The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/TTkmVT

AFRICA

Elephants Dying in Epic Frenzy as Ivory Fuels Wars and Profits

By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN SEPT. 3, 2012

GARAMBA NATIONAL PARK, Democratic Republic of Congo — In 30 years of fighting poachers, Paul Onyango had never seen anything like this. Twenty-two dead elephants, including several very young ones, clumped together on the open savanna, many killed by a single bullet to the top of the head.

There were no tracks leading away, no sign that the poachers had stalked their prey from the ground. The tusks had been hacked away, but none of the meat — and subsistence poachers almost always carve themselves a little meat for the long walk home.

Several days later, in early April, the Garamba National Park guards spotted a Ugandan military helicopter flying very low over the park, on an unauthorized flight, but they said it abruptly turned around after being detected. Park officials, scientists and the Congolese authorities now believe that the Ugandan military — one of the Pentagon's closest partners in Africa — killed the 22 elephants from a helicopter and spirited away more than a million dollars' worth of ivory.

"They were good shots, very good shots," said Mr. Onyango, Garamba's chief ranger. "They even shot the babies. Why? It was like they came here to destroy everything."

Africa is in the midst of an epic elephant slaughter. Conservation groups say poachers are wiping out tens of thousands of elephants a year, more than at any time in the previous two decades, with the underground ivory trade becoming increasingly militarized.

Like blood diamonds from Sierra Leone or plundered minerals from Congo, ivory, it seems, is the latest conflict resource in Africa, dragged out of remote battle zones, easily converted into cash and now fueling conflicts across the continent.

Some of Africa's most notorious armed groups, including the Lord's Resistance Army, the Shabab and Darfur's janjaweed, are hunting down elephants and using the tusks to buy weapons and sustain their mayhem. Organized crime syndicates are linking up with them to move the ivory around the world, exploiting turbulent states, porous borders and corrupt officials from sub-Saharan Africa to China, law enforcement officials say.

But it is not just outlaws cashing in. Members of some of the African armies that the American government trains and supports with millions of taxpayer dollars — like the Ugandan military, the Congolese Army and newly independent South Sudan's military — have been implicated in poaching elephants and dealing in ivory.

Congolese soldiers are often arrested for it. South Sudanese forces frequently battle wildlife rangers. Interpol, the international police network, is now helping to investigate the mass elephant killings in the Garamba park, trying to match DNA samples from the animals' skulls to a large shipment of tusks, marked "household goods," recently seized at a Ugandan airport.

The vast majority of the illegal ivory — experts say as much as 70 percent — is flowing to China, and though the Chinese have coveted ivory for centuries, never before have so many of them been able to afford it. China's economic

boom has created a vast middle class, pushing the price of ivory to a stratospheric $1,000 per pound on the streets of Beijing.

High-ranking officers in the People's Liberation Army have a fondness for ivory trinkets as gifts. Chinese online forums offer a thriving, and essentially unregulated, market for ivory chopsticks, bookmarks, rings, cups and combs, along with helpful tips on how to smuggle them (wrap the ivory in tinfoil, says one Web site, to throw off X-ray machines).

Last year, more than 150 Chinese citizens were arrested across Africa, from Kenya to Nigeria, for smuggling ivory. And there is growing evidence that poaching increases in elephant-rich areas where Chinese construction workers are building roads.

"China is the epicenter of demand," said Robert Hormats, a senior State Department official. "Without the demand from China, this would all but dry up."

He said that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who condemned conflict minerals from Congo a few years ago, was pushing the ivory issue with the Chinese "at the highest levels" and that she was "going to spend a considerable amount of time and effort to address this, in a very bold way."

Foreigners have been decimating African elephants for generations. "White gold" was one of the primary reasons King Leopold II of Belgium turned Congo into his own personal fief in the late 19th century, leading to the brutal excesses of the upriver ivory stations thinly fictionalized in Joseph Conrad's novel "Heart of Darkness" and planting the seeds for Congo's free fall today.

Ivory Coast got its name from the teeming elephant herds that used to frolic in its forests. Today, after decades of carnage, there is almost no ivory left.

The demand for ivory has surged to the point that the tusks of a single adult elephant can be worth more than 10 times the average annual income in many African countries. In Tanzania, impoverished villagers are poisoning pumpkins and rolling them into the road for elephants to eat. In Gabon, subsistence hunters deep in the rain forest are being enlisted to kill elephants and hand over the tusks, sometimes for as little as a sack of salt.

