

A confidential report by an "independent international observer" caused a stir when leaked to *The Cape Times* in December last year but according to the author, who has forwarded copies to BBC WILDLIFE, "the official silence is deafening". Botswana has enough problems with its own poachers and cannot make too much noise about the Caprivi insurgents because it is dependent on South Africa for so many things. Although difficult to substantiate, there are reports of a helicopter gunship firing on Botswana soldiers in a Chobe game camp and helicopters being used to chase elephants.

The chief of Botswana's Defence Force, Major General Mompoti Merafhe, told the *Johannesburg Star*: "Quite frankly I find it difficult to believe South Africa would sanction this activity but . . . I find it extremely difficult to believe South African soldiers can jump on helicopters and go off on a hunting spree without their officers knowing." He suggested that the SADF denied the incidents because it did not want to admit to a lack of discipline among its troops.

Whether the poachers are military or civilian, wildlife in Caprivi and Chobe, described as a green jewel in the arid Kalahari region, is under fire. In addition

to ivory, poachers are hunting hippo, buffalo and many species of antelope for meat and skins.

In one incident 2,000 rare lechwe *Kobus leche* were ambushed with automatic weapons; a survey last year found the remains of more than a thousand elephants along the Botswana border, their tusks removed by axes and chainsaws; populations of some species, such as puku *Kobus vardonii* and giraffe, are down to critical levels, and rhino have disappeared from the area altogether.

South Africa is also being criticised by conservationists for selling off confiscated ivory and

rhino horn at unrealistic prices to dealers, who then make a huge profit on resale to consumer countries.

The Conservation Monitoring Centre in Cambridge points out that confiscated ivory and rhino horn should be sold direct by tender from government agencies in producer countries to government-authorised buyers in consumer countries.

This would cut out the dealer (who may have provided the incentive or been responsible for the items being poached in the first place) and would not only restrict illegal trade, but would bring profits to the producer country's conservation agency.

How daggers kill rhinos

The fate of Africa's rhinos still rests in the hands of craftsmen in North Yemen, who continue to carve elaborate, silver-studded rhino-horn dagger handles for the richer status-seeking tribesmen, writes *Esmond Bradley Martin*, vice-chairman of IUCN's African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group, in a report to BBC WILDLIFE.

Despite the widely applauded ban on horn imports, trade continues unabated, and Yemeni dealers are now buying more than 50 per cent of horn available each year on the world market—an increase of 10 per cent from six years ago.

In 1978, when North Yemen began to open its frontiers to the outside world, I discovered, and later publicised, that it was a major consumer of rhino horn for the traditional *jambias* dagger handles. The African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) subsequently sponsored a worldwide campaign which eventually persuaded the Yemeni government to ban all rhino horn imports from 22 August, 1982. I recently returned to North Yemen on AWF's behalf to investigate suspicions that large quantities were still entering the country.

Our suspicions were confirmed—the only change being that the amount has decreased (because black rhino numbers have dropped from about 65,000 in 1970 to 13,500 in 1983) and the source of supply has changed. Before 1981, much of the horn was being smuggled out of Kenya, but when the Kenyan authorities cracked down on this,

Khartoum in Sudan became the main point of export.

Certain Yemeni traders now take regular scheduled flights from Khartoum to Sana, the North Yemen capital, with more than a hundred kilograms of rhino horn in their personal luggage. Because they are met by 'friends', who have a word with customs officials, their baggage is not searched. But even if it was, the worst that might happen is that taxes imposed on imports of any kind of horn, amounting to 23.5 per cent of the value, would be payable.

Incredibly, Sana's customs officials disclaim any knowledge of the Economy and Industry Ministerial Order No.193, which reads: "The importation of Rhinoceros Horn in any form is strictly forbidden." I questioned several senior officers in customs, and they emphatically replied that there was no ban on imports of any kind of horn.

Even if the authorities were interested in stopping rhino horn imports—which they don't appear to be—they would have little chance of success, judging by the flood of illegal imports of vehicles, whisky and consumer goods. There is simply not enough manpower or cooperation from Yemeni citizens to stop smuggling.

So what can be done to decrease rhino horn imports? First, the North Yemen Customs Department should be told of the law and made to enforce it.

Second, the re-export of rhino-horn shavings should be declared illegal. Up to 70 per cent of raw horn is wasted in the carving of dagger handles; the dealer collects the shavings from craftsmen and exports them to



Yemeni craftsmen with rhinoceros *jambias*. Every boy wants one.

the orient where they are made into medicines. Banning this secondary trade would cut out one more profit, making one less threat to the rhino's existence.

Third, the import duties on cow and water-buffalo horn (used for less expensive—and less prestigious—dagger handles) should be eliminated to encourage their use instead of rhino horn.

The demand for daggers is rising. The population of North Yemen is increasing by 2.7 per cent each year and per capita income is also going up. By the age of 12 most Yemeni boys have a dagger, but perhaps 70 per cent of them will need new ones (some inherit family heirlooms, some may not want one).

Given that 7.75 per cent will have rhino horn handles, there is a demand for two tonnes of rhino horn per year—and that does not take into account the 24,000 Western tourists who now visit North Yemen annually, many of whom are attracted to traditional daggers as souvenirs.

One tactic to influence the demand would be to use the media in North Yemen to im-

press upon the buyers the imminent demise of wild rhinos. A more promising solution, though, would be to dry up the flow by initiating stricter controls on rhino horn exports from source countries, especially the Sudan.

The ivory trade described in December's BBC WILDLIFE has been paralleled with rhino horn. During the past two years almost all the rhino horn in North Yemen has come from (or through) the Sudan, even though that country is a signatory to the CITES agreement which prohibits such trade.

Conservationists must, therefore, work in a more concerted manner to stop the 'Khartoum connection' and to prevent any other entrepôt from developing for the rhino horn trade.

Keep up to date with the latest conservation news by watching Nature, the only environmental and wildlife news magazine on television, and listening to Groundswell, Radio 4's topical nature series (see page 211 for transmission times).