

Hollywood film threatens to take the shine off Africa's gem trade

The diamond industry has begun a campaign to safeguard its lucrative Christmas trade from what it fears will be a blitz of negative publicity resulting from a forthcoming Hollywood film about the trade in African "conflict diamonds".

De Beers, the world's biggest diamond company, plans to spend £8m on publicity this autumn, in advance of the release in December of *Blood Diamond*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, which threatens to make diamonds as unfashionable as fur.

In the film DiCaprio plays a South African mercenary who goes on a quest in pursuit of a rare pink diamond through rebel-held territory in Sierra Leone, a west African country whose civil war was fuelled by diamond smuggling, and resulted in 75,000 deaths

In real life, DiCaprio has become the poster boy for those who believe the diamond industry is wrecking lives.

The film has inspired a band of Kalahari Bushmen to advertise in the Hollywood magazine *Variety*, attacking the diamond business. The Bushmen, who claim they have been expelled from ancestral land in Botswana to make way for diamond mining, appealed for DiCaprio's support.

In an open letter to the star, they said: "After diamonds were found on our land we were evicted ... Those diamonds are a curse for us. We hope you will use your film to let people know that we too are victims of diamonds and we just want to go home."

In turn, Hollywood has been accused of trivialising the truth about African diamonds by some in the gemstone trade. Eli Izhakoff, chairman of industry body the World Diamond Council, said: "This movie, drawing attention to this subject, is something that happened years ago, something that was remedied."

The industry has set up a website aimed at countering a backlash from the film. *Diamondfacts.org* tells of the benefits the industry has brought to its workers and enlists the unimpeachable sainthood of Nelson Mandela, who describes the diamond industry as "vital" to southern Africa's economy. In Botswana, 25% of jobs are directly or indirectly linked to diamonds, while in Namibia the diamond trade is the second biggest employer after the government, the industry says.

The Bushmen are not the only African voices drawn into the debate. Patrick Mazimhaka, a Rwandan diplomat who is now deputy chairman of the African Union, wrote in a US newspaper recently that blaming diamonds for fuelling conflict "misses the fact that plenty of good can be accomplished with earnings from natural resources. With the right ingredients ... good governance and careful leadership ... commodities have been a tremendous force for continental good."

The industry claims conflict diamonds now make up less than 1% of those sold, compared with 4% in the late 1990s, the period in which the film is set. Conflict diamonds have been virtually eliminated by the Kimberley Process, a scheme which requires governments to track rough diamonds from mines to the polished stage, the industry says.

"This system that we've put together is not perfect, but we are making every effort to make it so," Mr Izhakoff told the *Guardian*. "We don't want one stone out there that's a conflict stone."

But not everyone agrees the problem has been solved. Jewellers in London's Hatton Garden diamond district said they had been approached directly by smugglers offering west African diamonds. Malcolm Park-Carpenter, manager of Channings jewellers, said: "The only thing we can do is make sure they're non-conflict through our sources. We don't buy from Angola or anywhere that it can be turned into arms.

There is a fear that controversy around the film will provoke a backlash against all African diamonds, an outcome both the industry and the campaigners want to avoid. "It would be terrible if the film led to Sierra Leone being seen as a pariah," said Ms Sanders of Global Witness. "Quite a few African countries with artisanal mining have weak control systems. What we really hope doesn't happen is that people say 'I'm not going to buy African diamonds'. What we want to do is protect the legitimate trade from Africa."