

Poaching a destabilising force in Africa



Analysis

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IN THE last decade alone, 1000 rangers in 35 different countries have been killed. Even worse is the thousands of lives lost in the wars and conflict that the poaching funded.

Yet many roll their eyes about environmentalists and conservationists' zealous work to counter rampant poaching on the continent. Too often it is dismissed as an environmentalist issue.

The reality is that poaching in Africa is simply no longer solely a conservation issue. As poaching reaches crisis levels there is an even bigger threat on the horizon.

Poaching also funds a wide range of destabilising factors across Africa. Nefarious organisations fuelling conflict and instability in places such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and Somalia rely increasingly on trafficking in contraband as a source of finance.

On the ground, ivory is bush currency for militants, militias and terrorists, and one of the most valuable pieces of illicit contraband for organised criminals and corrupt elites. Like blood diamonds and drugs, ivory and rhino is the new cash for criminals.

We are talking about big money. The overall black market for illegal wildlife trade has become the fourth most lucrative criminal activity internationally, after drugs, counterfeit goods and human trafficking, yielding \$19bn a year.

Professor Moses Montesh, from the College of Law at Unisa, certainly views rhino poaching as a new form of organised crime in South Africa.

He said that although details of the nature and extent of the Asian-run syndicates behind the illegal export of rhino horn from Africa to Asian destinations are still emerging, the levels of criminal organisation are clearly evident.

He believes there is also evidence to suggest that these illegal trading networks have links

KEY POINTS

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These illegal trading networks have links with other highly lucrative natural resource product trades

with other highly lucrative natural resource product trades, including abalone, ivory, lion bones, crocodile organs and live game.

The UN has repeatedly warned that ivory is now a major source of finance for armed groups and has led to the depletion of elephants in Central Africa.

According to the US International Conservation Caucus Foundation, "ivory and rhino horn are gaining popularity as a source of income for some of Africa's most notorious armed groups", including Somalia's al-Shabab, the Lord's Resistance Army and Darfur's Janjaweed.

Three years ago an investigation by the Elephant Action League (EAL) uncovered the link between al-Shabab and the illegal trafficking of ivory through Kenya.

EAL suggested that al-Shabab has been actively buying and selling ivory to fund its militant operations and that ivory trafficking "could be supplying up to 40% of the funds needed to keep them in business".

Several private security firms have warned that the Westgate mall attack in Kenya was funded in part by ivory poaching. A Kenyan investigation also found that al-Shabab and Somali criminal networks are profiting off Kenyan elephants killed by poachers using weapons leaked from security forces.

In Sudan, government allied militias, including Janjaweed are complicit in the Darfur genocide fund their operations by poaching elephants hundreds of miles outside North Sudan's borders.



BIG BUCKS: Poaching in Africa is no longer purely an environmental issue as wildlife contraband helps finance a wide range of politically destabilising activities. PICTURE: GALLO IMAGES

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, state security forces support the very rebels they are supposed to fight, providing weapons and backing in exchange for ivory.

Closer to home Mozambican organised crime has militarised and consolidated to the extent that it is willing to battle the South African army and well-trained ranger forces for rhino horn.

According to StopRhinoPoaching.com since the start of the poaching epidemic in 2008, South Africa has lost more than 2600 rhinos – a figure that despite so much effort increases daily.

Elephants, particularly north of South Africa's borders, face the same crisis.

Kenya's Ol Pejeta Conservancy will deploy drones later this year to help protect their rhinos. Kenyan wildlife agents also received training from British troops stationed in the country to help them fight heavily armed poachers.

Michael Fay, technical adviser to Gabon's national parks service, told a US congressional

committee that, without the aid of military and intelligence services, African governments would lose control of regions destabilised by poachers.

The Ichikowitz Family Foundation's intervention in South Africa is an example of this. To help combat poaching, the foundation is financing a pilot project in the Madikwe Game Reserve, along South Africa's northern border with Botswana to bring military-style training to the rangers.

Trained sniffer dogs are one of the most effective tools to hunt for poachers. That is why we have established one of the largest K9 training facilities in South Africa to provide trained dogs and handlers to national parks across Africa. We will also provide this support in Gabon.

We need to take dramatic steps to rid this continent of poachers to not save our wildlife, but make Africa as a whole a safer place. *Ivor Ichikowitz is an industrialist, philanthropist and executive chairperson of Paramount Group and TransAfrica Capital*

#TNAbizBrief, Ramaphosa : We are working to change SA

@CilliArsoul: seems that the DP is actually the prez at the moment

Japan bans child porn possession

@PlessisJacques: not a bad idea!

Rihanna 'In love' with cousin's baby

@tumietango: Why is this news?

@TheReal_limo: Arggh

Ramaphosa : SA's can go online and download the NDP plan documents

@Penxene: Data is too expensive

@samtshabalala: Heba Ramaphosa says South Africans must be proud of #E-toll

Ramaphosa: South Africans must gain interest in what happens in their own country

@NthepeGee: Im so tired of listening, i wanna see now

Ramaphosa: We see ourselves as part of Africa- we are working with other African countries and learning from them as well

@CindiMfanafuthi: Mr deputy President, what is there to learn from Uhurru Kenyata, Goodluck Jonathan because they failing their own?

Ramaphosa : One of the key issues we have to address is creating jobs

Masimbane87: When, where, how? Since 2009 same thing – boring

@khanyizama: The song continues

Wants economy growing by 5% in five years

@fardarter: Won't do anything to help it

Ramaphosa: We should not be shy about our good story – we have made tremendous progress

@AlidaWillem: what good story??? What progress???

President Zuma says agriculture is a key job driver

@Crysannel: True, agricultural is key, as long as we avoid GMOs. Keep it out of African soil