

Major decline in Yemen's rhino horn imports

Story and photos by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin



Sanaa is noted for its multi-storey houses, some of which are hundreds of years old.

How much of a threat does Yemen still pose to Africa's rhino?

From the early 1970s until 1984, North Yemen imported nearly half the African rhino horn on the world market: three tonnes per annum in the 1970s gradually dropping to one and a half tonnes in the early 1980s as the rhino populations of Africa were decimated. Although the international outcry had led to an import ban in August 1982, this was not enforced; smuggling of all goods into Yemen was rife. By the late 1980s, however, rhino horn imports had dropped almost to insignificance relative to the eastern Asian markets. North Yemen was no longer the main threat to Africa's rhinos. How much of a threat did it continue to pose to the remaining rhino populations? This was the dominant question prompting our research in our late 1990 visit to the country.

The reason for the sudden growth and then fall in the rhino horn trade hinged on the country's financial state. After the 1962 revolution, when the feudal Imams were overthrown, and following the prolonged civil war, which was finally resolved in 1970, the poverty stricken country began benefiting from donor aid, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and from hard

currency remittances brought back by the one to two million Yemenis working abroad, mainly in Saudi Arabia during the oil boom. This new-found wealth enabled the ordinary Yemeni men to afford daggers (*jambias*) with rhino horn handles which had previously only been owned by the elite rich. The craftsmen in the souk were producing thousands of these *jambias* each year to meet the new demand. After 1984, however, the economic recession in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states (due to declining prices of oil and the Iran-Iraq war) caused dramatic changes to Yemen once more. Remittances declined from about \$1,000,000,000 in 1984 to \$600,000,000 in 1986. Foreign aid fell from \$400,000,000 in 1982 to \$100,000,000 in 1986. Yemen's exports were minimal.

Not surprisingly, with a lack of hard currency the Yemeni rial declined in value from its previously steady 4.7 to the US dollar in January 1984 to 11.9 in December 1986. So, although the dollar price for rhino horn stayed roughly the same in North Yemen at about \$800 a kilo wholesale during this three-year period, in rials it increased from 4,300 to 10,000 per kilo. It

was no longer so profitable for traders, and few buyers could afford the retail prices of *jambias*. Substitutes such as water buffalo horn, wood and even plastic were increasingly being used.

We returned to Yemen in October 1990 to find out what had happened to the rhino horn trade during the past four years and to have meetings with government officials about the problem – if it still existed.

The country continues to face severe economic difficulties due to several changes that occurred in 1990. On 22 May 1990, the new Republic of Yemen was formed by the leaders of North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic – YAR) and of South Yemen (the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen – PDRY). Yemen had been divided in 1905 as a result of clashes between the Turks and the British. The Turks withdrew from the north in 1918 leaving the country ruled by the traditional Imams until they were overthrown in the revolution. In the south, the British finally withdrew in 1967, and the country was soon taken over by radical Marxist reformers. Opposition to the Marxist government gradually increased, and for years

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unification had been a rallying cry of politicians. Finally, in 1990, unity took place. Apart from religious, political and social divisions which the new Republic of Yemen must deal with, it becomes one of the poorest, but most populous states in the Arab peninsular, with over 12 million people. Unity has been initially expensive. Several thousand civil servants had to be moved from Aden north to Sanaa and salaries have had to be equalized with those in the north. With unification, the government expected an increase in foreign aid, but did not get it.

Iraq invaded Kuwait at the beginning of August 1990. This had a major impact on the economy of Yemen. Donor aid from the Gulf has been cut considerably. In 1989, Saudi Arabia gave about \$400,000,000 in cash, project assistance and military aid. In 1990, Saudi could give only an estimated \$50,000,000. Aid from Kuwait and Iraq has, of course, stopped, but some western aid will continue. Tourism in Yemen has collapsed. This had grown dramatically during the past four years to 57,000 tourists in 1989 bringing the country perhaps \$60,000,000 a year. Petrol doubled in price in October 1990 resulting in price increases for vegetables and qat (a narcotic leaf stimulant chewed by many Yemenis). Inflation is rising, families are hoarding basic foods and there is a certain amount of 'war fever'. From Kuwait, 20,000 workers returned to Yemen, cutting back Yemeni remittances also.

