The Role of Diamonds in Fueling Armed Conflict

Topic Background

Many nations in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from what is commonly referred to as a “resource curse.” A resource curse is a scenario in which a nation with particularly significant deposits of a certain natural resource finds that resource to be fuel for economic or political strife, rather than for development. In some situations, it can take the form of an overdependence on oil or a certain mineral, leading to serious economic damage when prices fluctuate or when that resource runs out. In other countries, this resource curse takes the form of serving as a center-point of armed conflict, as governments, rebel groups, or others fight for control of that scarce resource for the economic value it can bring, often creating more of an economic burden through the conflict than the resource itself would provide.

One of the main resources that can create a “resource curse” are diamonds. The role of diamonds in sustaining armed conflict can be significant, especially in the context of some sub-Saharan African countries. Some of the most notorious conflicts in the African continent have been sustained, in part, by conflict diamonds. Popularly referred to as “blood diamonds”, these diamonds are mined by military groups and exported illicitly to enter the global diamond market. Sierra Leone, Angola, Liberia, and others all possess rich diamond deposits which are ideal for extraction and export by militant groups, and all of the aforementioned countries have seen conflict dragged on by the continued fight for control and exploitation of said diamonds.

Diamonds make ideal conflict resources for many reasons. One of the most prominent is the low level of technology required to extract them. With a large labor force in place to pan for diamonds, an armed group does not need much else to monopolize deposits of the extremely valuable resource. Secondly, diamonds are very difficult for opposing military forces to destroy. While oil fields can be burned and mines can be bombed, diamond extraction is low tech to the point that it’s largely impossible to completely eliminate a militant group’s ability to extract from
a diamond deposit. Because of this, non-state military actors often gravitate towards diamonds where other sources of income are less available. The average militant group doesn’t have the necessary technology to draw from an oil field or maintain large scale underground mining operations, so they turn to diamonds.

Although conflict diamonds have played a role in many armed struggles throughout history, they came to the world’s attention when the civil war in Sierra Leone began in March of 1991. The civil conflict in Sierra Leone was one of West Africa’s most notorious confrontations, and was characterized by atrocities perpetuated on all sides such as amputation as a form of punishment, widespread violence against civilians and other non-combatants, and systemic rape as a tool of war. Diamonds were a critical resource for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) as they used the stones to finance their efforts to overthrow the Sierra Leonean government. The RUF was also supported by the then leader of Libya Muammar al-Gaddafi, and the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Campoare. While these leaders may have never publicly stated their motives, it is highly probable that access to the rich mineral deposits within Sierra Leone, especially its diamonds, where a strong persuasive factor for foreign involvement in the civil war.¹

At the height of the illicit diamond trade towards the end of the 1990s, estimates indicated that conflict diamonds made up nearly 4% of global diamond production. Additionally, while it was Sierra Leone that brought conflict diamonds to the global community’s attention, the same process of illicit diamond trade helped finance rebel groups and prolonged conflicts in nations like Liberia, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.² Without any international institutions in place to curtail their export, rebel groups sold diamonds to whoever would buy them, and since there was no mechanism to identify where diamonds came from, even legally purchased stones could have once been purchased from a non-state military group.

Delegates should consider their nation’s history with conflict diamonds before proposing solutions. Were blood diamonds ever a contributing factor to conflict within your national borders? Is your country a significant transit or destination country for these conflict diamonds? Were you one of the parties that contributed to the eventual international agreement that helped curtail the flow of conflict diamonds, or was your state government involved in the import and export processes of the global diamond trade?

One other key point to consider is the definition of conflict diamonds; while international treaties have defined conflict diamonds largely as being diamonds mined illegally by rebel groups, there are many more diamonds around the world being panned for or mined by women, men, and children treated basically as slaves, by corrupt companies illegally stealing diamonds from territories, or from corrupt governments that use the diamond trade to fuel their own conflicts. Does your state also want to eliminate the role of diamonds in these alternate forms of armed conflict or human rights abuses?

Past International Actions

Towards the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone the international community, namely the
United Nations, took several steps to curtail the illicit trade of diamonds in an effort to stop the
ongoing conflict. One of the first and most important documents on the illicit diamond trade was
UN Security Council resolution 1306, adopted on July 5th, 2000, which declared that all Member
States must prohibit the import, either directly or indirectly, of diamonds from Sierra Leone with
the exception of diamonds that had been verified as produced by the Sierra Leonean government
through what was referred to as the “Certificate of Origin Regime”. UNSCR 1306 is significant
because it took decisive action to stop the export of blood diamonds from Sierra Leone, and
because it established the trade of conflict diamonds as a significant issue for the United Nations
and for the world. Outside of just implementing a certificate of origin regime in Sierra Leone,
UNSCR 1306 requested numerous official reviews of the role of diamonds in Sierra Leone’s
conflict, and established exploratory hearings for all interested state parties to debate the effects of
diamonds and other illicitly extracted materials in ongoing conflicts.3

