

Doubts over Zimbabwe diamonds

BULAWAYO and TEL AVIV: Three days of tense deliberations by members of the Kimberley Process have failed to reach consensus on whether diamonds from Zimbabwe's Marange fields should be certified as conflict-free. Zimbabwe has already announced that it intends to resume exports of the precious stones immediately.

By [Busani Bafana and Pierre Klochendler](#) 28 Jun 2010

The Kimberley Process (KP) is a joint effort by governments, the diamond industry and civil society to curtail trade in "blood diamonds" - stones that have provoked, financed and fueled civil wars in Angola, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Marange diamond fields lie 300 kilometres east of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare; after diamonds were discovered there in 2006, thousands of unlicensed miners moved in to take advantage.

In October 2008, the government of Zimbabwe sent the army to clear the area in an operation widely condemned for its disregard of human rights. The security forces are alleged to have committed murder, rape and press-ganged young children and women into forced labour.

Zimbabwe avoided suspension from the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme at a plenary meeting in Namibia in November 2009, when KP members accepted a work plan that Zimbabwe itself had proposed.

The plan committed the country to a phased withdrawal of the armed forces from the diamond fields (but without specific timelines), directed that police would take responsibility for security for the area, and provided for a monitor acceptable to both Zimbabwe and the KP would examine and certify that shipments of diamonds from Marange meet Kimberley Process standards.

That monitor, South African businessman Abbey Chikane, is satisfied that Zimbabwe has met the minimum conditions, though his report has not been made public. "Chikane states that 'the government of Zimbabwe has demonstrated its commitment to meet the minimum requirements' of the KP Certification Scheme for the trade in rough diamonds," according to a statement by the Israel Diamond Industry, which hosted the KP Intersessional meeting in Tel Aviv.

Fully exploited, the gems from Marange could make up 25 percent of the global supply, estimates Haim Even-Zohar, head of the Israel-based diamond consulting firm Tacy Ltd.

Zimbabwe is set to auction four million carats from its gem stockpile, reportedly worth up to 1.7 billion dollars. The proceeds from diamond sales could be enormously important to the economy of a country saddled with debt of more than \$7 billion, but human rights groups inside and outside the country say it's premature to certify the country's diamonds.

One warning sign is the arrest and detention of Farai Maguwu, director of the Centre for Research and Development, who met with Chikane and briefed him on alleged human rights violations in the Marange field.

Maguwu had been invited to attend the Tel Aviv meeting, but instead appeared in court in Zimbabwe to face charges of peddling falsehoods prejudicial to the state on Jun. 22. He remains in custody; if convicted, he could face up to 20 years in prison.

"If Zimbabwe is jailing activists for writing about abuses connected to diamond mining, then it's hardly meeting the minimum standards for KP membership," said Rona Peligal, acting Africa director for Human Rights Watch.

HRW published a report on Jun. 21 asserting that the Zimbabwean army continues to engage in forced labour, torture, beatings and harassment in the Marange area.

"It will be tragic for the diamond sale ban to be lifted now, especially if someone who wrote about human rights violations is in jail and his life is under threat," Kucaca Phulu, told IPS. Phulu is a lawyer and chairman of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association.

"The diamonds have been a sinister situation for the people of Marange, who have not been rehabilitated from the trauma with the soldiers still there. Why give an impression that everything is now normal by lifting the ban?"

But a senior government source and mining expert in Zimbabwe dismisses the allegations of human rights abuses as a smoke screen to deny Zimbabwe revenue from the diamond sales to the benefit of global companies eyeing a stake in the country's mines.

"Who has died in Chiadzwa?" the source, who declined to be named, told IPS. "This is all NGO talk to ensure that Zimbabwe does not progress and benefit from its diamonds.

"The government has done everything above board and in a proper manner. This nonsense about blood diamonds is to stop Zimbabwe from progressing as the [KP] monitor has already given the country a green light."

One participant in the closed proceedings said the US, Australia, Canada and the EU opposed resuming exports of Marar diamonds. Most African countries, Brazil, China, Russia, and India supported the resumption of exports, based on the late report on the conditions there issued by the KP.

At stake is the principle of whether or not to broaden the KP definition of a conflict diamond. Human rights activists have urged that the definition include diamonds that provide financial support to governments in violation of human rights.

The wealth from the gems found in Marange can only reinforce authoritarian rule in Zimbabwe, they argue.

Eli Izhakoff, president of the World Diamond Council, declared, "We will not rest until this diamond producing area is operating for the benefit of all the country's citizens."

But, he cautioned, "We should never overlook what has been achieved."

That not much was achieved in Tel Aviv is not entirely unexpected. The Kimberley Process was originally conceived to stem the flow of "blood diamonds" mined or traded by rebel movements to finance their operations.

Applying it to the case of Zimbabwe, where activists charge the profits will enable an authoritarian government to consolidate its grip, would mark an expansion of the definition of a conflict diamond.

A higher level Plenary Meeting to be held in Jerusalem in November may provide a second opportunity to restore the promise the KP has stood for.

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