

PETER AND JANICE CLARK IN SIERRA LEONE

6 FEBRUARY 2010

There will be few readers who have not heard of, or seen, the 2006 film Blood Diamonds, which in true Hollywood style, uses the big star status of Leonardo DiCaprio, for a drama based on the little gems that played a central role in Salone's decade long, civil war. Another film Diamonds, made two years later by a Canadian-South African consortium, addresses the global trade of diamonds in a more thorough but no less entertaining manner. In doing so it gets closer to the ethical complexities of the industry and the paradox, of how such a tiny, geological feature, that is both revered with aesthetic awe and ruthlessly prized financially, was also the epicentre of geo-political madness and human brutality in West Africa and Salone. The current trial in the Hague of Charles Taylor of Liberia, for crimes against humanity committed in Salone, is a reminder that justice and peace building take a long time to be accomplished, internationally and locally.



Diamonds were the heart of the nation's exports for most of the 20th Century, with sometimes close on two hundred thousand Saloneans mining gems from alluvial sources in the far east of the country. Not surprisingly, the miners, legal or illegal, have not been the major beneficiaries of a trade that has drawn in, not just international mining companies and traders, but mercenaries and others forms of 'security'.

Today the nation's mining interests are expanding and include rutile (titanium dioxide) and iron ore, but in a new piece of legislation, the Mining Act 2009, special attention is being given to ensuring that greater control is exercised in the mining and trading of diamonds. The Salonean government, along with over 50 other countries is committed to The Kimberley Process, which is intended to rid the world of illegal, rough cut, conflict free/blood diamonds. The current legal trade in Salonean diamonds is estimated to be worth around £100 million, whilst the United Mineworkers Union is struggling to establish a minimum wage of £1.20 a day. It is therefore not surprising that with the unjust labour conditions, the illegal mining and trade of diamonds is still considered highly prevalent and worryingly problematic.

Freetown couldn't be much further from the minefields of Koidu and though the country's international airport is near to Freetown, the corridor for the illegal diamond trade has been traditionally through Liberia to Europe, and in particular Antwerp. This phenomenon may be one reason why Liberia is the only West African nation to remit more money than it receives, with the beneficiaries being residents of the United States.

Frequent reference is made to the ongoing affects that the civil war is still having on the recovery of the

socio-economic progress for the nation and its people. Those who have visited the country intermittently since the war, speak of the visible signs of restoration in buildings and institutions and the ease of mobility on the roads across the country.

The War Affected Amputees Association of Sierra Leone has branches in most of Salone's towns and cities and in North America and Europe too. The organisation includes many who were children under the age of 10 when they lost an arm, a leg or more than one of both. Today in Salone, many of those who lost limbs and their childhood too, are committed to affirming the need for a continuing peace. For some this includes the promotion of sport and some are currently touring the country holding football matches* as means of promoting an ongoing peace. Despite the need for crutches and in a few cases a prosthesis, there are no shortage of talented footballers who want to play for the love of the game and not the desire to emulate the stars of English premier league some of whom, sport a diamond or two in their ears!

* http://www.ampsoccer.org/nation_sites/sierra-leone/index.htm and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6346363.stm>