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FZS Press Release

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New FZS census finds a 98% decline in the Hippopotamus population of the Virunga National Park, DRC

A census carried out on the 23 October 2006 revealed that there were only 629 hippos left in the Virunga National Park, DRC. In the late 60's and early 70's there were around 30,000 hippos living in the park. The aerial census carried out by the Frankfurt Zoological Society with funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, shows that this population has now crashed by 98%.

With the second round of presidential elections in Congo less than one week away, the Mai Mai and other non integrated local militia groups had begun poaching at an unprecedented rate because they believed their days in the park were numbered. The Congolese army who operate in the park without sufficient rations or salary, had also been accused of poaching the hippos, often in collusion with the militia troops.

The problem had become so serious that the Ugandan military had deployed troops along the banks of the River Ishasha, which separates Congo from Uganda, to help deter the Mai Mai from killing the park's largest remaining group of hippos consisting of only 134 individuals. The Mai Mai and other poachers had been targeting hippos and elephants for their ivory, which is collected regularly from the militia camps and is thought to leave Congo through Uganda and Sudan to be traded illegally on the international black market.

The Mai Mai had refused to engage in dialogue with the rangers and had recently begun launching attacks on their patrol posts. Despite that fact that over 100 rangers have been killed over the last few years trying to protect Virunga's wildlife populations, and that they have not received a proper salary for more than a decade, the rangers continue to show remarkable commitment, determination and fortitude. After years of hardship, some support from the European Union

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An FZS aerial census on Monday 23 October revealed: 629 Hippos are left in Virunga National Park.

and other donors is enabling the Congolese rangers to take control of the situation, but this positive development may be too late for the hippos.

Poaching has now become so prolific and the threat to rangers so serious, that a combined operation between the park rangers and the UN peace keeping troops is needed. The Mai Mai camps are well known to both the rangers and the UN, and an operation needs to be mounted quickly. However, the UN is preoccupied with the lead up to the second round of elections and the militia forces have taken advantage of the situation. Over the last few weeks the park has seen unprecedented levels of poaching, ambushes, violence, and violations of human rights.

The Virunga National Park's best chance now lies in the hands of its elite ranger force, trained by Frankfurt Zoological Society and deployed to help protect the last few hippos from extinction. The Congo Rangers are massively under resourced and are outnumbered five-to-one by poachers armed with machine guns and rocket launchers. UNESCO and the EU are engaging at the highest political levels in Kinshasa, but support in terms of patrol equipment, rations and salary supplements are desperately needed on the ground if the rangers are to halt the precipitous decline in hippos and wildlife.



Elephants and Hippos are being poached for their ivory.

Further Information:

www.wildlifedirect.org/congo-rangers/

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Digital Pictures in print resolution are available on request.