



PRESS RELEASE

INTERNATIONAL ELEPHANT FOUNDATION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Garamba National Park Under Attack!

Yulee, Florida (July 13, 2004) -- Sudanese horsemen are slaughtering hundreds of elephants and the last northern white rhinos on earth in Garamba National Park. Garamba is located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) on the southwest border of Sudan, a country which UN officials describe as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Conservationists on the ground in Garamba suspect that such profits are being used to purchase weapons for the mounting arsenal wielded in Sudan. Poachers can fetch a good price for elephant ivory and rhino horn on the black market in Sudan. Rhino horn sells for upwards of \$1,200 per kilo (\$2,640 per pound). There is concern among some conservationists that there may be a linkage between these horsemen and the factions terrorizing the populace in Sudan's Northern Darfur Province.

The DRC is trying to stabilize after a civil war lasting six years. It is focused on conserving its rich natural resources for ecotourism and long-term benefits for Congolese citizens. The DRC (formerly Zaire) is the most biologically diverse country in Africa. With the largest portion of the continent's tropical forests, it tops the list for Africa in almost every group of organisms except plants (second to South Africa). In 1938, a northeast corner of the country comprising 4,900 square kilometers (1,892 square miles) was named Garamba National Park. In 1980, it was recognized as a World Heritage Site.

Within the southern part of the Park, there is an intensive protection zone (IPZ) of approximately 750 square kilometers (290 square miles) created for the genetically distinct subspecies of northern white rhinos – the only such population left in the wild. Today it is also the last refuge for most of the elephant, Congo giraffe, and other wildlife that have survived the massive commercial bushmeat exploitation from within the DRC and neighboring Sudan.

In the 1970s and 80s, poachers reduced the number of northern white rhinos from 500 to 15 and the elephants from 22,000 to 5,000. However, by the early 1990s, the rhino and elephant populations had recovered to double their low point – more than 32 rhinos and 10,000 elephants through the heroics of staff on the ground supported by a coalition of non-profit organization (NGO) funders.

The brave Garamba staff includes: Muhindo Mesi, long-time warden of the Park until his death in 2002; the Garamba Park guards, some of whom have lost their lives; and expatriates Fraser and Kes Smith who have served as conservationists in the park since 1984. Working with the official Congolese conservation authorities (ICCN - the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature), the coalition of NGO funders includes: UNESCO, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), US Fish & Wildlife Service (both the Rhinoceros & Tiger and the African Elephant Conservation Fund), United Nations Foundation, Save the Rhino International, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Zoological Society of London, and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), which has been the lead NGO in Garamba since 1998.

During the civil and regional wars in the DRC over the last 6 years, the determination of the staff and the funders maintained the status quo, at least in the IPZ where most of the rhinos live. Despite the loss of a few rhinos and many elephants, normal reproduction kept the elephants still in good numbers and the rhino population stable -- five rhino calves were born in just the past year.

This situation dramatically changed in mid-2003. The focus of poaching shifted from bushmeat to elephant ivory and rhino horn as poachers began to penetrate the IPZ. But the worst was yet to occur. Early in 2004, a wave of new poachers descended upon Garamba, causing unprecedented devastation to the wildlife populations there. Sweeping in from Sudan on horseback, and using donkeys for quick transport of ivory and horn across the border, poachers are killing animals at a rate that will within months or even weeks exterminate the remaining elephants in the Park and render the northern white rhino extinct in the wild.

This new incursion is highly organized and intensely dangerous. Last week, surveillance flights found 25 freshly killed elephants, including a family group of six dead together.

“The last contact that Garamba park guards had with these poachers indicates that they are characteristic of the Northern Sudanese. They appear to have Arab features and exhibit Arab language and culture. Mounted on horses, these poachers are well armed with heavy weaponry, and exhibit the discipline of trained military personnel,” says IRF’s Fraser Smith, at ground zero in Garamba.

Fraser and Kes have worked with ICCN in Garamba for 20 years, “But this,” they say, “is the toughest challenge Garamba has ever faced.”

An emergency strategy is in effect in Garamba, with a key priority to train and equip the guards so they can be more effective against the intensified and increasing attacks against wildlife in the Park. Providing additional support in response to the crisis are the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, WCS, WWF-US, Save the Rhino International and a number of other conservation groups. Emergency funds will strengthen Garamba’s anti-poaching teams, which are badly outmatched at this time. Recently, two park rangers in Garamba were killed in a confrontation with poachers.

IRF and its partners are calling upon the U.S. government and the United Nations, along with other governments, to swiftly and decisively address the theft and savagery of poachers in Garamba National Park. The financial support and public attention provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior as announced by Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton in her press release on 12 July 2004 (<http://news.fws.gov/NewsReleases/R9/B46A3301-65B8-D693-75B1D3B0AB6D6F50.html>) is a highly commendable and most appreciated response in this direction. The fortification of the Park must be accomplished within the next few months. Otherwise, the wildlife here will be lost for good.

But even a fortress strategy can’t succeed indefinitely. The problem needs to be solved at its origins in the Sudan. “These poachers fit the profile of the type of people who have wiped out the rhinos and most of the elephants in northern central Africa over the last 30 years,” says Richard Ruggiero of US Fish and Wildlife Service. “It’s time we take notice of the brutality and put an end to it.”

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