

FEATURE

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Diamonds are a Colonel's Best Friend

I had left Hamrville in the morning, headed north. Slowly, the dry scrub-covered plains gave way to hills, then mountains. Every once and a while, evidence of past fighting could be seen—a burnt-out building, a destroyed tank. As the mountainous route became steeper and more perilous, I wondered if the old Lada would hold together. The driver stayed silent, with little knowledge of English made no effort at conversation. Eventually along the dusty road we encountered the last Brynanian Army checkpoint. The nervous young soldiers scrutinized my papers for half an hour. While I waited, I made some notes about the upcoming interview.



Through contacts with an the Icasian diamond trader, whom are friendly with some members of the Free People's Army (FPA) and 500 US dollars, I have a letter of safe passage into FPA controlled territory and instructions to head to the town of Eiku. There I met with a Colonel in the FPA.

Since their failed counter-coup attempt in 1995, the FPA forces have been continuing their struggle in the northern part of the country. They have been engaging in lucrative diamond smuggling operations into Icasia, as a means to fund their guerrilla activities. The well-equipped rebel force is primarily comprised of soldiers and officers loyal to General Rudolf Arvantidis old regime. When the counter-coup failed soldiers in the northern region refused to take orders from the new President and other loyalists fled to the North.

For the last 6 years the FPA has engaged in frequent squirmishes with soldiers and paramilitaries loyal to the government. The terrain makes fighting in this region difficult and with efforts concentrated on fighting the PFLZ the government has gained little or no ground. Recent reports linking the smuggling of diamonds to the fuelling of the bitter civil war in Brynanian have cast a new spotlight on the FPA. The FPA, perhaps in collusion with foreign mining companies are known to have smuggled millions of dollars in raw diamonds across the border into Icasia. The proceeds from diamond smuggling are largely credited with keeping this army alive and fighting. As a result the UN and other NGOs are calling for measure to ban the sale of these diamonds on the international market.

The soldier explained to me in broken English that the road is closed because of fighting. I hand him a hundred dollar bill and he waives my silent driver and I through. The next checkpoint is with be manned by soldiers from the FPA. When I pull up to the checkpoint the soldier's look tense and confused. I hear artillery in the distance. Maybe there really is fighting down this road? I show them my letter and I am told to get in a jeep, and leave my car and driver behind. I am searched; my camera and tape recorder are confiscated, a hood is placed over my head. Rather recklessly I am chauffeured on the bumpy roads for an hour until we reached the village. Inside what looks like the old police barrack I finally meet the masked colonel, smoking cigar, feet up on the desk. He motions for me to sit down, and pours me a

drink of something that tastes like rocket fuel. The Colonel, in eloquent English asks me about my trip, and then he asks me what I want to know about his army.

Colonel, it's been six years since your failed counter-coup, do you still have aspirations for the leadership of Brynania?

Of course, I do. General Hamra is incompetent and he betrayed my uncle like a dog. His leadership of this country has done nothing but harm to our integrity and security. He is failing militarily against the PFLZ. He is weak and will be forced to appease those traitors. Through the Free People's Army, those who were loyal to General Arvanitidis will one-day rule Brynania again.

Would you ever share power with General Hamra as a means to end the conflict?

Over my dead body.

Colonel, how does your Army sustain itself.

We have strong support from those who were loyal to my uncle's government throughout the region. They are committed to returning to power those with the wisdom to lead. We also engage in certain entrepreneurial activities.

Recent reports by the UN have accused the Free People's Army of diamond smuggling. Are they unfounded?

We are not ruthless smugglers, just ruthless soldiers. Every army needs funding, since we are temporarily without funding from the government we engage in certain business transactions that are possible in this region. Diamonds are available and we have the resources to transport them to the market. We control the supply that fulfills a high demand. As you can imagine the returns are quite good. What is wrong with that?

What is your relationship with the diamond companies in this region?

We are on good terms with many types of enterprises in this region. We follow policies that harbour mutually beneficial relationships with many enterprises. Business is business and I can say no more.

The UN has talked about placing sanctions on diamonds from this country, could this pose a threat to the FPA?

As I mentioned before, we merely supply a high demand, the sanctions will do nothing to crush the demand. It does not worry my fellow soldiers or me.

In the last six years, how has the struggle changed?

Our war has remained the same in many ways. We still seek to rule this country and to restore its integrity. However we are better equipped than we have ever been, morale is high, more and more soldiers join us every week. The will to be victorious is higher than ever!

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The Colonel and I continued to speak for a half hour. I politely sipped my drink. It burns my throat. He shows me his pearl handled forty-five and tells me about a recent fishing trip. He appears relaxed and confident that this struggle will be successful. In our conversation I try to steer the conversation onto the diamond trade, he largely ignores details but mentions that casually that they are the lifeblood of the FPA. Diamonds are a Colonel's best friend.

Disclaimer: This is not the real Time Magazine. Brynania is not a real country and exists as part of a fictional conflict simulation.
