



The high price of diamonds. (Global Village: Sierra Leone).

Contemporary Women's Issues Database

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The high price of **diamonds**. (Global Village: Sierra Leone).

It was 2:00 a.m., and Mabinty's heart pounded heavily in her chest. The threat of war in her hometown was fast becoming reality. Mabinty and her family grew more afraid as rumors spread about the devastation and brutality in surrounding villages. They were running from the civil war that was spreading like wildfire and threatening to engulf the country of Sierra Leone.

They brought with them only a few treasures to remember their lives in Kono. Mabinty's feet felt like they couldn't carry the weight of her body any further. Still, she plodded on. Rain came shooting down on them like arrows from the sky. They ran in fear for their lives as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) turned against the people in the **diamond** districts.

Finally they made it to the safety of neighboring Guinea. Overcrowded refugee camps and a sea of people came into view. There were thousands, some with frighteningly blank expressions on their faces. Mabinty knew she didn't belong here, but the journey had been too long and tiring for her to show disappointment. Time passed slowly in the camps, and Mabinty dreamed of returning to Sierra Leone.

My name is Tehtena, and I'm 14. Although I didn't live in Sierra Leone during the time of the **diamond** wars, I visited there and saw the devastation. My grandparents were forced to evacuate their homes twice. My great aunt died the night the rebels invaded Freetown. My grandma couldn't even go outside to bury her. She was alone in the house with a dead body for two days in the sweltering heat. Because of the war, my family was displaced from their homes, and we're afraid to return because of the unknown.

The Horrors of War

Sierra Leone is one of a handful of countries with an abundant supply of **diamonds**, but it's also one of the poorest nations on earth. At first the people of Sierra Leone saw the RUF invasion as hope for a better future. They were fed up with the government and believed anything else would be better. So, when the RUF promised to free the country, people actually welcomed them.

It was only a matter of time, however, before the RUF's real motives came to light. They were yet another group interested in **diamonds** instead of people. The RUF was backed by a powerful accomplice, the dictator of Liberia, Charles Taylor. They quickly became partners in crime. The RUF brought **diamonds** from Sierra Leone into Liberia and exported them to North American countries where people pay high prices for them. But Sierra Leone paid the highest price for those **diamonds** because the RUF traded them for weapons to fight a brutal rebel war.

Kono, where Mabinty lived, was one of the first places the RUF attacked and claimed as rebel territory.

That's why Mabinty and her family fled. The consequences of staying were terrible. The RUF took children from their homes and made them do terrible things like kill family members. These child soldiers were particularly vicious because they'd never known anything but violence. They didn't value life, and they began to see killing as a joke. They'd ask those they were about to amputate if they'd like long sleeves or short sleeves. Long sleeves meant cutting off your hand, short sleeves meant cutting off your arm at the shoulder.

Dealing with **Diamonds**

What part do **diamonds** play in the war? Because **diamonds** are so popular in wealthy western countries like the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada, they're worth lots of money. **Diamonds**, ice, or "bling bling" are promoted by hip hop culture, fashion, and movies. **Diamonds** are a status symbol and advertising campaigns like "A **Diamond** is Forever" associate these stones with glamour and love. But while the West buys **diamonds**, countries like Angola, the Congo, and Sierra Leone suffer.

Power-hungry people trade **diamonds** to buy weapons to terrorize and kill people. That's why these **diamonds** are called "**conflict diamonds**" or "blood **diamonds**." David Crane, a reporter for Newsweek, said, "**Diamond**-buyers should remember that **diamonds** are a wonderful gift, but some are dipped in blood."

To Buy or Not to Buy?

Diamonds that are mined and sold LEGALLY can be a source of great riches for a country, like in South **Africa** where the **diamond** trade is controlled and managed by the government. But it's very difficult to tell the difference between legally mined **diamonds** and **conflict diamonds**. A number of countries came up with a solution to make illegal **diamond** trading more difficult. The agreement is called The Kimberley Process. According to The Kimberley Process, **diamonds** that aren't approved by the government aren't for sale to legitimate **diamond** companies. Although this is a step in the right direction, the solution isn't that easy. **Diamond** smugglers still sell to dishonest dealers who want to buy cheaper **diamonds**. Those dealers don't care where the **diamonds** come from, even though they face a penalty of three years in prison.

Putting the Peace Back Together

The civil war in Sierra Leone lasted 10 years. It ended just over a year ago with help from the United Nations and the British Army, who helped install Sierra Leone's first democratically elected government. But peace is very fragile. The people of Sierra Leone are slowly coming to terms with the psychological and physical damage to their nation. War criminals face trials for horrific crimes at an International Court, while therapists rehabilitate the child soldiers to help them return to a more normal life. Displaced people slowly return to their homes and, with help from the rest of the world, are determined to rebuild their country.

What Can You Do?

Let local jewelry stores know that you want them to sell guaranteed **conflict** free **diamonds**. Visit www.onesky.ca/diamonds. At One Sky's website you can quickly and easily send a letter with your comments directly to the World **Diamond** Council. One Sky's slogan is "Blood **Diamonds** Are for Never."

For more information and resources on how to stop the trade of **conflict diamonds**, e-mail Kristin@onesky.ca or visit Amnesty International at www.amnestyusa.org.

Donate to a charity that helps those affected by the **diamond** wars. All As One (www.all-as-one.org) provides shelters for orphans; War Child (www.warchild.com) works to help the child soldiers return to a normal life; and Medicins San Frontieres (www.msf.org) provides health care for amputees and others wounded in the war. You could create your own fundraiser for one of these charities. There are a lot of creative ways to raise money for a good cause. We can all help Sierra Leoneans rebuild their lives and regain strength in their country.

Tehtena Tsegaye, 14, lives in England with her mom and sister. Tehtena is interested in writing, photography, and music. She also enjoys going out with friends. Tehtena hopes to study psychology at a university one day.

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