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Only five rhino horns fake

- Assam verification panel finds most genuine in treasury

Our special correspondent

Guwahati, Dec. 29: The rhino horn verification committee constituted by the Assam government to verify rhino horns in different treasuries of the state today said rhino horns were "genuine," barring some which were deposited as fake and some which could not be ascertained due to various reasons.

Of the 2,038 rhino horns deposited in various treasuries, five were found to be fake. Of the remaining 2,033, 13 could not be verified.

The government had constituted a committee through a notification to verify the genuineness of the rhino horns kept in custody of twelve treasuries of the state by the forest department.

The five fake rhino horns are in Western Assam Wildlife Division at Tezpur and in Sonitpur east division at Biswanath Chariali.

The report was today submitted to forest minister Pramila Rani Brahma in her office chamber. One member Prashanta Rajguru has given a note of dissent.

He says while verifying the horns deposited in Tezpur treasury as many as 5 numbers of horns were found to be fake. From records available with forest department it is found that these horns were recorded as fake horns, at the time of depositing the items in treasury. "The question arises that under what circumstances fake horns were deposited in treasury and why these fake horns were not numbered separately," he said.

A WWF report, *The Greater One Horned Rhino: Past, Present and Future*, released by Brahma here today, stated that poaching is a constant menace in all areas where rhinos are found.

Demand has soared, particularly in Vietnam, and criminal gangs can make a fortune by selling rhino horns in Asian markets. Poachers see a fraction of the profits "but to many desperately poor people, it's a risk worth taking," the report said.

"But as long as the demand for rhino horn persists in nearby consumer countries, poaching will remain a threat, and constant vigilance is needed. The concentration of rhinos in just a few areas makes them particularly vulnerable to poachers and the organised crime syndicates that run the trade," it added.

Meanwhile, an anti-poaching STF team from Nagaon, with assistance from Jorhat police, today picked up two youths from the outskirts of Kakajan for their alleged involvement in rhino trade.

An object suspected to be a rhino horn was recovered from the duo, who have been taken to Kaziranga National Park to be questioned by park authorities.

Yesterday, Jhagalabandha police arrested two persons who organise poacher groups and provide arms and ammunition to them, from Bokajan in Karbi Anglong.

"Lamkho Konngsai, 35, alias Lan of Manja area in Karbi Anglong and Haokho Chongloi, 55, of Dimapur North, Nagaland, organise poacher groups and supply arms and ammunition to them. It is an important arrest," Kaziranga National Park director Satyendra Singh told The Telegraph.

Twelve rounds of AK-47 ammunition were seized from the duo.

Altogether 18 rhinos have been poached in Kaziranga so far this year, one more than last year.

"Interrogations will reveal more on the modus operandi of the poachers," Singh said.

"There was no denying that rhino poaching has international connotations and there are long chains crossing many borders of states and countries," the rhino task force report of the National Tiger Conservation Authority said.

The report said people from the neighbouring states are involved not only in the trade but also in shooting/poaching the animals. Several poachers shot dead inside Kaziranga during encounters have been found to belong to these states. They are engaged by the local organisers, who either already have smuggled or hired weapons from militants on rent on daily basis or buy them in markets such as Dimapur.

The arms are handed over to the shooters by local contacts at the time of operation only when the team is inside the park. Once the rhino horn is removed, it is kept with the team leader. The leader is either the organiser or one of his henchmen.