Remittances have been the mainstay of the country's economy for almost twenty years. In the latter part of 1990, however, over 700,000 Yemeni workers returned from Saudi Arabia representing the loss of

about \$300,000,000 a year in cash remittances. In the past, Yemenis could come and work there freely, but now the Saudis have introduced new regulations treating Yemenis as all other foreigners, now requiring residence permits and a Saudi business partner. As a result, more than one-third of Yemeni workers have had to leave. There is now a squeeze on housing. Rents doubled in northern Yemen in three weeks from September 1990, and many people have come back, after perhaps 20 years in Saudi Arabia, homeless and unemployed. In 1989, Yemenis sent back perhaps \$2 billion in cash and goods to maintain their families. Now many poor people will no longer have this support. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states had been a good safety valve in providing work.

Over 70 per cent of the Yemen population lives in rural areas and is dependent on agriculture. Official exports, however, remain low: coffee, fruits and vegetables, hides, skins and tobacco. The future hope in Yemen is oil. It was discovered in commercial quantities in 1984 and exports began in late 1987. Oil revenue provided the government with \$500,000,000 in 1989. There are also reserves in the south. More exploration is underway, and it is possible that Yemen could almost double its present output.

As Yemen gradually runs down its reserves of foreign exchange, the rial will continue to fall in value making it more expensive to import goods. There has been an almost 50 per cent decrease in the value of the rial from 1986 to 1990, to 15 rials to the US dollar unofficially (the souk rate) and 12 officially (the bank rate).

This brings us to rhino horn, for which traders in the souk are not, and will not be able to pay the competitive eastern Asian prices. This is encouraging for Africa's

rhinos, but imports of substitutes – water buffalo horn and plastic – will be harder to import too with a lack of hard currency. Furthermore, the Central Bank is reluctant to give import permits as it does not want previous, scarce hard currency leaving the country, and import duties are very high.

Sanaa, Yemen's capital, is where most jambias are carved. We had spent much time on previous visits in Sanaa's old souk watching daggers being made and interviewing craftsmen.

On this particular visit our first afternoon was spent in Sanaa's old market, where we counted 57 dagger workshops (a little more than in late 1986) mostly along two alleys in which 87 dagger makers worked. More children were in the profession than before, starting from the age of about eight. Over half the handles being carved were now of an amber-coloured plastic – a great increase compared with four years ago when the main dagger trading family had only just introduced plastic to the carvers. That first afternoon in the souk was our most successful in terms of seeing rhino horn, as at that stage nobody suspected us as investigators, but presumed we were ordinary tourists passing by.

At the first shop we examined, we asked the worker who was filing a handle if it were rhino horn, but he told us it was water buffalo horn. He then beckoned us closer and unlocked a small cupboard from which he pulled out a plastic bag containing several dark water buffalo horn tips and five rhino horn handles in the early rough stage of being carved, creamier-grey in colour than the blackish water buffalo horn and with a rougher outer layer. He told us the buying price for rhino horn in the souk was \$1,500 a kilo. Then from the plastic bag, the craftsman drew out two whole black rhino horns: a large black one and a small front one from different rhinos, which we photographed prolifically until he got suspicious and hurriedly re-hid them. Towards the end of the alley was a man carefully wetting and polishing a nearly finished handle which had been joined on to a blade. It was beige in colour and grained, and he readily admitted that it was rhino horn. We saw another craftsman that afternoon sandpapering a roughly carved handle, also paler than water buffalo horn, and beside him on the floor of his little workshop were two similar handles in the early stage of making; he confirmed all were made from rhino horn. As dusk fell, all the veiled women walking through the souk had vanished back to their houses; some of the workshops were closing, while in others, the carvers worked on, beneath a bare light bulb, sitting cross legged, and stimulated by the chewing of a great ball of qat leaves lodged in one cheek.

