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HOMEGROWN BLING

BIRKS NOW RETAILING A GIRL'S LOCAL BEST FRIEND

At an estimated \$4 million, 131 shiny new Ontario diamonds are now retailing at the BIRKS flagship store in Toronto until May 1, 2010. Accompanied by government certification, these crystals are the first specimens from the province's pioneer diamond mine, the De Beers Canada Victor Mine, opened in 2006 and voted as "Mine of the Year" in 2009. Located in the James Bay Lowlands near Attawapiskat, Victor operators have attempted to partner with local First Nations through joint ventures and work relations agreements, with such partnerships netting aboriginal businesses approximately \$167 million of the total \$1 billion in construction expenditures. Despite De Beers' initiatives in sustainability and community agreements, Attawapiskat First Nations have cited concerns of perceived inaction regarding water quality and mercury levels and discrimination on the job site. De Beers claims to mitigate such problems through sensitivity training and the alleged firing of six individuals accused of discriminatory behaviour, while also setting in motion a program of environmental site rehabilitation. Notwithstanding rehabilitative measures, conservation groups such as the Wildlands League and MiningWatch Canada fear that operations will have a significant impact upon the environmental and social fabric of the Lowland region, and have called for in depth environmental assessments.

Last year, two Victor diamonds found their way into Ontario's Legislative Mace – one cut and polished, and the other left in natural form. Hand-picked by the province's Chief Gemmologist, Ron Gashinski, the parliamentary bling represents not only Ontario's natural bounty, but also expectations that the mineral operations will generate more than 400 full-time production jobs and approximately 600,000 carats of diamonds a year during its projected 12-year lifespan. Jim Gowans, President and CEO of De Beers Canada estimates the mine will "create a \$6.7 billion in GDP economic impact, contributing to sustainable growth in the First Nation communities of James Bay, Northeastern Ontario and Ontario." In acknowledgement of a stipulation by Northern Development and Mines Minister Michael Gravelle, De Beers has agreed to remit processing of 10% of the mine's yield to Ontario industry, with cutting and polishing contracted to Sudbury's Crossworks Manufacturing Ltd., meaning the BIRKS gems mark the first time that diamonds have found their way from the mine to your ring finger all within one provincial jurisdiction.