

Congo militia threaten to kill rare gorillas

By Joe Bavier Mon May 21, 11:50 AM ET

Congolese militia are threatening to slaughter rare mountain gorillas in Congo's Virunga National Park after they raided the eastern reserve at the weekend, killing a wildlife officer, officials said.

Up to three more local wildlife workers were injured in the attacks early on Sunday by Mai Mai militia fighters on three conservation and tourism camps in the park, in Democratic Republic of Congo's violence-torn North Kivu province.

Officials in Virunga, Africa's oldest national park established in 1925, said on Monday the attackers looted the three sites, seizing arms and communications equipment.

The area attacked is only two hours walk from a unique and isolated population of gorillas, according to WildlifeDirect, an organization involved in conservation in Virunga, which is home to half of the 700 mountain gorillas that remain in the world.

"This was an unprovoked attack on our Rangers and other wildlife officers who protect Virunga's wildlife. And the Mai Mai said that if we retaliate, they will kill all the gorillas in this area," Virunga's Park Director Norbert Mushenzi said in a statement distributed by WildlifeDirect.

During the raids, 13 other local wildlife workers were taken hostage by the militia fighters but were subsequently released, WildlifeDirect said.

Despite the end of a 1998-2003 war in Congo and historic elections held last year in the former Belgian colony, renegade militia and rebel groups still operate in the east of the country, raiding villages and terrorizing civilians.

Conservationists also accuse the Mai Mai of slaughtering hundreds of hippos with machine guns on the southern shores of Lake Edward in late 2006.

ILLEGAL SQUATTERS

Lunpali Adanbert, communications officer for the World Wildlife Foundation in the provincial capital Goma, told Reuters the wildlife officer killed on Sunday had been gathering data for the WWF from villagers.

Park officials believe the attacks may also have been motivated by a long standing conflict between conservationists and local people living illegally within the Virunga reserve, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Besides mountain gorillas, it is also home to eastern lowland gorillas and chimpanzees.

"The assailants said they would continue this kind of violence, if the local people continue to be chased out of the park," said Benoit Kisuki Mathe, an official with the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation.

The institute said wildlife rangers were tracking the militia and local army units were also being sent to the area.

In January, WildlifeDirect accused rebel fighters loyal to a renegade Congolese army general of butchering two silverback gorillas -- adult males so called because of their grey coloring. But the rebel fighters of General Laurent Nkunda later agreed to stop killing the rare primates.

Richard Leakey, Chairman of WildlifeDirect and credited with ending the slaughter of elephants in Kenya in the 1980s, said that since the beginning of armed conflict in eastern Congo more than 150 wildlife rangers have been killed on active service.

Violence in North Kivu province has been on the rise in recent months due to failing efforts to integrate rebel

fighters into the ranks of the national army. Civilians say abuses have increased, often by these "mixed" army units.