All that glisters is not gold in rough diamond trade

Shoppers can do their bit to help stamp out trade in ‘illicit’ diamonds, writes Helen Fallon

Mohamed tells me how many of the people in his home village were diamond diggers, most of the 150,000 people who see shortcake and stew to recover rough diamonds. This type of mining is called “slice” or “arch” and has been carried out in Sierra Leone since the 1990s when British geologists realized the value of the rocks that littered the forest floor and river bed.

Neither Mohamed nor his relatives have become wealthy. Instead, they are exploited by local dealers who dictate the price of rough diamonds and smuggle them out of the country.

This means that the government, diamond miners and their communities, and the overall economy do not receive revenue from diamond sales.

Even where diamonds are sold through legitimate channels, the diggers are paid little over €1 a day and work without contracts. Health and safety regulations are either non-existent or ignored. A United Nations study estimated the number of children working in the artisanal diamond mines at 10,000.

This problem extends beyond Sierra Leone’s borders as diamonds are not cut or polished in Sierra Leone. Some 90% of the world’s diamonds are cut and polished in India and, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), conservative estimates indicate that 20,000 children in India are now employed in the industry, working 12-14 hours a day.

So what can Irish people do to help stamp out the trade in “illicit” diamonds and ensure Mohamed and the diamond diggers of Sierra Leone get a fair price for their rough diamonds?

It’s very simple: ask questions. An information leaflet launched yesterday by the Sierra Leone-Ireland Partnership (SLIP), in association with Appleby Jewellers, informs shoppers of the questions to ask retailers.

“Traditionally, four Cs are considered when buying a diamond. These are cut, colour, clarity and carat. We ask people to consider a fifth C — certification. When you purchase a diamond, ask for an independent certificate from one of the international diamond laboratories such as GIA, HRD or IGI. Also, ask about the shop’s policy when purchasing their diamonds and how they make sure they are not dealing in illicit diamonds.

Shoppers may not realize it, but they are in a strong position to influence the diamond supply chain and ensure illicit diamonds do not enter the legitimate market.

Internationally, a scheme to tackle the problem of conflict and illicit diamonds has been in place since 2003, called the Kimberley Process. Certificates which guarantee that stones are conflict-free should accompany all shipments of rough diamonds to and from participating countries.

In Sierra Leone, the government has made some progress to tackle the problem of illicit diamonds. But with an estimated $120 million worth of diamonds taken out of Sierra Leone in 2004 and about $3m of this obtained by the government, clearly diamond revenue is not being translated into basic social amenities such as water, electricity, healthcare and education.

As well as encouraging shoppers to exercise vigilance, SLIP is striving to highlight the need for the development of an ethical and fair diamond trade in Sierra Leone to ensure that miners and their communities benefit from their country’s natural resource.

Helen Fallon is the public relations officer of the Sierra Leone-Ireland Partnership, a registered charity, and visited Sierra Leone in March 2006. The information leaflet, endorsed by Trócaire, is available at www.ms-livia.ie or from The Sierra Leone-Ireland Partnership, 221 Pembroke Street, Dublin 22.