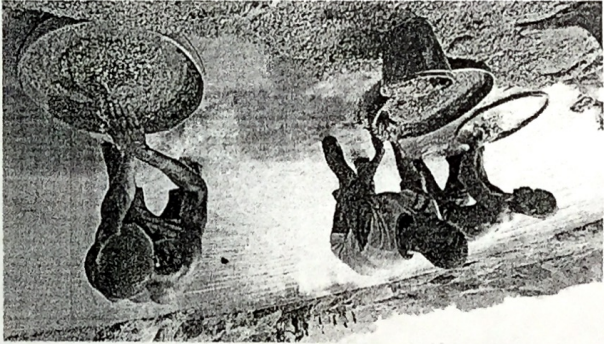


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Diamonds Move From Blood to Sweat and Tears



Children after the civil war in Sierra Leone diamond miners remain impoverished.

By LYDIA POLGREEN

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Multimedia



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KOYIDU, Sierra Leone — The tiny stone settled into the calloused grooves of Tambara Kamanda's palm, its dull yellow glint almost

It was the first stone he had found in

than a dollar for it. It hardly seemed

washing, searching the gravel for

diamonds.

But farming had brought no money for clothes or

schoolbooks for his two wives and five children. He could

find no work as a mason.

"I don't have choice," Mr. Kamanda said, standing calf-

deep in brown muddy water here at the Bondobush mine, "This is my only hope, really."

Diamond mining in Sierra Leone is no longer the bloody

a far made infamous by the nation's decade-long civil war,

in which diamonds played a starring role.

The conflict — begun by rebels who claimed to be ridding

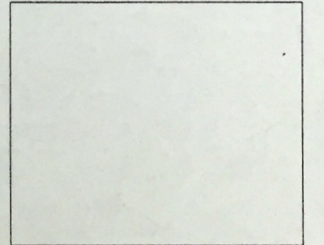
the mines of foreign control — killed 50,000 people, forced



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Millions to flee their homes, destroyed the country's economy and shocked the world with its images of amputated limbs and drug-addled boy soldiers.

An international regulatory system created after the war has prevented diamonds from fueling conflicts and financing terrorist networks. Even so, diamond mining in Sierra Leone remains a grim business that brings the government far too little revenue to right

the devastated country, yet feeds off the desperation of some of the world's poorest people. "The process is more to sanitize the industry from the market side rather than the supply side," said John Kanu, a policy adviser to the Integrated Diamond Management Program, a United States-backed effort to improve the government's handling of diamond money.

"To make it so people could go to buy a diamond ring and to say, 'Yes, because of this system, there are no longer any blood diamonds. So my love, and my conscience, can sleep easily.'"

"But that doesn't mean that there is justice," he said. "That will take a lot, lot longer to change."

In many cases, the vilified foreign mine owners have simply been replaced by local elites with a firm grip on the industry's profits.

At the losing end are the miners here in Kono District, who work for little or no pay, hoping to strike it rich but caught in a net of semi-feudal relationships that make it all but impossible that they ever will.

A vast majority of Sierra Leone's diamonds are mined by hand from alluvial deposits near the earth's surface, so anyone with a shovel, a bucket and a sieve can go into business, and officials said.

Most days, diggers like Charles Kabia, a 25-year-old grade-school dropout who has been digging since the rebels forced him to mine as a teenager, come up empty — he has not found a stone in two months. That last diamond, a half-carat stone, went for about \$65, which he split with his three partners.

"From all my years of mining I don't even have one bicycle," said Mr. Kabia, his hands trembling. "I really get nothing out of it."

The struggle to reform Sierra Leone's troubled mining industry is emblematic of many of the difficulties faced by this small, impoverished nation as it tries to heal.

Sierra Leone is at peace, its economy is growing and in July it will hold a presidential election that will turn a fresh page in the country's troubled history. But the recovery has been painfully slow. In the center of Koidu sits an enormous tank gun with a sign slung around its barrel — "War don don, we love peace," a hopeful message in English and Sierra Leone's lingua franca, Krio, placed there at the end of the war.

But five years later, the city still has no electricity. The crumbling streets were last paved in the mid-1970s. People live in roofless buildings left by the fighting, doing their best to scrub off the stinking mold and ring tarpaulin roofs.

Sierra Leone has struggled for much of its history to turn its diamonds into development and prosperity, but they have mainly been a source of pain. "Diamonds, from the very beginning, corrupted Sierra Leone's most basic sense of governance," said Mr. Kanu, the diamond policy adviser.

Some countries, like Botswana, whose diamonds lie locked deep underground, have been able to make their deposits a source of wealth through careful management and control. But countries like Sierra Leone, Congo, Angola and Ivory Coast, where diamonds wash up in rivers and often sit just a few feet below the surface, have struggled to manage what may be the world's worst resource curse.



