

# Mark Leftly: We owe it to Sierra Leone, and ourselves, to re-establish links

Parliamentary Business: Fund managers will say: 'Oh, no – I've seen Blood Diamond.' It's ridiculous.

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A boxing blue at Oxford University, Paddy Docherty has been fighting Sierra Leone's corner. The chief executive of Phoenix Africa, which specialises in building businesses in post-conflict countries, told a packed audience in Parliament's Attlee Suite yesterday morning: "As a place to do business, Sierra Leone is terrific, but the single biggest problem is perception. If I talk to fund managers in London about investing in Sierra Leone they will say, 'Oh, no – I've seen *Blood Diamond*'. It's ridiculous."

That Leonardo DiCaprio flick was set during Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war, which ended in 2001 after the deaths of an estimated 70,000 people. But this small West African country of beaches, rainforests and mountains hit 20 per cent growth on the back of an iron-ore boom in 2013, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Poverty was still widespread, but Sierra Leone, which gained independence from the UK in 1961 after more than 150 years of colonial rule, showed signs of developing a diverse economy based on mineral wealth, tourism and agriculture. A trio of London Stock Exchange-listed ventures – London Mining, African Minerals, and Sierra Rutile – had given the country a little commercial lustre, even if its own bourse existed in name only, with shares traded in just one company, Rokel Commercial Bank.

In May, the Ebola crisis struck. It has since killed more than 3,400 people in Sierra Leone and a further 6,118 in Liberia and Guinea, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Sierra Leone's hopes of foreign investment and export growth were ruined: a German executive who makes fruit juice there said yesterday that delegates at a conference would not risk shaking his hand when they realised where he worked.

London Mining went into administration and African Minerals closed a mine in the country's Northern Province, though in both cases Ebola compounded a crisis that had been caused by a sharp fall in iron ore prices.

Shares in Sierra Rutile, which makes an ingredient for white pigment used in paint, have collapsed from 61p at the start of May to around 20p today. But the company survived

the crisis, with no cases found among its 1,400 staff and hundreds of contractors. Sierra Leone's boom was halted, yet growth was still about 4 per cent. The number of new Ebola cases fell sharply in the first few weeks of the year. Figures have remained stubbornly flat in the weeks since, but Sierra Leone appears to be past the worst of the crisis.

Yesterday's event was hosted by David Lammy, Labour's candidate for London mayor, whose Tottenham constituency has a large number of Sierra Leoneans. It was the first effort by the country's Foreign Affairs Minister, Samura Kamara, to convince the world Sierra Leone is "open for business".

The presentations attracted City PR executives, women's rights activists, civil servants, West Africa-focused entrepreneurs, and members of Sierra Leone's UK-based diaspora. Monty Jones, the Freetown-born World Food Prize Laureate in 2004, and a Birmingham University graduate, used the platform to urge British Airways to resume flights to Sierra Leone.

BA cancelled flights on a route between Heathrow and Liberia, with a stopover at Lungi International near Freetown, on health grounds last August. Now aid workers, businessmen and people visiting their families must go through Belgium and Morocco to get Sierra Leone.

Stephen Phillips, a Conservative MP who visited Sierra Leone half-a-dozen times last year, and Christian Aid want the flight brought back into service. They believe direct flights are easier to monitor for people carrying the virus, and that their absence is hindering efforts to rebuild the economy now that the danger has largely abated.

Dr Jones says the shortage of flights is hurting the country's exports, while John Sisay, head of Sierra Rutile, argues that many businessmen cannot afford the extra time needed to fly in and out of the country. He also points out that the continued loss of such a major airline sends "a very negative message" that hurts the "flow of business".

Even if BA did resume flights it is likely that the Department for Transport would revoke its permission to fly there, which is what happened when Gambia Bird Airlines tried to re-establish a route from Gatwick. DfT officials and ministers would, it is reckoned, be unwilling to risk the scare headlines should BA's boss, Willie Walsh, approve a resumption of flights.

Dr Kamara told me yesterday he would be discussing the issue with Baroness Northover, the Liberal Democrat international development minister, this week. Sierra Leone will soon offer big investment opportunities in building electricity grids, hotels and roads, as well as privatisations in energy and banking. Re-opening that flight would not only be the right thing to do, it would also emphasise Britain's links with Sierra Leone – which, in turn, could prove a commercially lucrative decision.