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Congo politics may finish off white rhinos

By Marc Lacey The New York Times
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EPULU, Congo If the endangered northern white rhinos are driven to extinction, which many experts predict, it will be politics, not just poachers, that finishes them off.

With fewer than a dozen still alive in the wild, the northern white rhinoceros is considered by conservationists to be the most endangered large mammal on earth. Besides those found in zoos in San Diego and the Czech Republic, where they have not reproduced well, these rhinos are believed to exist only in Garamba, a rugged place near the border with Sudan that is full of wildlife and lush vegetation but also men with guns.

"I do not believe that any rhinos will survive the year," predicted Thomas Foose, program director at the International Rhino Foundation, which is based in the United States and has been working for years in Garamba, the last refuge for the northern white rhino.

The immediate culprits, according to conservation groups, are poachers from an offshoot of the janjaweed, the Arab militia groups that have been pillaging villages in the Darfur region of Sudan.

Rather than attacking people, these militias are on a mission to make money. They roam across the border to kill elephants and rhinos, leaving the carcasses and taking the valuable tusks and horns, which are carried back in long donkey trains.

These militias have proved particularly violent and, as a result, difficult to combat. But the greatest threat to the rhinos is political, specifically a growing Congolese nationalism that has undercut protection efforts, including a last-ditch program to move five of the remaining animals to safety in Kenya.

That plan set off an anti-colonial uproar, with opponents likening it to the days when Congo was forced to export its wealth to European nations. Rumors circulated that foreigners were buying up the rhinos at low prices, paying off corrupt officials and spiriting the animals out of

probably kill these rhinos," said Emmanuel de Merode, a Belgian who was running the project for the European Union before it was shut down.

White rhinos, known scientifically as *Ceratotherium simum*, weigh as much as 2,700 kilograms, or 6,000 pounds, and are the second-largest land mammal species, behind the elephant. They get their name not from their color, experts say, but from the Afrikaans word *weit*, meaning wide, which was used to describe their mouths.

South Africa has a white rhino population of about 11,000, making them the most abundant kind of rhino in the world. But the going has been much tougher for the northern subspecies, which used to be found in several countries in East and Central Africa.

The animals' decline has closely tracked the chaos of Congo's past.

There were anywhere from a thousand to several thousand of them when the country, then Zaire, gained independence from Belgium in 1960.

The survival of the northern rhinos for this long is the result of an international conservation effort, now collapsed, that for decades supported Congolese rangers, who acted as bodyguards for the rhinos. The rhinos' horns are a valuable prize, sought after in Asia for purported medicinal value, and in the Middle East, where they are carved into dagger handles.

The latest trouble began in 2003, with the Darfur conflict and the appearance of the Arab militias.

Three French security experts were hired by the European Union last autumn for their expertise in fighting poachers in the Central African Republic. But the last of them pulled out recently in the furor over the failed effort to send five animals to Kenya.

That deal, struck in January, was

and this was no exception.

Before a deal had been signed, groups like Fauna and Flora International and the International Rhino Foundation began trumpeting the relocation in press releases. Some Congolese politicians saw that as presumptuous.

"There was no official decision on this," said the information minister, Henri Mova Sakanyi, in a recent telephone interview. "There was a suggestion. Nobody should be announcing a government decision until there is a government decision."

With the prodding of political leaders, Congolese began to see the long-neglected rhino as a symbol of sovereignty that ought to remain on Congolese soil, dead or alive.

To make their point, angry residents living near Garamba grabbed machetes and joined mutinous rangers in roughing up the small group of foreigners working there. They disarmed the French security officers and briefly detained Kes Hillman-Smith and Fraser Smith, a couple who have worked for decades at the park, a UN World Heritage Site.

Sakanyi said the Congolese government was hoping donors would put the same resources that were set aside to move the animals - more than \$1 million - into protecting them in Garamba.

"This country has to show that it is a sovereign nation able to protect its own wildlife as well as its own people and its cultural heritage," he said.

But conservationists, who maintain that the government has shown little commitment to the animals in the past, are wary about pumping money into Congo's notoriously corrupt government.

The losers in the dispute are the rhinos, which remain for now "at the mercy of the poachers," Foose said.

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the country.

One newspaper in Kinshasa, the capital, described the Western conservationists as "modern-day poachers," and Congolese politicians seized on the white rhino as a symbol of national pride, off limits to exploitative outsiders.

A Western-financed project, now decades old, to train and pay Congolese park rangers to fight off the poachers was abandoned after similar accusations surfaced that the Westerners were stealing the animals and selling them abroad, a charge that the Western conservation groups strongly deny.

"It is sad that politics, not poaching, will

intended to give the rhinos a chance to breed in peace. The plan was to return them to Congo sometime in the future, to a more stable park.

But that plan is now as dead as the rhino carcasses that have been turning up regularly in Garamba.

Vice President Abdoulaye Yerodia had indicated that the Congolese government would support the plan, conservationists say, but there are four vice presidents in the country's transitional government, and numerous ministers from an array of parties. Rarely do they agree on anything,

Herald Tribune.

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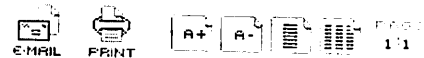
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