

All that glisters is not gold in rough diamond trade

HAND your weapons to security before entering the bar," a sign above the entrance to the Silver Wings proclaims.

On the nearby beach, a battalion of Swedish peacekeeping soldiers jog easily along, watched by curious local children.

These are just some of the signs that Sierra Leone is a country emerging from a brutal and bloody 10-year civil war — a war that was financed by the country's rich diamond resources.

"Diamonds have done nothing for the people of the country," Mohamed, the driver, tells me after we leave the capital Freetown and make our way up-country alongside weighed-down road-weary trucks that stagger and sway their way between the pot-holes.

"In fact, they are the reason the war lasted so long," he continues.

'Conflict' or 'blood' diamonds are so-called as they were used by the rebel to fund the purchase of arms in this small West African country which is about the same size as Ireland and has a similar population.

The charred remains of what were once schools, clinics and people's homes in the villages we pass through seem far removed from the jewellery shops where happy couples go to view stones that glitter and shimmer beautifully in their gold settings.

Shoppers can do their bit to help stamp out trade in 'illicit' diamonds, writes **Helen Fallon**

Mohamed tells me how many of the people in his home village were diamond diggers, some of the 150,000 people who use shovels and sieves to recover rough diamonds. This type of mining is called "alluvial" or "artisanal" mining and has been carried out in Sierra Leone since the 1930s when British geologists realised the value of the stones that littered the forest floors and river beds.

Neither Mohamed nor his relatives have become wealthy. Instead, they are exploited by local dealers who dictate the price of rough diamonds and smuggle them out of the country.

This means that the government, diamond miners and their communities, and the overall economy do not receive revenue from diamond sales.

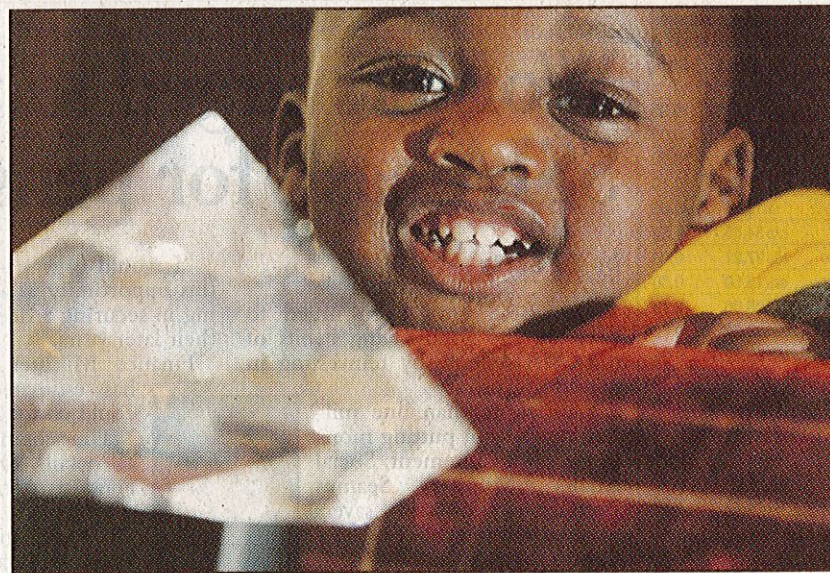
Even where diamonds are sold through legitimate channels, the diggers are paid little over €1 a day and work without contracts. Health and safety regulations are either non-existent or ignored. A World Vision study estimated the number of children working in the artisanal diamond mines at 10,000.

This problem extends beyond Sierra Leone's borders as diamonds are not cut or polished in Sierra Leone. Some 90% of the world's diamonds are cut and polished in India and, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), conservative estimates indicate that 20,000 children in India are now employed in the industry, working 12-14 hour days.

So what can Irish people do to help stamp out the trade in "illicit" diamonds and ensure Mohamed and the diamond diggers of Sierra Leone get a fair price for their rough diamonds?

It's very simple: ask questions. An information leaflet launched yesterday by the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership (SLIP), in association with Appleby Jewellers, informs shoppers of the questions to ask retailers.

Traditionally, four Cs are considered



Ibrahim Jalloh, two, from Sierra Leone examines a large diamond at the launch of an information leaflet by the Sierra Leone Ireland partnership (SLIP) for shoppers about the link between diamonds and development. Picture: Maxwells

when buying a diamond. These are cut, colour, clarity and carat. We ask people to consider a fifth C — certification. When you purchase a diamond, ask for an independent certificate from one of the international diamond laboratories ie GIA, HD or

IGI. Also, ask about the shop's policy when purchasing their diamonds and how they make sure they are not dealing in illicit diamonds.

Shoppers may not realise it, but they are in a strong position to influence the diamond supply chain and ensure

illicit diamonds do not enter the legitimate market.

Internationally, a scheme to tackle the problem of 'conflict' and illicit diamonds has been in place since 2003, called The Kimberley Process.

Certificates which guarantee that stones are conflict-free should accompany all shipments of rough diamonds to and from participating countries.

In Sierra Leone, the government has made some progress to tackle the problem of illicit diamonds. But with an estimated \$120 million worth of diamonds taken out of Sierra Leone in 2004 and about \$3m of this obtained by the government, clearly diamond revenue is not being translated into basic social amenities such as water, electricity, healthcare and education.

As well as encouraging shoppers to exercise vigilance, SLIP is striving to highlight the need for the development of an ethical and fair diamond trade in Sierra Leone to ensure that miners and their communities benefit from their country's natural resource.

Helen Fallon is the public relations officer of the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership, a registered charity, and visited Sierra Leone in March 2006. The information leaflet, endorsed by Trócaire, is available at www.trócaire.ie or from The Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership, 221 Palmerstown Woods, Dublin 22.