

Congo suspended from world diamond trade

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) - A U.N.-backed body barred the Republic of Congo from the legitimate world diamond trade, accusing it of blatantly sending millions of dollars in smuggled gems onto the global market.

Suspending the west African country was "necessary to safeguard the credibility and integrity" of international efforts to block black-market conflict diamonds from the \$60 billion annual diamond business, said the group.

The suspension was imposed after a May 31-June 4 mission to Republic of Congo that concluded the country had smuggled in from surrounding nations virtually all of the reported 5.2 million carats Republic of Congo had been putting into the market each year through Europe and the Middle East.

Republic of Congo's officials trafficked the gems through the lesser diamond centers of Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates to

evade more rigorous controls at the world's diamond hub, Antwerp, Belgium, investigators said, in confidential findings first reported Friday by The Associated Press.

The Canada-based Kimberley Process Certification Scheme announced the ban in a statement released on its web site late Friday in Ottawa.

"The findings of the review mission are clear. The Republic of Congo cannot account for the origin of large quantities of rough diamonds that it is officially exporting," Tim Martin, the Kimberley Process chairman, said in the statement.

Kimberley Process dealers "must have complete confidence that conflict diamonds are not entering the legitimate trade," Martin said.

The Kimberley Process was established with diamond industry backing in late 2002. The effort came in response to growing world concern about "blood diamonds" that

fueled and funded 1990s insurgencies that killed millions of people in Angola, Congo, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The process is meant to track diamonds from mines to jewelry display cases, certifying their origins so as to keep conflict diamonds out of the system.

Forty-five countries have signed on to the process, representing 98 percent of the world diamond trade, Kimberley officials say.

Suspension closes legitimate diamond-trading channels to the Republic of Congo, barring the gems from Kimberley Process signatories including Belgium, the world's diamond-trading center, and the United States, which buys two-thirds of the world's diamonds.

Republic of Congo, which has little or no actual diamond production of its own, long has stood accused of dealing in smuggled diamonds from two diamond-rich, unstable neighbors - the

similarly named Congo, and the Central African Republic.

Investigators, in their report, found Republic of Congo was exporting diamonds at a rate "approximately 100 times greater than its estimated production."

Republic of Congo authorities subsequently were unable to account to Kimberley Process officials for the "massive discrepancy" of their large-scale exports "in the absence of any reported production or imports," Martin said in his statement.

Republic of Congo officials — apparently seeking to evade taxes and hide revenues — also were formally declaring the gem-quality stones in Switzerland at far less than their market price, investigators concluded: just 98 U.S. cents a carat on average, compared to the average market price of US\$75.90 a carat for uncut, unset stones. Republic of Congo denied

all the allegations. It denounced the suspension, calling it "arbitrary."

Expulsion of Republic of Congo throws into question "the credibility of the Kimberley Process," mining ministry official Louis-Marie Djama told the AP on Saturday. "I can't see what conflict diamonds could come into our country."

Djama accused other Kimberley Process nations, particularly neighboring Congo, of conspiring to have it banned.

Diamond-rich Congo and diamond-poor Republic of Congo face each other across the Congo River.

Congo was wracked by a 1998-2002 war perpetuated in part by combatants' desire to keep plundering Congo of its diamonds and other resources. Congo by last year managed to climb back up to the No. 5 position among world diamond producers.

Congo welcomed news of the ban on its neighbors.

"It is a small but important step to stabilizing the region," said Victor Kasongo, head of Congo's diamond regulatory body.

The suspension was the third worldwide from the Kimberley process, and the second active one.

Lebanon was suspended in March this year, because its president did not pass into law legislation making the Kimberley Process a legal entity in his country. It remains suspended. An international diamond embargo still stands on Liberia.

The West African nation was a major trafficker in smuggled arms and diamonds under former President Charles Taylor, who fled into exile last August.

A report commissioned by the U.S. Congress, and released earlier this week, urges broadening the Kimberley Process to block alleged African diamond trade benefiting terror groups, including al-Qaida.

Brutality

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Deputy Chief Paysinger, the commanding officer of the South Bureau, where the majority of the city's homicides occur, said the chief has spent more time in South Los Angeles than in any other section of the city as part of his effort to build a better relationship with the Black community.

"(Bratton) has lobbied lawmakers both locally and at the state and federal levels for more funding for police and youth-based programs," Paysinger said. "He's spent a lot of time in the community, but many don't know that or appreciate what he does. There is an incredible demand that is placed on a person in his position."

Sgt. Ronnie Cato, an LAPD officer and president of the Oscar Joel Bryant Foundation, which represents Black officers, said Bratton has made efforts to open up the department to African-Americans, a crucial step in changing the "racist" attitudes at the LAPD. His apology is another step in the right direction, especially since his remarks had discouraged some Black officers.

"When a man can humble himself to the point where he can go back into the public and apologize, to say he did something wrong and try to correct it, that has to be considered," Cato said. "People are going to be watching now though, to see if he's not another mouthpiece, but some-

one who will take action and make sure officers don't mistreat the community."

Cato said the foundation approached Bratton about the department's hiring practices that make it difficult for African-Americans to apply, such as credit ratings and prior drug use, the chief responded, a sign of good-faith.

Cato also would like to

see more emphasis placed on racial sensitivity training and more Black officers promoted.

"By hiring more Black officers (in positions of power), that has a scarecrow effect on others," Cato said.

"That helps counter racism and the discrimination that is so deeply embedded in the department."

Walters

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that the Republicans enjoy with Southern Whites, based substantially on racial solidarity, rather than class interests.

Right now, the Black leadership within the Kerry campaign is in a sorry state, since they haven't been able to posture the campaign to do its job. Rather, the campaign has made some symbolic gestures by picking a few members of the Congressional Black Caucus to represent it, but even they have not yet connected the campaign substantially to the Black community. Few advertisement purchases have gone to Black radio stations, only \$2 million total out of \$100 million spent by the party has been given to Black vendors and most local groups have received no funding as yet. It's late in this election cycle and Edwards has a big job to do and I hope for Kerry's sake he is asked to do it and gets about the task.

Ron Walters is a professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland-College Park.

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GNJ Family Life Center, a not-for-profit organization, is seeking a CPA to perform a review of its financial statements for the year ended June 30, 2004. The organization runs a youth service program with federal grants of over \$300,000. For further information contact Robert Weaver at (702) 648-1407.



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