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The sprawling mining business here includes about 2,500 small operations. Unlike oil, iron ore and even gold, diamonds are so easy to transport that if regulations are too onerous and taxes too high, miners and exporters will simply turn to smuggling. In 2005, Sierra Leone officially exported \$141 million worth of diamonds, government records show. That is a vast improvement over the \$24 million officially exported in 2001, before stringent new rules known as the Kimberley Process required diamond deals to be certified by the authorities. Before that, most diamonds were smuggled out of the country through Liberia and Guinea and sold for weapons.

But even now, the government's share of the revenue is modest, just 3 percent. In 2006, the government's take was only \$3.7 million. Licensing fees add to that total, but it is hardly enough to rebuild a nation of six million people, still broken by war.

Usman Boie Kamara, the deputy director of the government's mining office, noted that new laws requiring permits for dealers, mine owners and exporters have forced out shadowy operators, smugglers and money launderers. Laws also set minimum standards for the pay and benefits of diggers — though they are scarcely enforced, miners and experts say.

“These issues are being addressed, but it takes time,” Mr. Kamara said.

At the Bondobush mine here, the grim routine of mining is on daily display — hundreds of diggers sifting through tons of gravel. The mine is divided into areas of 210 square yards, with each controlled by a license holder. By law that person must be Sierra Leonean, but in practice the licenses are often fronts for foreign backers or migrants from the Middle East or other West African countries.

Some are paid a small sum per day, usually about 75 cents, and given tools, food and shelter in exchange for about 30 percent of whatever their backers claim to be the value of the diamonds they find. And the financiers first deduct their expenses.

A few workers have no stake in their finds but are paid a wage, usually \$2 a day. Still others work solely for a share of the gravel they extract from the vast, watery pits. In most arrangements, a great deal of the risk is shouldered by the laborer.

The industry has long been dominated by outsiders, feeding a nationalism that was exploited by Koidu Sanneh, leader of the Revolutionary United Front, the brutal rebel force that claimed to be liberating the mines but instead enriched itself and terrorized the populace.

Yet even with the laws requiring local control, working conditions have not improved much. The mine where Mr. Kabba works is operated by a chief who functions as a kind of local government executive. The chief, Paul N. Saquee, 46, is a former truck driver who spent the past two decades in the United States, most recently around Atlanta. Mr. Saquee's brother Prince is the chairman of the local diamond dealers association, the first Sierra Leonean to hold that position.

Paul Saquee employs two kinds of diggers. Some are paid about a dollar a day and 30 percent of the value of their stones, which they must hand over to Mr. Saquee's representative, another of the chief's brothers named Tamba. He watches with hawklike vigilance as the miners dig.

Others, like Mr. Kabba, work for a percentage of the gravel they extract and own any stones they find. In theory, this means they should get a fair sale price, but dealers often exploit their ignorance.

Prince Saquee, the chief's diamond-dealing brother, bankrolls several mines and scoffs at the notion of selling his stones to only one buyer.

“If you are working for an exporter, he will dictate the price,” he said. “To me that is indirect slavery.”

But he has no qualms about demanding precisely that arrangement from those below him on the diamond food chain. “The mine owners and workers he bankrolls must sell only to him.”

“For the miners, it is different,” he argued. A digger, “it depends on you. He doesn't know the value so you as the dealer have to tell him.”

Paul Saquee, the chief, said that despite the low pay and hard working conditions, he was providing at least some form of employment to desperate people with no alternative.

“I wish that the miners would all go back to the farm, but they are here and need work,” he said.

Part of Mr. Saquee's role is to administer a fund that sends a quarter of the government's diamond revenues back to the community the stones came from. Kono, home to more than half of all mining license holders, received \$377,900 in 2005 for a district of 475,000 people.

“I don't believe that diamonds are the future of this country,” Mr. Saquee said. “We need to find something else to get ourselves moving.”

Indeed, the poverty rates are highest in the mining districts — Kono's poverty rate is 20 percent higher than that in nearby Pujehun district, which is largely agricultural.

In the central bank building in Freetown, Mustafa B. Turay sorted gleaming stones into small mounds to determine their value for taxation. On a recent afternoon the country's largest exporter, Hisham Madkie, a longtime Lebanese kingpin, brought in \$2 million worth of stones bound for Antwerp, Belgium, that night.

Most had been dug by hand by workers in places like Koidu. But the paper trail does not reach all the way back to the miner, so there is no way to know how much a miner was paid. It is a gap, said Mr. Kanu, the diamond policy adviser, that can lead to the illusion that the problems brought to light by the civil war have been solved.

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