Last year, poaching levels in Africa were at their highest since international monitors began keeping detailed records in 2002. And 2011 broke the record for the amount of illegal ivory seized worldwide, at 38.8 tons (equaling the tusks from more than 4,000 dead elephants). Law enforcement officials say the sharp increase in large seizures is a clear sign that organized crime has slipped into the ivory underworld, because only a well-oiled criminal machine — with the help of corrupt officials — could move hundreds of pounds of tusks thousands of miles across the globe, often using specially made shipping containers with secret compartments.

The smugglers are "Africa-based, Asian-run crime syndicates," said Tom Milliken, director of the Elephant Trade Information System, an international ivory monitoring project, and "highly adaptive to law enforcement interventions, constantly changing trade routes and modus operandi."

Conservationists say the mass kill-offs taking place across Africa may be as bad as, or worse than, those in the 1980s, when poachers killed more than half of Africa's elephants before an international ban on the commercial ivory trade was put in place.

"We're experiencing what is likely to be the greatest percentage loss of elephants in history," said Richard G. Ruggiero, an official with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Some experts say the survival of the species is at stake, especially when many members of the African security services entrusted with protecting the animals are currently killing them.

"The huge populations in West Africa have disappeared, and those in the center and east are going rapidly," said Andrew Dobson, an ecologist at Princeton. "The question is: Do you want your children to grow up in a world without elephants?"

'We Shoot First'

Garamba National Park is a big, beautiful sheet of green, 1,900 square miles, tucked in the northeastern corner of Congo. Picture a sea of chest-high elephant grass, swirling brown rivers, ribbons of papyrus and the occasional black-and-white secretary bird swooping elegantly through rose-colored skies. Founded in 1938, Garamba is widely considered one of Africa's most stunning parks, a naturalist's dream.

But today, it is a battlefield, with an arms race playing out across the savanna. Every morning, platoons of Garamba's 140 wildlife rangers suit up with assault rifles, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. Luis Arranz, the park manager, wants to get surveillance drones, and the nonprofit organization that runs the park is considering buying night-vision goggles, flak jackets and pickup trucks with mounted machine guns.

"We don't negotiate, we don't give any warning, we shoot first," said Mr. Onyango, the chief ranger, who worked as a game warden in Kenya for more than 20 years. He rose to a high rank but lost his job after a poaching suspect died in his custody after being whipped.

"Out here, it's not michezo," Mr. Onyango said, using the Swahili word for games.

In June, he heard a burst of gunfire. His rangers did a "leopard crawl" on their bellies for hours through the scratchy elephant grass until they spied poachers hacking several elephants. The instant his squad shot at the poachers, the whole bush came alive with crackling gunfire.

"They opened up on us with PKMs, AKs, G-3s, and FNs," he said. "Most poachers are conservative with their ammo, but these guys were shooting like they were in Iraq. All of a sudden, we were outgunned and outnumbered."

Both of the rangers' old belt-fed machine guns jammed that day, and they narrowly escaped (11 have been killed since 2008 and some of the rangers' children have even been kidnapped). Later investigation showed that the poachers were members of the Lord's Resistance Army, a brutal rebel outfit that circulates in central Africa, killing villagers and enslaving children. American Special Operations troops are helping several African armies hunt down the group's phantom of a leader, Joseph Kony, who is believed to be hiding in a remote corner of the Central African Republic.

Ivory may be Mr. Kony's new lifeline.

Several recent escapees from the L.R.A. said that Mr. Kony had ordered his fighters to kill as many elephants as possible and send him the tusks.

"Kony wants ivory," said a young woman who was kidnapped earlier this year near Garamba and did not want to be identified because she was still terrified. "I heard the other rebels say it many times: 'We need to get ivory and send it to Kony.' "

She said that in her four months in captivity, before she ran away one night when the rebels got drunk, she saw them kill 10 elephants, wrap the tusks in cloth sacks and send them to Mr. Kony at his hiding place.

Other recent escapees said that the group had killed at least 29 elephants since May, buying guns, ammunition and radios with the proceeds. Mr. Kony may be working with Sudanese ivory traders. One ivory retailer in Omdurman, Sudan, who openly sells ivory bracelets, prayer beads and carved tusks, said the Lord's Resistance Army was one source of the ivory he saw.

"The L.R.A. works in this, too; that's how they buy their weapons," the shopkeeper said matter-of-factly. That made sense, American officials said, given Mr. Kony's few sources of income.

