

ENVIRONMENT

# ELEPHANTS MASSACRED IN IVORY ARMS RACE

**African militia** are gunning down endangered elephants from aircraft to fund their warfare as the price of ivory rockets in Beijing

**The New York Times**  
in the 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, clumped together on the open savannah, many killed by a single bullet to the top of the head.

There were no tracks leading away, no sign the poachers had stalked their prey from the ground. The tusks had been hacked off, but tellingly all of the meat remained – subsistence poachers almost always carve themselves a little food for the long walk home.

Several days later, in early April, the Garamba National Park guards spotted a Ugandan military helicopter flying very low on an unauthorised flight.

But they said it abruptly turned around after being seen. Park officials, scientists and the Congolese authorities believe the Ugandan military killed the 22

corrupt officials from sub-Saharan Africa to China, officials say.

The majority of the illegal ivory – experts say as much as 70 per cent – is flowing to China, where ivory has been coveted for centuries. But while in the past it was too expensive for most, China's economic boom has created a vast middle class, pushing the price of ivory to a record US\$2,200 per kilogram in Beijing. Tusks of an adult can now be worth more than 10 times the average annual income in many African states.

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

Garamba National Park is a big, beautiful sheet of green, 490,000 hectares, and widely considered one of Africa's most stunning parks.

But today, an arms race is playing out across the savannah.

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 surveillance drones, while the non-profit organisation that runs the park is considering 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 Onyango. In June, his rang-



**Do you want your children to grow up in a world without elephants?**

elephants from a helicopter and spirited away more than a million dollars' worth of ivory.

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

Africa is in the grip of an epic elephant slaughter. Conservation groups say poachers are wiping out tens of thousands of elephants a year—faster than ever before in the past two decades as the underground ivory trade becomes increasingly militarised.

Like blood diamonds from Sierra Leone or plundered minerals from Congo, ivory is the latest conflict resource in Africa, dragged out of remote battle zones and converted into cash that fuels countless conflicts.

Some of Africa's most notorious armed groups, including the Lord's Resistance Army, al-Shabab and Darfur's *janjaweed*, are hunting down elephants and using the tusks to buy weapons.

Organised-crime syndicates are helping them move the goods around the world, exploiting turbulent states, porous borders and

ers saw poachers hacking elephants. The instant they shot at them, the bush came alive with crackling gunfire. An investigation found the poachers were from the Lord's Resistance Army, a brutal rebel outfit that kills villagers and enslaves children.

While Garamba rangers report routinely battling soldiers from outfits such as the Sudan People's Liberation Army—a claim a South Sudanese military spokesman denied—the suspected helicopter poaching is new.

Colonel Felix Kulayigye, a spokesman for the Ugandan military, said the helicopter was one of its aircraft but called the poaching allegation a "baseless rumour". Yet in June, 36 tusks were seized at the Entebbe airport in Uganda. Eighteen of the 22 elephants killed in Garamba in March were adults, which would usually equate to 36 tusks. The little stubs of ivory on the dead calves had been left untouched.

Garamba once had 20,000 elephants. Last year, there were about 2,800. This year, even less.

"It's like the drug war," Arranz said. "If people keep buying ivory, it's impossible to stop it."

Worst offending nations  
(weight of ivory seized in  
tonnes, 2009/11)



Presumed destination



Ivory estimated to weigh more than **23 tonnes**—equal to **2,500** elephants—was seized in the 13 largest seizures of illegal ivory in 2011

SCMP



Soldiers discover the grisly pillaged carcass of an elephant killed for its tusks in the Garamba National Park in Congo. Photo: NYT