

## Rangers battle odds to save rare gorillas



Mourning ... the bodies of four mountain gorillas killed in the Virunga National Park last month.

Photo: *Reuters*

Stephanie McCrummen in Virunga National Park  
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THEY heard the gunshots at about 3pm, echoing across the green mountains of a vast park tangled up in vines, fallen trees and years of war.

Rangers in the Democratic Republic of Congo knew immediately what it was, and in their frayed uniforms and rubber boots began hacking their way with machetes into the jungle-like forest. This time, it was Rubiga.

The rare mountain gorilla had been shot execution-style - once in the back of the head and a second time in the hand. When the rangers found her hulking, lifeless body, her two-month-old baby, barely alive, was still clinging to her chest.

"Everyone just started crying," recalled Jean-Marie Serundori, who helped wrap the body in plastic sheeting and carry it down the steep mountain side on a wooden stretcher. "We love these gorillas."

The killing of Rubiga was only the most recent instance of carnage inside Africa's oldest national park, a place that displays to varying degrees all the chaos and hope that the Democratic Republic of Congo has to offer.

Like everyone else in this troubled country, the rangers are struggling to establish some order following one of the worst wars in modern history, a conflict that left an estimated 4 million people dead and already weak state institutions near total collapse.

Like thousands of government workers there, they are doing so despite having not been paid in more than 10 years. And like most living in the eastern region bordering Rwanda and Uganda, the rangers are carrying on amid a mess of militias and others whose interest in the republic's minerals, timber and other natural resources only perpetuates the chaos.

The rangers say the struggle is becoming especially daunting. In what seem to be crude attempts to sabotage the rangers' work, two male silverback gorillas were killed in January, including one whose dismembered body was dumped into a latrine. The rangers suspect that Rubiga was also killed to send a message that their work is not appreciated.

At the end of last year militiamen wielding AK-47s slaughtered thousands of hippos in Lake Edward. In that

instance, rangers believe, the slaughter was for money, the meat from one hippo fetching \$US300 (\$357) on the open market.

For years, the park rangers have also been targeted. More than 150 have been killed during 10 years of fighting among armed groups that want to use the park as their base, or by poachers who sell baby gorillas and hippo meat. The rangers also suspect people associated with the country's charcoal industry who depend on the park's trees and would rather Virunga be unprotected.

One ranger was recently found wandering in the forest, close to death, after escaping from a militia group known as the Mai Mai that had held him hostage as a guide and interpreter for two years. Another ranger bears a scar around his neck from a near-beheading. Earlier this year, one of the park's chief wardens, Paulin Ngobobo, was abducted and beaten with a whip.

Because of the gorillas, the rangers continue their work. "Congolese people live on hope," said Ngobobo, who has received more death threats than he can count. "They always think tomorrow will be better."

Virunga National Park was established in 1925 by the Belgians. There were royal visits in the 1950s, and during the 1970s the zoologist Dian Fossey - who was murdered in 1985 - among others brought world attention to Virunga's mountain gorillas, before continuing her work in Rwanda.

During the 1980s, backpackers and other adventurers trekked in to see the gorillas, said Serundori, who has worked in the park for more than 25 years.

"Sometimes tourists would spend a month here," he said. "People from Australia and England ... It was very good."

Then came the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when between April and June of that year an estimated 800,000 people, mostly Tutsis, were slaughtered by Hutu militiamen. Thousands fled across the border and into the park, starting a decade of fighting in Congo.

Though a peace agreement was signed in 2004, and multi-party elections were held last year, the detritus of war remains. In the past year, militia groups have been living off the park. The 500 rangers who occupy run-down posts throughout Virunga have had to evacuate several times.

Despite the persistent insecurity, the conservation group WildlifeDirect and the Frankfurt Zoological Society in January became the first conservation organisations to set foot in the park since 1994. They built a tented camp, set up a satellite dish and began distributing boots and radios to the beleaguered rangers, some of whom have begun blogging from the wilderness.

"This is Noela," Ngobobo wrote recently under a photo of a young gorilla playing in dirt. "She was born on Christmas Day. ... She spent yesterday playing with Congomani, who is eight, and Mukunda, who is 10."

Some rangers have spent their entire working lives patrolling the park. They have named all the gorillas, mostly after their fallen comrades - Resi, Matuko, Gashangi, Janga - and one after the recently elected president, Joseph Kabila, son of Laurent Kabila.

The rangers hack their way into the forest with old, rusted machetes. They climb muddy slopes, hop over logs and slide down grassy gullies tracking gorilla families that appear first as a tremble of leaves and grunts and at last like so many furry, black miracles in the dense tangles of green.

Then, in the quiet of one of the most violent spots on Earth, the rangers observe. They watch the gorillas hanging from the trees and tumbling with each other. They count them and sketch their noseprints in damp notebooks. They note how they play, how they eat. They know the Humba family from the Kabirizi and notice when Matuko's hair is discoloured or Resi is agitated.

"They have a character almost like man," Serundori said. "They are very intelligent animals. For example, if one is walking and finds a snare, he stops the babies from going forward."

In recent months, the rangers' work has included destroying poisoned bananas left by poachers; they were

scattered near Rubiga's family the day before she was shot.

After hauling her body down off the mountain, the rangers held a burial ceremony at their post headquarters, then had a drink. They sent her baby, Ndakasi, off to a vet in the city of Goma, near the southern end of the park.

"When a man dies, you have some questions, like: What mistakes did he make? Or what might have been wrong with him?" said Ngobobo, the chief warden. "But when an animal is killed like that, you really see the absurdity of man."

More gorillas have been killed during the past year in Virunga National Park than are known to have been killed during the worst years of the war. There are only 700 mountain gorillas left in the world - more than half of them in this park. The hippo population in the park has declined from 28,000 to fewer than 350.

"These killings are part of a worrying trend," said Emmanuel de Merode, who co-founded WildlifeDirect . "We are extremely concerned the situation is getting worse."

Even so, the rangers keep working with the hope that if the fighting ever stops the park might again attract tourists; in neighbouring Rwanda, gorilla-viewing is a multimillion-dollar-a-year business. "It's like being an apostle," Ngobobo said. "You have to have an altruistic mind."

## **The Washington Post**

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