

Politics and the Burmese Ruby Boycott

A few years ago, my wife and I purchased from our Thai suppliers some rubies that were probably from Burma. We wondered what the conditions were under which they were mined and cut, and if owning rubies from Burma was out of alignment with our values. This past October, after the brutal squelching of the Burmese pro-democratic movement resulting in scores of deaths, Burmese rubies have made the headlines. In October, the press, such as Reuters, CNN and Fortune Magazine picked up the term, "blood rubies," suggesting a comparison to the situation surrounding "blood diamonds." Sound bites may rule, but this one is misleading at best. Ruby mining in Burma, unlike diamond mining in Sierra Leone and Liberia ten years ago, is not resulting in the deaths of millions of people. However, with the blood diamond issue still fresh in the minds of the consumer, Jewelers of America, (JA) which represents 11,000 jewelers, urged a US boycott of Burmese rubies. This push for a boycott took place while the new term "blood rubies" was awash in the mainstream press. With lobbying from JA, the Senate and House recently passed bills to ban importing stones from Burma. Laura Bush said in a press release, "Every Burmese stone bought, cut, polished, and sold sustains an illegitimate, repressive regime," The Burmese government, however, derives the bulk of its revenues from the highly centralized international oil, gas, and timber corporations which are not covered in the boycott. Some lumber ends up in Home Depot via China. For the gem boycott to really affect the oppressive Burmese government, large ruby mines would have to be centralized and controlled, with a focused channel of distribution, such as government sponsored trade shows. According to my sources, this is not the case. When researching this article, I contacted multiple people in the gem trade. One of them is Edward Boehm, the current Vice President of International Colored Gemstone Association, (ICA) has been visiting Burma for years. He wrote in a letter to the New York Times that there are two primary ruby mining areas in Burma, and that most of the rough material is brought across the border to Thailand where it is sold to Thai dealers and cutters. According to Boehm, "the lives of hundreds of thousands of Burmese would be dramatically impacted by a boycott on all gem materials. Many of these independent artisanal miners and gem dealers directly or indirectly support democratic reforms. They are also often the ones who provide food and financial support to the monks and students who have been leading the protests. Therefore, the collateral damage of an all encompassing ban could negatively affect the very people we are trying to protect." Boehm is not alone among industry experts who are concerned about the boycott. David Federman, editor of Colored Stone believes the rubies are one of the most uncontrolled commodities in that country and that the generals don't get a "normal share" of the proceeds. Few in the jewelry industry have opposed JA's position. It is possible that my sources could be too narrow in their scope or too interested in protecting their own interests to be objective and reliable.

What seems to be most likely is that for JA and the jewelers that support them, the appearance of being politically correct and protecting the image and profits of the jewelry trade is paramount in decision making, even if it means undermining one of the economic roots that supports the pro-democracy movement in Burma. If this is the case, it is another situation where corporate profits in the jewelry trade trump true moral and ethical concerns. The lesson gleaned from the "blood diamond" tragedy concerns merely public relations, not morality. Any way you look at, the impoverished Burmese artisanal miners and their families will continue to suffer.

About the Author

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