



# THE HIGH COST OF PLAYING THE DIAMOND GAME

By John Mack

For decades, people living in Africa's northern diamond-rich regions have been subjected to vicious thuggery by warlords fighting for control of the diamond producing areas – mainly in Sierra Leone, Angola and the Congo. But it was only in 2000 that the international media finally focussed the world's attention on the horrendous massacres and mutilations taking place. Ultimately, this resulted in an international collaboration to produce Certificates of Authenticity for all legally procured stones.

No level of brutality was deemed excessive and victims not killed outright suffered the lesser evils of rape and mutilation. A common practice was to offer the victims a choice of 'long sleeves' or 'short sleeves', meaning that one or both upper limbs would be severed – 'long sleeves' for wrist amputations and 'short sleeves' for amputations above the elbow.

This horrendous practice was carried out whenever and wherever resistance

was met – often in remote locations where there was little or no medical help available. The instrument of choice was the common machete although some of the perpetrators in Sierra Leone favoured the old-fashioned Navy broadsword. Many of those not killed outright often had to walk for days to seek medical attention with just a dirty rag wrapped around the wound.

Once an area had been 'secured', all the population would be put to work, closely supervised by armed gang members as they laboured in appalling conditions sieving the river gravels for diamonds. Any attempt to escape or steal a stone resulted in almost certain death if caught.

## NOT OVERLY SOPHISTICATED

In the more remote parts of the Third World the technology used to recover diamonds is not overly sophisticated. While a few people may own commercially made sieves, the majority just make their own from whatever is available from the local rubbish tip or from what they can

Above: Cut diamonds

'professionally forage' from any nearby mining company.

The frame is made from a green sapling bent into a circle about a metre in diameter. This is wired together and then laid on some mesh, which is stitched to the rim. The mesh aperture is usually about one-sixteenth or one-eighteenth of an inch. A few reinforcing wires are strung across the bottom to provide additional support for the mesh.

When sieving the gravels, the workers stand in the shallow water of the diamond-bearing stream – often illegally on active mining leases – and use the sieve like a jig, pulsing it up and down. On every 'up stroke', the sieve is flicked sharply to the right to get the material moving in a circular motion. This action of pulsing and rotating successfully concentrates the material leaving the light waste on the top, some of which will flow over the edge of the screen. The heavier minerals

are retained in the centre at the bottom of the sieve. When the concentration process is considered complete, the sieve is lifted and allowed to drain before being neatly flipped upside down on a bit of old sack cloth. While the jiggling action can be mastered quickly, getting a neat turnout takes a bit more practice.

### QUICKLY HANDPICKED

If it has been done properly, the diamonds, small nuggets and other precious stones will be sitting in the 'eye' – the very centre and on top of the heavy mineral concentrates. These are quickly handpicked and the waste discarded. A full sieve will take about two shovelfuls for a reasonable load – so it is very much faster than panning – but it plays hell with your back!

During the late 1960s, I spent time working for SLST (Sierra Leone Selection Trust) on their up-country diamond leases. This was before the bloody savagery started. Sure, there was lots of diamond thieving going on, both from the company's treatment plants and from our mining leases. Large gangs worked the leases, aided and abetted by the local workforce at the mine face. They had an excellent system of cockatoo's posted along the haul road to warn of the arrival of the 'White Master' or Security staff.

Given a warning from the cockatoos, the sieving gangs threw all their sieves and shovels into a pile that was immediately covered with a heap of waste by the dragline driver. All the IDM's (Illicit Diamond Miners) would then melt into the bush.

On one occasion we commandeered a haul truck, dressed one of the local security officers in the standard issue overalls and hardhat and then filled the back with security officers. This ruse passed the cockatoos without arousing suspicion. Arriving at the mine face the security officers managed to catch about 15 IDMs before the rest fled into the bush.

