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Civil society walk out of diamond meeting over Zim

By Alex Bell

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A coalition of civil society groups on Thursday walked out of a meeting of the international diamond trade watchdog, the Kimberley Process (KP), saying negotiations with Zimbabwe were harming the scheme's credibility.

KP members have been meeting in the Democratic Republic of Congo this week, where Zimbabwe's trade future has been top of the agenda. The meeting has been pegged as the biggest test to the KP since its inception in 2003, when it was tasked with eliminating the global trade in 'blood diamonds'.

But the KP's civil society arm, which includes Global Witness and Partnership Africa Canada (PAC), said the KP is not meeting its most basic commitments to prevent diamonds from fueling violence and human rights violations.

Alan Martin, a researcher for PAC, told SW Radio Africa on Thursday that the walkout was in part prompted by an 'insulting' diatribe by Zimbabwe's Mines Minister Obert Mpofu on Wednesday. Mpofu told the KP meeting that 'racist' countries were trying to prevent Zimbabwe from selling its diamonds, and once again said the stones would be sold without KP approval.

Despite these threats by Mpofu and the ongoing reports of human rights abuses at Chiadzwa, the KP has still been trying to negotiate some kind of agreement with Zimbabwe. Martin said this was a sign that the KP "has drifted very far from its core values and KP members have lost touch with what the KP is supposed to be about."

Earlier this year the new KP chairman, Mathieu Yamba (from the DRC), made the shock unilateral decision to allow Zimbabwe to sell its stones, despite a lack of consensus from KP members. The watchdog group has been deadlocked since 2009 on how to move forward with Zimbabwe, and mainly Western countries have supported the country's continued suspension from trade until it is fully compliant with international standards.

But Zimbabwe's allies in the industry have backed Zimbabwe's return to trading, with countries like South Africa, India and China all pledging their support. The PAC's Martin said that "African diamond groups have decided to essentially side with Robert Mugabe over the people of Zimbabwe," who are not benefiting at all from illicit diamond sales.

"The role that South Africa in particular is playing in enabling Zimbabwe's diamond trade is nothing sort of tragic. On one hand they are mediating in the political crisis but on the other, they are actively

undermining that by giving ZANU PF a free ride with the diamonds,” Martin said, emphasising that it is ZANU PF and not Zimbabwe which is benefiting from diamond sales.

The KP was still discussing Zimbabwe’s future on Thursday evening and no decision had yet been made by the end of the day.



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