

(Written in the summer of 2012, this piece on the illegal wildlife trade was never published, but nearly all of it found its way, in bits and pieces, into other materials.)

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*“To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe,” Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness.*

Another war is being waged across the heart of Africa; a war that hasn’t made many headlines yet despite the threat it poses to the security and stability of regional U.S. allies. Africa’s newest killing fields are its national parks and game preserves and the spoils of this war are the continent’s new “blood diamonds”: elephant ivory and rhino horn.

Driven by demand from newly affluent Asian consumers, particularly in China and Vietnam, the killing of African elephants and rhinos has surged to levels unseen in decades. In just the past five years, rhino poaching in South Africa witnessed more than a 30-fold increase, from 13 recorded kills in 2007 to 448 in 2011, with this year well on its way to shattering that record. Last year also saw the largest number of major ivory seizures ever recorded—more than 24 tons of tusks from at least 2,500 elephants. Because seizures represent only a fraction of the trade, conservationists estimate the real toll may be five to 10 times higher. At this rate, two of Africa’s most important and iconic species may disappear from the continent well before the century turns 50.

This is a conservation crisis, to be sure. But with rhino horn now selling for more than its weight in gold, poaching has metastasized into something much more than that: a methodical, mechanized and highly militarized venture linked to organized crime and controlled by militias, insurgencies and tribal warlords. Many of today’s poachers are combat-hardened veterans of conflict armed with automatic weapons, grenade launchers and night vision equipment.

These groups include the remnants of forces responsible for some of sub-Saharan Africa’s worst atrocities—among them Janjaweed militiamen who slaughtered tens of thousands of civilians in Darfur and Hutu rebels led by a general who helped direct the Rwandan genocide. They are Africa’s zombie armies: predatory outcasts from wars long since won or lost. With many of their leaders facing death or imprisonment if they return home, they have little choice but to hang on in the jungle, looting villages, terrorizing local communities and supplying the burgeoning wildlife trade with elephant ivory and rhino horn in exchange for guns, cash and ammunition.

Poaching is not the only illegal activity sustaining these groups, prolonging their conflicts long after they might otherwise have ended. Exploitable resources such as timber, rough-cut

diamonds and coltan, an ore used in cell phones and computers, have all played a part in sustaining central Africa's chronic violence. But with demand from Asia's nouveau riche driving up prices, poaching has moved to the head of the line of highly profitable and relatively low risk criminal enterprises.

The risk is low in central Africa because parks and reserves are understaffed, poorly patrolled and located for the most part in remote areas, far from capital cities and often close to porous international borders. State authority is weak or non-existent and corruption dilutes what little enforcement capacity there is. Sudanese raiders, for instance, met virtually no resistance when they invaded northeastern Cameroon's Bouda N'Djida National Park last January, slaughtering more than 300 elephants over several weeks before the belated arrival of government troops from the distant capital of Yaounde. Even when poachers are caught, successful prosecutions are rare and penalties are light.

Enforcement is better in South Africa, home to nearly three-quarters of the continent's remaining rhino population. But with a single rhino horn worth as much as \$500,000 on the black market, officials have been hard pressed to keep up with paramilitary poaching syndicates and their increasingly sophisticated arsenals, which include helicopters.

Little wonder, then, that the illegal wildlife trade has burgeoned into a \$10 billion annual business—a sum more than twice the value of the illicit trade in diamonds, gold and small arms combined. Criminal cartels—often the same ones that deal in drugs, guns and human trafficking—control the trade at the international level, interacting with corrupt governments, rebel militias and other suppliers through a shadowy network of intermediaries, some of whom have suspected links to terrorism.

Curbing this trade is a formidable task, but not an insurmountable one. The threat has grown, but so has the resolve of both source and demand side countries to confront it. China is stepping up efforts to crack down on the illegal wildlife market within its borders and eight central African governments recently signed a watershed agreement to coordinate their wildlife law enforcement efforts. The Obama Administration played a key role in helping to secure this accord, known by its French acronym PAPECALF, and African heads of state are expected to endorse it when they come to New York next month for the opening of the U.N. General Assembly.

More must happen for this effort to succeed, however. With limited capacity of their own, the PAPECALF signatories will need technical and financial help to implement the accord. Needs include better border surveillance, increased park protection, and judicial training to ensure wildlife crimes are prosecuted, with convictions carrying penalties appropriate to the gravity of the offense.

The key international law governing wildlife trade is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). It's a treaty with teeth that can be used to sanction countries violating its provisions. One of the architects of CITES, the US should use its influence to help ensure that it is more strictly enforced.

Most urgent of all, however, is the need for more and better trained and equipped park rangers. Several Federal agencies, including the Fish and Wildlife, National Park and Forest Services, conduct overseas training programs for rangers, but these efforts are not coordinated. They should be consolidated, expanded and centralized under the State Department.

While wildlife management training is important, Bouda N'Djida isn't Yellowstone. What central African park rangers need most is military training and automatic weapons to help them even up the odds they face. The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) could play an important role here—one that should also help advance the regional security objectives outlined in the U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa announced by the White House in June. The military's traditional view that wildlife crime is a law enforcement issue best left to civilian police is sadly outdated—at least in central Africa, where the poachers are military and paramilitary actors who violate borders, inflict economic harm, undermine state authority and perpetuate social instability.

Ultimately, the war against wildlife will have to be won on the demand side of the battle line. There is progress on that front. Traditional medicine societies, for instance, now forswear the use of endangered species parts in favor of ingredients from farmed animals. But changing traditional beliefs and customs will take more time than Africa's elephants and rhinos have left. What they need most is better protection. A global ban on ivory trade, imposed in 1989, worked well for nearly 20 years. It could work again if it were backed up by better armed and trained park rangers, stricter law enforcement, and a little more resolve, on the part of Africa's friends, to help stop the hemorrhaging of its bleeding heart.

