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Sierra Leone: UN investigation exposes continuing trade in arms and diamonds

Responding to reports in today's media (20 December) about a United Nations investigation into the trade in arms and diamonds in Sierra Leone, Amnesty International said, "This is not simply a question of the governments of Liberia and Burkina Faso directly contributing to a human rights catastrophe in Sierra Leone by using international criminal networks with tentacles in other African countries and the United Arab Emirates; it is also a tragic failure by powerful governments such as those of Belgium, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (UK) to set up proper regulatory systems to control arms brokers and transporters and traders in rough diamonds."

"This evidence is more than sufficient to demonstrate the urgent need for governments to take determined action to halt the arms-for-diamonds trade with those who are committing human rights abuses," Amnesty International said.

A diamond trader in Antwerp admitted to Amnesty International in October 2000, more than three months after the UN Security Council banned the export of non-certified diamonds from Sierra Leone, that: *"If someone offers me a diamond at 30 per cent discount, will I suspect something? Of course. It is probably a conflict diamond. Will I buy it? Of course. I'm here to do business. Have I done it? I can't tell you that".*

Amnesty International is calling for:

- the immediate grounding for inspection of all aircraft suspected of being used to ship arms and ammunition to rebel forces in Sierra Leone, including aircraft operated by Russian businessman Victor Bout, who is accused of arming the RUF and the Angolan armed opposition, UNITA; UN monitors should be allowed to interview the air crew and double-check all documentation, log-books, operating licences, way bills and cargo manifests of each plane, in order to report to the UN sanctions committee on Sierra Leone;
- the establishment by all governments of a strict registration and monitoring system for agents brokering or transporting arms, or supplying military training, backed with criminal sanctions; each transaction involving such agents should require a licence, issued in advance by their national government, even when the arms delivery or training takes place entirely in "third countries"; no licences should be granted for any arms transaction where there is a clear risk that the transfers will contribute to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law;
- immediate and effective steps to end the trade in diamonds from rebel-held areas of Sierra Leone, in particular those traded through Liberia, and a complete overhaul of the customs classification systems in diamond-importing countries, including Belgium, Switzerland and the UK, so that the origin, and not just the provenance, of diamonds is fully transparent; countries trading in rough diamonds should agree an international certification system to strictly monitor imports from countries suspected of being used by illicit diamond traffickers.

"Investigations by the UN panel of experts must continue to uncover the sources of the arms and the identities of the traffickers so that further arms shipments and rough diamond exports do not

undermine the fragile security situation in Sierra Leone and continue to pose a threat of atrocities against civilians,” Amnesty International stressed.

Amnesty International also urges the UN Security Council to provide sufficient resources for continuing investigation and to establish a permanent structure, staffed with independent experts, to monitor implementation of the UN embargo on arms and ammunition to rebel forces in Sierra Leone and diamonds from rebel-held areas.

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