Several Sudanese ivory traders said the ivory from Congo and the Central African Republic moved overland across Sudan's vast western desert region of Darfur and then up to Omdurman, all with the help of corrupt Sudanese officials. There is a well-worn practice in Sudan called "buying time," in which smugglers pay police officers and border guards for a specified amount of time to let a convoy of illegal goods slip through checkpoints.

But there are many routes. On Africa's east coast, Kenya's port city of Mombasa is a major transshipment center. A relatively small percentage of containers in Mombasa is inspected, and ivory has been concealed in shipments of everything from avocados to anchovies. Sometimes it is wrapped in chili peppers, to throw off the sniffer dogs.

On the west coast, in the Gulf of Guinea, "there is a relatively recent phenomenon of well-armed, sophisticated poachers who load their ivory onto Chinese fishing ships," one senior American official said.

Chinese officials declined to discuss any aspect of the ivory trade, with one representative of the Forestry Ministry, which handles ivory issues, saying, "This is a very sensitive topic right now."

Several Sudanese ivory traders and Western officials said that the infamous janjaweed militias of Darfur were also major poachers. Large groups of janjaweed — the word means horseback raider — were blamed for killing thousands of civilians in the early 2000s, when Darfur erupted in ethnic conflict. International law enforcement officials say that horseback raiders from Darfur wiped out thousands of elephants in central Africa in the 1980s. Now they suspect that hundreds of janjaweed militiamen rode more than 600 miles from Sudan and were the ones who slaughtered at least 300 elephants in Bouba Ndjida National Park in Cameroon this past January, one of the worst episodes of elephant slaughter recently discovered.

In 2010, Ugandan soldiers, searching for Mr. Kony in the forests of the Central African Republic, ran into a janjaweed ivory caravan. "These guys had 400 men, pack mules, a major camp, lots of weapons," a Western official said. A battle erupted and more than 10 Ugandans were killed.

"It just shows you the power of poaching, how much money you can make stacking up the game," the official said.

Businessmen are clearly bankrolling these enormous ivory expeditions, both feeding off and fueling conflict, Western officials and researchers say.

"This is not just freelance stuff," said Mr. Hormats, the State Department official. "This is organized crime."

Paul Elkan, a director at the Wildlife Conservation Society, said that the janjaweed sweeping across central Africa on ambitious elephant hunts "goes much deeper than a bunch of guys coming in on horses. It has to do with insecurity and lawlessness."

Perhaps no country in Africa is as lawless as Somalia, which has languished for more than 20 years without a functioning central government, spawning Islamist militants, gunrunners, human traffickers and modern-day pirates. Ivory has entered this illicit mix.

Several Somali elders said that the Shabab, the militant Islamist group that has pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda, recently began training fighters to infiltrate neighboring Kenya and kill elephants for ivory to raise money.

One former Shabab associate said that the Shabab were promising to "facilitate the marketing" of ivory and have encouraged villagers along the Kenya-Somalia border to bring them tusks, which are then shipped out through the port of Kismayo, a notorious smuggling hub and the last major town the Shabab still control.

"The business is a risk," said Hassan Majengo, a Kismayo resident with knowledge of the ivory trade, "but it has an exceptional profit."

'Easy Money'

That profit is not lost on government soldiers in central Africa, who often get paid as little as $100 a month, if they get paid at all.

In Garamba, the park rangers have arrested many Congolese government soldiers, including some caught with tusks, slabs of elephant meat and the red berets often worn by the elite presidential guard.

"An element of our army is involved," acknowledged Maj. Jean-Pierrot Mulaku, a Congolese military prosecutor. "It's easy money."

Congolese soldiers have a long history of raping and killing civilians and pilfering resources. According to a report written in 2010 by John Hart, an American scientist and one of the top elephant researchers in Congo, the "Congolese military are implicated in almost all elephant poaching," making the military "the main perpetrator of illegal elephant killing in D.R.C."

The Garamba rangers and a Congolese government intelligence officer said that they also routinely battled soldiers from the Sudan People's Liberation Army, the military of South Sudan. A South Sudanese military spokesman denied that, saying that the soldiers "didn't have time" for poaching.

The American government has provided $250 million in nonlethal military assistance to South Sudan during the past several years. In May, the Garamba rangers said they had opened fire on four South Sudanese soldiers who had poached six elephant tusks. The rangers said they killed one soldier, though they did not seem to think too much about it.

"I've killed too many people to count," said Alexi Tamoasi, a veteran ranger.

But the suspected helicopter poaching is something new.

Mr. Onyango said the strange way the elephant carcasses were found, clumped in circles, with the calves in the middle for protection, was yet another sign that a helicopter had corralled them together because elephants usually scatter at the first shot.