The war in Sierra Leone ended shortly after the passage of UNSCR 1306, which is by no
means to say that the resolution was the deciding factor for the end of the war, but we can be sure
that the restriction of diamond trade coming out of Sierra Leone was at least partially responsible
for the decline in violence. The ban on diamond trade coming out of Sierra Leone would be
extended and subject to a bi-yearly review period in UNSCR 1385 adopted on December 19th
2001,4 but the prior resolutions had been very much focused on Sierra Leone, and hadn’t done
much to address the overall issue of the conflict diamond trade. It wasn’t until the 55th session of
the General Assembly in 2000 that there would be a comprehensive international framework for
combating the illicit diamond trade.

It was during the 55th session that UN General Assembly resolution 55/56 formalized what
had been referred to as the “Kimberley Process”: a regulatory framework for the global trade of
diamonds. The Kimberley Process had been discussed before at a workshop held by Namibia and
attended by the world’s leading diamond exporters where the concerned parties developed a
framework to ensure that all diamonds that found their way into the global market had been legally
obtained. Resolution 55/56 encouraged the expansion of the Kimberley Processes’ membership,
and expressed hope that it would become a significant intergovernmental body to legitimize the
diamond trade.5

Today the Kimberley Process has a membership of 54 representatives from 81 different
countries that account for 99.8% of the world’s legal diamond production. In its most basic form
the Kimberley Process is a certification scheme that imposes requirements on Member States that
allow diamond exports to be certified as conflict free, and to ensure that uncertified diamonds do
not enter the global market. The Kimberley Process requires that its members meet certain policy
standards to ensure that state institutions are strong enough to effectively certify and monitor the
export of diamonds.6 In addition to operating with state actors the Kimberley Process also
cooperates with a number of non-state actors. Observers to KP meetings include the World

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5 “The role of diamonds in fuelling conflict: breaking the link between the illicit transaction of rough diamonds and
armed conflict as a contribution to prevention and settlement of conflicts,”
Diamond Council, which is a representative body of diamond retail corporations. In addition to corporate observation there are a number of non-governmental organizations and civil society groups that cooperate with the KP to ensure its effectiveness. In other words: the Kimberley Process represents an intersection of the civil, political, and corporate interests associated with the diamond trade in an effort to produce the highest degree of effectiveness.

The Kimberley Process has been a highly effective regulatory body in the global effort to eliminate the illicit diamond trade, and it continues to be a strong bulwark against the production of blood diamonds even today. Delegates should consider their country’s relationship with the Kimberley Process, as well as the way that Kimberley Process policy requirements might impact their country if they currently are or wish to become members.

Possible Solutions

While the Kimberley Process and the holistic efforts of the international community have so far been extremely effective at eliminating the majority of the global blood diamond trade, the problem is not completely eradicated. Delegates may wish to pursue solutions that aim to expand the reach of already existing international institutions so that they may be more effective at totally eradicating the global conflict diamond trade.

Additionally delegates should caution themselves against complacency; while the Kimberley Process has proven to be a well-developed solution in the past, nations should not underestimate the ability of non-state actors to circumvent the international community’s efforts to halt their activities. Delegates representing countries that have a history of military instability within their borders should be particularly cautious when evaluating the future ability of insurgent groups to extract and export resources. Complacency could be extremely dangerous in such a situation, and delegates should ensure that they continue with the vigilance that was put in place when the international community first responded to the crisis in Sierra Leone.

It will also be important to consider the future of the issue in debate. Currently existing institutions have done well at curtailing the present illicit diamond trade when defined as diamond trade by illegal rebel groups, but it is possible that the means or goals of non-state actors or even Member States will evolve in the future in a way that outstrips the capacities of the currently existing institutions. Delegates should address what to do with human rights conditions for diamond workers forced to work to ensure their own safety, how to address corrupt corporations that fuel conflict or political strife to exploit economic resources, and how to handle Member States that abuse the legal diamond trade to fuel their own conflicts. Considering future developments in an issue and creating preemptive solutions to said problems is a very viable strategy in debate, and it will only make the future of the diamond trade more secure.

Further Research

- The Kimberley Process: [https://www.kimberleyprocess.com/](https://www.kimberleyprocess.com/)
Questions

1. What is the term for countries abundant in raw materials, but may cause conflict over said materials?
2. What are the two names for diamonds that originate from areas controlled by forces or factors opposed to legitimate and internationally recognized governments?
3. What is the current process in place to ensure that diamonds are certified?
4. What is one country that has been recently impacted by conflict diamonds?