### FULL OF CONTRASTS

It was an interesting place full of contrasts. On one side there was the modern, comfortable, gated village for the mine staff with cottages dotted around the superb golf course and on the flipside were the tin shacks jammed together in the dusty, litter-strewn street where most of the local mine employees lived. Although well paid by the company, they lived in



**Top: Fancy coloured rough stones**

**Above: Uncut diamonds in their natural state**

squalid conditions, drank lots of palm wine and partied hard. Occasionally they enjoyed short-lived bursts of prosperity when they found and sold a large diamond. Short-lived because the money, often substantial, never lasted long. Word would spread and all the extended family from all over the country would arrive to share the spoils.

I once saw a late model Mercedes Benz parked outside a small group of grass-thatched huts. It had one or two wheels missing and possibly a door but the rest was still like new with only a few thousand miles on the clock. It had been taken over by scrawny bush fowls as a roosting spot and a place to stay out the monsoonal cloudbursts that occurred every afternoon.

Alas, for us expatriates, to be seen driving around in a Mercedes was a dismissible

offence. Only the temporarily rich IDMs and all the IDBs (Illicit Diamond Buyers) drove Mercs. The local taxi drivers owned only Peugeot 403s and 404s and the expatriate staff only drove VW Beetles.

Most of the local mine employees received two wages – one from the company and the second, a 'retainer', from their Lebanese buyer. The Lebanese had monopoly control of the illicit diamond buying business and also owned most of the other businesses in town.

### THE ULTIMATE STATUS SYMBOL

Often the buyers would offer the stone's current owner a new Mercedes and say,



**Above: Working the alluvial diamond streams**

**Above, right: Illicit miners on a mine lease**

£5,000 as a reward for supplying a good stone. In the majority of cases, a driver had to be hired as the individual couldn't drive but owning a chauffer-driven Merc was the ultimate status symbol. The money never lasted long – a few months at best – and then it was back to the mine face while the chooks took over the car.

Thefts from the treatment plants were also common and some individuals were highly skilled. A diamond could be 'lifted' from a sorting table right in front of you in less than the blink of an eye and, unless you were really on the ball, you would miss it. The workers also developed some clever strategies to steal diamonds when the plant was shut down on weekends.

In the diamond concentration circuit there were a number of large 16-foot diameter rotating 'puddle' pans covered with a strong, expanded metal security screen. On the side of the cover was an access hatch that was locked and sealed with the security guard's lead seals. The hinge consisted of strong hollow tubing with a three-quarter inch diameter steel rod inside with nuts welded on each end.

One day, when supervising some maintenance work, I was idly twiddling the welded nut on the end of the hinge when I suddenly got a strong feeling that something was wrong! It took me several minutes before I twigged that the nut welded onto the other end of the hinge was not turning. Further investigation revealed that the original hinge rod had been cut off and replaced with an identical one that was cut in the middle, where it was hidden inside the hinge tube.

### REVEAL THE DIAMONDS UNDERNEATH

On the weekend, when the plant was shut, the workers would scale the wire, slip the hinge bolt out from either end and lower the access door – still secured by the padlock and security seal. They would then scrape away the surface of the concentrates to reveal the diamonds underneath. After cleaning out the diamonds, they would throw a few buckets of water into the pan and pull the rakes around by hand so that any evidence of scratching or sorting was well obscured.

Throughout my first few weeks on the mine site I thought the workers appeared to be really rundown and tired. They always walked slowly with their heads bowed and eyes downcast. They also seemed to have many problems with their shoelaces becoming undone and were forever crouching down to re-tie them. Being a greenhorn it took me a while to work out they were just looking for diamonds on the ground.

In later years, while working on mines in southern Africa, it was apparent that a similar amount of thieving went on, some of it just for individual gain but in many cases forced on workers by criminal gangs.

The workers in these mines were contract employees who did six to 12-month stints away from their homeland. Back where they lived, gang bosses would contact them and demand that 'x' amount of diamonds be stolen and brought out by a courier – usually another worker returning home. Failure to do so would initially result in the wife being pack raped. The threats would then escalate to cattle being slaughtered, houses or trucks burned or even murder.