African Parks, the South Africa-based conservation organization that manages Garamba, has photographs of an Mi-17 military transport helicopter flying low over the park in April and said it had traced the chopper's registration number to the Ugandan military.

Col. Felix Kulayigye, a spokesman for the Ugandan military, acknowledged that the helicopter was one of its aircraft. But he said that the poaching allegation was a "baseless rumor" and that he knew "for sure" that Lord's Resistance Army members were "well known" poachers in that area.

John Sidle, an American from Nebraska who works as a pilot at Garamba, said, "What bothers me is that it's probably American taxpayer money paying for the jet fuel for the helicopter."

The United States has paid tens of millions of dollars in recent years for fuel and transport services for the Ugandan Army to hunt down Mr. Kony in central Africa, while training Congolese and South Sudanese to help. But the State Department said it had no evidence that the Ugandan military was responsible for the Garamba killings, nor knowledge that any of the African soldiers involved in the Kony hunt had engaged in poaching. It did not address the broader history of poaching by American-supported militaries.

In June, 36 tusks were seized at the Entebbe airport in Uganda. Eighteen of the 22 elephants killed in Garamba in March were adults that had their ivory hacked out, which would usually mean 36 tusks. The little stubs of ivory on

the dead calves had been left untouched.

In 1989, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species passed a moratorium on the international commercial trade of African elephant ivory, except under a few rare circumstances. No one knows how many elephants are being poached each year, but many leading conservationists agree that "tens of thousands" is a safe number and that 2012 is likely to be worse than 2011.

The total elephant population in Africa is a bit of a mystery, too. The International Union for Conservation of Nature, a global conservation network, estimates from 472,269 to 689,671. But that is based on information from 2006. Poaching has dramatically increased since then, all across the continent.

Some of the recently poached elephants had been sexually mutilated, with their genitals or nipples cut off, possibly for sale — something researchers said they had not encountered before.

"It's very disturbing," said Iain Douglas-Hamilton, the founder of Save the Elephants, who recently testified at a Senate hearing on ivory and insecurity.

'Like the Drug War'

Mr. Arranz, Garamba's director, has an exhausted look in his eyes. History is against him. Garamba was founded more than 70 years ago, in part to protect the rare northern white rhinoceros, which used to number more than 1,000 here. But many people in Asia believe that ground rhino horn is a cure for cancer and other ills, and it fetches nearly $30,000 a pound, more than gold. In the past few decades, as Congo has descended into chaos, rhino poachers have moved into Garamba. The park's northern white rhinos were among the last ones in the wild anywhere, but rangers have not seen any for the past five years.

Garamba faces a seemingly endless number of challenges, many connected to the utter state failure of Congo itself. Some of the rangers are poachers themselves, killing the animals they are entrusted to protect, saying their salaries are too low to live on.

"I was hungry," explained Anabuda Bakuli, a ranger jailed for killing a waterbuck.

It does not help that many Garamba rangers are, by their own admission, alcoholics and run up debts at the bar not far from park headquarters. Mr. Onyango, the chief, is known to drink several liters of beer in a single sitting. He talks about "the stress."

Poaching rates are now the highest here in central Africa, a belt of some of the most troubled countries in the world. In Chad, heavily armed horsemen, who many conservationists say were janjaweed, recently killed 3,000 elephants in just a few years.

Garamba once had more than 20,000 elephants. Last year, there were around 2,800. This year, maybe 2,400.

Every morning, if the skies are clear, Mr. Arranz flies above Garamba in a small two-seat plane, the equivalent of a Mazda Miata with wings. The emerald green savanna stretches out below him, a breathtaking sight at dawn.

But the other day, he saw something that furrowed his brow: vultures.

The next day, after a hike through the tall grass, the stench grew unbearable and the air reverberated with the sizzle of thousands of flies. "Poached," Mr. Arranz said, as he discovered a dead elephant, its face cut off.

Nearby were the ashes of a small campfire.

"These guys were out here for a while," he said. "If they were willing to do this for one elephant. ..." His voice trailed off.

"It's like the drug war," he said later. "If people keep buying and paying for ivory, it's impossible to stop it."

Isma'il Kushkush contributed reporting from Omdurman, Sudan; Mia Li from Beijing; and a Somali journalist from Mogadishu, Somalia.

A version of this article appears in print on September 4, 2012, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Elephants Dying in Epic Frenzy As Ivory Fuels Wars and Profits.
