product has a story.

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