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The blood in Africa's poaching wars is not that of only elephants and rhinos.

In the last decade alone, 1,000 rangers in 35 different countries have been killed. Even worse is the thousands of lives lost in the wars and conflict that the poaching had 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 \$19-billion per year.

Professor Moses Montesh, from the College of Law at Unisa, certainly views rhino poaching as a new form of organized 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 organization are clearly evident.

He believes there is also evidence to suggest that these illegal trading networks have links with other highly lucrative natural resource product trades, including abalone, ivory, lion bones, crocodile organs and live game

The United Nations 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 (ICCF), '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-Shabaab, the Lord's Resistance Army (L.R.A.), and Darfur's Janjaweed.

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



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investigation also found that al-Shabaab and Somali criminal networks are profiting off Kenyan elephants killed by poachers using weapons leaked from security forces.

A UN report on the Democratic Republic of the Congo released in January, said the slaughter of elephants in the Democratic Republic of the Congo "is one of the most tragic consequences of years of war and poor governance. Driven by growing demand in Asia and increases in prices, poaching by armed groups and criminal networks has decimated elephant populations throughout eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo".

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

The statistics of the carnage speak for themselves.

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

Elephants, particularly north of South Africa's borders, face the same crisis. Between 25 000 and 35 000 elephants are reportedly being killed in Africa every year for their tusks. Conservationists say at least half of the elephant population in Gabon has been slaughtered for their valuable ivory.

Until recently South Africa's elephants were considered safe, despite the carnage in neighbouring Mozambique. But a couple of weeks ago poachers killed an elephant near Pafuri elephant, believed to have been the first elephant in many years that was targeted for its ivory. The suspects were likely organised crime syndicates from Mozambique.

In many instances it is the rangers and government conservation organisations that stand between the criminals and the poachers. And in the majority of the cases, the rangers are horribly outgunned.

You simply can't bring sticks to a gunfight – you need sleek military and tech equipment to out manoeuvre the sophistication of the poachers, who are backed up by powerful crime syndicates with deep pockets. Many of the poachers are indeed soldiers or trained militia who will not hesitate to kill a ranger.

There is a growing school of thought that a firm militaristic intervention is needed to quash the poachers, including the use of large infantry and Special Forces units. Anti-poaching units need hi-tech surveillance night-vision goggles, GPS trackers, and even drones.

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 destabilized 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



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Africa's northern border with Botswana to bring military-style training to the rangers. The program puts the rangers through an intensive six-week training program, overseen by former Special Task soldiers from around the world. The project will grow into other areas where rhino poaching has reached a crisis point. Next month we will expand the ranger military training to national parks in Gabon.

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.

Rangers learn combat training, target shooting, building camouflage netting to ambush the poachers and are introduced with new equipment to combat poaching.

The Foundation also donated military helicopters and aircraft to the Kruger National Park.

We can no longer afford to simply talk about the problem. Practical solutions such as aircraft and its surveillance capabilities, as well as equipping rangers at the forefront of the fight are the only way to make a real difference. We need to take dramatic steps to rid this country of poachers to not only save our wildlife, but make Africa as a whole a safer place.
