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SW Radio Africa (London)

**Zimbabwe: Key Rights Group Quits 'Failing' Diamond Watchdog**

Alex Bell

5 December 2011

A key international human rights campaign group has announced that it has left the diamond industry's watchdog, the Kimberley Process (KP), in the strongest indictment yet of the monitoring body.

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UK based Global Witness said on Monday that the KP's "refusal to evolve and address the clear links between diamonds, violence and tyranny has rendered it increasingly outdated."

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Global Witness in recent years has played a key role in exposing ongoing human rights abuses in Zimbabwe's Chiadzwa diamond fields and has previously lobbied for strong action against the country.

But the group said that the KP "has proved unwilling to stop diamonds fuelling corruption and violence in Zimbabwe," condemning the group's decision to allow exports from Chiadzwa to resume.

This decision in November has been widely criticised by human rights groups and international members of the diamond industry, who have slammed the KP for appearing to sideline human rights concerns.

This is because the decision was made in spite of evidence of serious human rights abuses, ongoing smuggling and high level corruption at Chiadzwa.

The first auction of Chiadzwa diamonds, since the KP's decision in November, got underway in Harare last Friday, with Global Witness warning that the diamond profits could be used to fund violence in Zimbabwe's upcoming election.

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"Over the last decade, elections in Zimbabwe have been associated with the brutal intimidation of voters. Orchestrating this kind of violence costs a lot of money. As the country approaches another election there is a very high risk of ZANU PF hardliners employing these tactics once more and using (Chiadzwa) diamonds to foot the bill. The KP's refusal to confront this reality is an outrage," said Global Witness founding Director, Chairman Gooch.

The KP has faced intense criticism over its handling of the Zimbabwe situation, with rights groups accusing it of letting the country "off the hook." The group has repeatedly refused to give in to pressure to completely ban Zimbabwe from international trade, and instead made room for the country to fall in line with minimum trade standards.

But these standards have not been met. Mines Minister Obert Mpofu has admitted that smuggling is still rife.

Finance Minister Tendai Biti has admitted that millions of dollars in diamond profits are missing from the national coffers. And there are still reports of serious human rights abuses, including evidence of at least one torture facility in the area.

Martin Rapaport, the head of the US network of diamond affiliates the Rapaport Group, said on Monday that the KP has failed in its mandate, because "it does not relate to human rights abuses."

Rapaport said: "The fact that the KP is used to communicate that diamonds are not involved in human rights abuses is a lie. Its misinformation. Its false advertising. Everyone need to be very clear here, the KP does not examine or certify against human rights abuses. Full stop."

Rapaport said the threat the Zimbabwe situation poses to the entire diamond industry is very real, because people have no way of knowing where the diamonds they are trading in have come from.

He said it is now up to the industry to lead the way in ensuring that no diamonds on the market are funding oppression or conflict anywhere in the world.

"We are asking for a commitment from the industry not to trade in these diamonds. Not just our US and EU members, who legally cannot because of sanctions against Zimbabwe, but the whole industry," Rapaport said.

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