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Mountain gorillas in danger as DR Congo rebels overrun habitat
by Bogonko Bosire

NAIROBI, Oct 7, 2007 (AFP) - Endangered mountain gorillas in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo faced greater danger Sunday as renegade troops overran their habitat after clashes with the army, conservationists warned.

Forces loyal to cashiered general Laurent Nkunda, a powerful local leader, took control of the gorilla sector in Virunga National Park, after renewed fighting with the army flared, said Wildlife Direct, a charitable animal welfare organisation.

"The rebels have taken control of the whole gorilla sector after fighting yesterday and today," the organisation's spokeswoman Samantha Newport told AFP from provincial town of Goma, south of the primate's habitat.

"It is very serious and the situation for gorillas is now worse than it was when fighting started five weeks ago. Rangers who were doing the tracking have been forced to flee," she added.

"All Congolese mountain gorillas are now unprotected, unmonitored and untracked and therefore there is nothing we can do at the moment," Newport explained.

When the flared up late August, Nkunda men attacked Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN) gorilla patrol posts and looted weapons, ammunition as well as communication equipment, weakening rangers ability to track the gorillas.

A subsequent UN-mediated armistice unravelled pushing fighting from the displaced countryside to the dense park.

Ten mountain gorillas have been killed and two still missing in Virunga national park since January. These slaughters, some blamed on Nkunda's men, have sparked outrage among conservationists.

After two were slaughtered and eaten in January, the renegade troops pledged to halt the killings in a meeting with Virunga park officials mediated by the United Nations and Congolese army, but the deal fell apart.

Local and foreign militias as well as Congolese soldiers, poachers and illegal miners regularly cross this area of the park, one of Africa's largest national parks and a UNESCO world heritage site. Sometimes they occupy parts of it.

The mountain gorillas are a major tourist attraction in the Virunga park, but poaching of wildlife there is endemic.

Only about 700 critically endangered mountain gorillas remain in the wild, all of them living in the mountain forests of Rwanda, Uganda and the eastern DRC.

Conservationists say more than 150 rangers have been killed in the last 10 years while protecting five parks in the country's eastern region. Apart from the mountain gorillas, DRC is also home to chimpanzees and bonobos -- pygmy chimps whose population has been decimated over the past 15 years.

Congolese troops said they had killed 38 rebels loyal Nkunda in clashes that began on Saturday morning in Virunga National Park in the eastern Nord Kivu region, the latest in a series of duels that have

defied ceasefire calls.

"We've counted 38 dead on the rebel side. We evacuated the wounded to our camp," Major Joseph Kabuyaya told AFP. The army's general staff was unable to confirm the toll.

Nkunda is a Tutsi, like Rwanda's minority population targeted in the 2004 genocide carried out by then Hutu troops and youth militias in the smaller nation across the border, and he claims one of his aims is to protect Congolese ethnic Tutsis.

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