### DE BEERS MINES

The de Beers mines in Namibia (then South West Africa) were located in the very dry and dusty coastal sand plains just over the border from South Africa,

which is delineated by the Orange River. The de Beers mining company owned all the leases for hundreds of kilometres up the Sperrgebiet – 'Skeleton Coast' – that stretches northwards from the border. Oranjemund, the mining town located at the river mouth, was home to some 6,000 employees and owned outright by the de Beers Mining Company. This included the bank, supermarket, all the houses, the hospital – everything.

Being a very high security area, employees were only allowed to leave the lease and cross the river to the 'outside world' once a month – and even that had to be applied for a week in advance. On the day you departed, you caught the company bus to the security centre where both you and your baggage were X-rayed and searched. Then the bus took you to the northern side of the river where the garages were located. Here you could access your car that you had not seen since your last trip.

It was usually necessary to drag the 'donkey battery' up to get your car started and then you had the blow off the accumulated dust, inside and out. On average it took about four hours from the time you left your house to the time when you drove over the bridge to 'freedom'.

As you could imagine, smuggling diamonds out was not easy and all sorts of ruses were tried, with varying degree of success. The black contract workers tried to beat the security X-ray inspection by wrapping the stones in sheet lead and concealing them in their hollowed out boot heels. They knew X-rays could not 'see' through lead and thought they were on a winner but of course the X-rays showed large black inclusions in the boot heels that were immediately opened up.

### TAKE HOME TINS OF JAM

Another trick they tried was to take home tins of jam when they left at the end of

# THE HIGH COST OF PLAYING THE DIAMOND GAME

their contracts. Prior to departure, they carefully soaked off the labels, unsoldered the side seams and packed the diamonds in. The tins were then re-soldered and the label replaced. However, the security staff always opened anything they could not readily inspect – toothpaste tubes, shaving brush handles, blanket straps, everything.

One of the smartest schemes attempted by a white employee was to smuggle in a pair of homing pigeons when he returned to the mine after annual leave in Cape Town. This was only partially successful as he overloaded one poor pigeon to the extent that it got so tired after take-off that it crashed into the security fence and dropped exhausted. After that, homing pigeons were banned on site and any suspicious birds sighted were shot.

Another cheeky Afrikaans guy was passing out of the security gate when he was stopped for an X-ray search. 'Kannie worrie' (no worries) he said, placing his half-smoked cigarette on the counter ashtray. He went in and had his X-ray search and of course, it was all clear. Exiting the screening booth, he picked up his burning cigarette and headed for the door. However, one of the more alert security officers was on duty that day and called him back. The chap returned after flicking his cigarette out the door but the officer wasn't fooled and made him pick it up and bring it back in. It contained a very nice 2.7-carat stone.

## BLOODSHED WILL FOLLOW

Wherever diamonds are found and mined, corruption, thievery and usually bloodshed will follow. Diamonds are the currency of choice for international organised crime syndicates because they are easily concealed, largely untraceable and negotiable for currency, drugs and guns.

It was interesting to come to Australia and work at the Argyle Diamond Mine while it was still in the final evaluation and design stage. There was an initial belief amongst senior management that 'our people are all honest' and 'it's different here from the African mining scene'. This resulted in a security system design based on the assumption that diamond theft

would not be an issue. This lax attitude towards security prevailed for a few years until it was discovered that a \$50 million theft had occurred courtesy of an international crime syndicate and some corrupt mine employees.

Diamonds may be 'a girl's best friend' but they have also been responsible for much bloodshed and the wrecking of many lives around the world. The final fallacy is that they are a great investment. Go and buy a \$5,000 stone and then take

to half a dozen other dealers and see how much you are offered!

I recall a good friend who bought his new wife a stunningly beautiful Cape Yellow stone set in a ring. He was convinced it was a great investment.

"They appreciate at around 17 per cent a year," he proclaimed.

The smile left his face when I asked him how he would eventually 'cash-in' on his canny investment!



**The lethal aftermath of the diamond wars  
(Photo courtesy of Tom Claytor)**

