It's a far cry from the clean, mechanized mines of South Africa, but it's how much of Africa's gem stones are mined: men dig by hand in pits, gravel and stream beds, looking for telltale signs of that elusive stone that will make them rich - or at least bring in enough money to sustain them and maybe secure the family's future.

Over one million diggers search for diamonds this way in Africa. They make less than a dollar a day, while the global diamond trade nets an estimated $80 billion a year. But, economic woes are not the only human toll of the gem industry.

In countries like Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sierra Leone, diamonds were used by armed militias and rebels to fan civil war and inflict misery on the population. These became known as "blood diamonds." Global Witness was one of the first non-governmental organizations to focus on the issue. Speaking with VOA in London, Annie Dunnebacke says the group set out to document the tragedy of conflict diamonds.

"Sierra Leone is one of the most notorious cases where hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of the conflict that saw the eastern part of the country, where the diamond fields are, controlled by the Revolutionary United Front, a rebel group backed by then Liberian president Charles Taylor," says Dunnebacke. "Horrible destruction and havoc was wreaked, especially upon the civilian population really, because the diamonds represented an economic incentive for the war to continue."

The horrors of that war shocked the public, especially the scenes of innocent men, women and children with their limbs cut off by rebels, and youngsters being forced into combat. Efforts to publicize the link between the atrocities, the warlords and the diamonds paid off.

The movie Blood Diamonds helped. In it, Leonardo DiCaprio plays an ex-mercenary who sells arms to Sierra Leone rebels in exchange for diamonds. In the end, though, he gives up the business and helps publicize the illicit trade.

Global Witness was an advisor on the film, and Annie Dunnebacke says it had an impact. "I think bringing the message in sort of Hollywood terms to a much wider audience than possibly our reports get to, it does have value," she says.

Eventually, international pressure made the diamond industry sit up and listen. In 2003, the Kimberley Process came into being. It requires member governments to certify that exports and imports are free from blood diamonds. Industry associations said they would comply.

Tom Tweedy is a spokesman for DeBeers, the world's largest producer of rough diamonds. He says the Kimberley Process is a good way forward. "We have a system, and however imperfect it may be, it is probably the only comprehensive system of its type in the world," says Tweedy.

At the World Diamond Center in Antwerp, Director Philip Claes says that before the Kimberley Process, conflict diamonds accounted for 4 to 15 percent of rough diamonds traded worldwide. "Today, conflict diamonds account for only 0.2 percent of all rough diamonds traded worldwide," says Claes.

The emphasis is on certifying the origin of the diamonds to weed out goods traded illegally. Annie Dunnebacke of Global Witness says it's a good start but there are loopholes.
"There are huge weaknesses ranging obviously from porous borders in African artisanal producing countries and basic lack of infrastructure, corruption, things like this which are stopping the scheme from being implemented effectively, things that encourage a lot of smuggling, cross-border smuggling," she says.

In Johannesburg, diamond trader Janine Chaveau agrees. "I know quite a few people who are multi-millionaires who have never dealt in legal diamonds," she says, "it's always been illegal, blood diamonds."

Chaveau says she has been offered many undocumented diamonds. She says if they don't have papers, she doesn't touch them.

But, it's not just diamonds that are causing trouble. More than 90 percent of the world's rubies come from Burma, a poor country with a military government that controls the sale of gems. The trade helps maintain the government in power. Human rights activists are working to tighten sanctions against Burmese rubies.

But, like with diamonds, the potential profits are large and many are willing to look the other way.

Rights activists are hoping consumers will start to ask more questions of the jewelers to make sure that the gem stone they buy is not sullied by anguish and blood.

**Words**

- **account for** = to have a share of
- **anguish** = suffering, pain
- **artisanal** = to dig for diamonds with your hands and not with the help of machines
- **atروcity** = cruel crimes and killings
- **certify** = declare officially
- **comply** = obey
- **comprehensive** = complete
- **elusive** = hard to get, mysterious
- **encourage** = push, promote
- **fan** = generate, to stir up, provoke
- **gem** = very valuable jewel or rock
- **gravel** = small stones, used to make roads
- **havoc** = chaos, destruction, disaster
- **horrific** = terrible, awful
- **illicit trade** = buying and selling of illegal products
- **implement** = put into effect
- **incentive** = motivation, reason for
- **inflict** = cause
- **lack** = not enough
- **limb** = arms and legs
- **loophole** = a small mistake in the law; a way to get out of a situation
- **maintain** = keep
- **mercenary** = a soldier who will fight for any country or group that pays him
- **misery** = unhappiness, suffering
- **net** = to make a profit
- **notorious** = well known, but in a negative way
- **pay off** = to be successful
- **pit** = hole in the ground
- **porous** = with holes
- **potential** = possible
- **require** = to make necessary
- **rough diamonds** = diamonds that have not yet been cut or polished by industry
- **ruby** = a red jewel
- **scheme** = plan
- **sully** = dishonor
- **sustain** = to keep going, keep them alive
- **tighten** = to make tighter, stricter
- **toll** = a bad effect that something has
- **warlord** = boss of a rebel group
- **weed out** = sort out
- **woe** = misery, sadness
- **wreak** = do, inflict