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Global Witness warns Zimbabwe against exporting blood diamonds

Zimbabwe must not resume diamond exports from its troubled Marange diamond fields without prior permission from the Kimberley Process certification scheme, warned Global Witness today following a ruling by the Zimbabwean High Court apparently approving the sale of 129,000 carats of diamonds.

Exports from Marange were stopped last year, following reports of grave human rights abuses in the area. Investigators confirmed reports that the military had carried out widespread atrocities in the diamond fields, including murder, rape and forced labour.

The Kimberley Process scheme, which was set up to eradicate the trade in conflict diamonds, sent representatives to assess Zimbabwe's compliance with the scheme's minimum standards in July 2009. Following their visit, an action plan was agreed with which Zimbabwe needed to comply before exports from Marange could restart. There is no sign that the country has yet implemented the necessary reforms.

"What has been taking place in Marange is unconscionable and there is no way that exports should restart until the government can prove that it has taken the necessary action to end the abuses and hold the perpetrators to account," said Global Witness campaigner Elly Harrowell.

"If the government goes ahead with its plan to sell diamonds without prior approval from the Kimberley Process, it will be in breach of its commitments and should face suspension. Member states will need to act swiftly if they want to maintain the credibility of the scheme and protect consumer confidence in the international diamond market," said Harrowell.

Following the High Court decision, the Minister of Mines, Obert Mpofu, told state media: "We are going to benefit from our diamonds whether with the KP or not."

"If Minister Mpofu really wants the Zimbabwean people to benefit from the wealth beneath their feet, he should start by withdrawing the army from the area, which is responsible for serious human rights abuses and is still profiting from the illegal trade in smuggled Marange diamonds," said Harrowell. "Until this happens diamonds from Marange will continue to be tainted by violence and corruption".

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