On the following days, our procedure was to send our interpreter to the souk first, with a list of questions in order to interview key traders and collect information without our presence rousing suspicion or memories. There are three families who control the trade in jambia making, and one of these which deals in nearly all the rhino

There are always crowds of men gathered around the retailers selling daggers in the Sanaa souk.

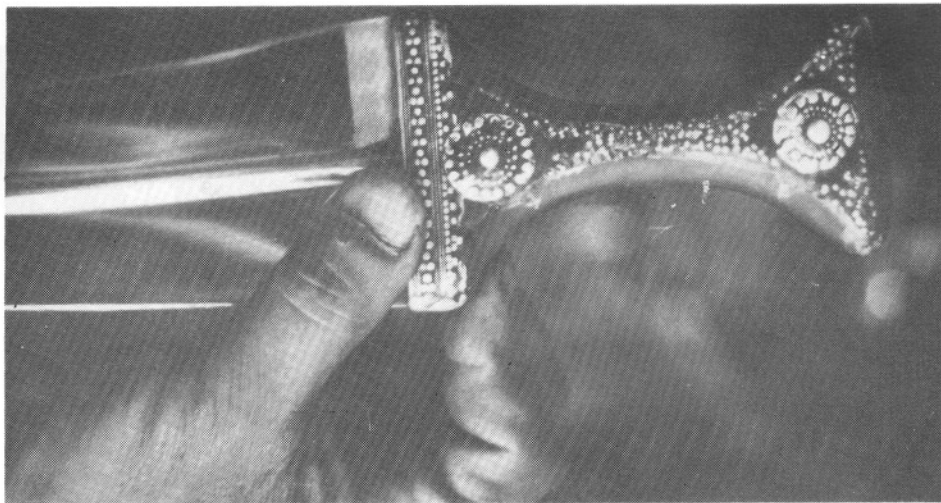


horn. This family has been in the business for at least 400 years. The main trader in the family said he was very upset with the government for banning rhino horn imports in 1982. Only occasionally in the last four years has rhino horn been offered for sale in the souk. Usually, returning Yemeni/African immigrants from Ethiopia or Sudan bring back the rhino horn which originates from Sudan, Kenya and Tanzania. The main trader was reluctant to give any recent figures but he implied that he had obtained around 20 kilos of rhino horn annually for the last four years. His buying price from these immigrants (the importers) is 20,000 rials (\$1,360) a kilo for a very large five kilo horn which could make 15 handles. If he would sell this horn wholesale, he could ask up to \$2,000 a kilo for it.

Prices of antique jambias with rhino horn handles are up tremendously, the traders explained. Tribes in the north sell to each other antique jambias with rhino horn handles for up to \$34,000 while in the Sanaa souk, most of the retailers display a couple of rhino horn jambias amongst 50 or so water buffalo ones which vary in retail prices from \$340 to \$680 for a new one and up to \$6,800 for an antique. Often, a man with a recently made rhino horn jambia urgently in need of money will sell his dagger to a retailer for say \$540 which the retailer will re-sell for \$680. Such jambias are highly prized, and members of the souk wander about polishing their precious handles with a white cloth and stroking them which improves the horn's patina. Those which are 200 years old sometimes turn almost olive green, and handles which show well the horn's hair follicle pattern, creating an almost lizard skin effect, are the most sought after. It is the coloration and patterning and amber-like translucency at the edges when the handle is held up to light that identifies rhino horn from other materials. It is also the most popular because it can last for hundreds of years.

A craftsman will spend about two and a half days producing a rhino horn handle. Each time we were in the souk we saw two to three men working on rhino horn. Usually the shavings fell on to a carefully arranged piece of plastic or paper, presumably to make their collection easier. The main trader explained that the Chinese bought rhino horn shavings to use in medicines. He even said that in 1982 he had travelled to China in order to sell his shavings, but he sold them in Taiwan instead for a better price. Several businessmen said they could obtain shavings to sell to us for around \$340 to \$700 a kilo. One dagger retailer said he could collect about 50 kilos of shavings and sell them to us for \$340 a kilo. According to the main trader, the Chinese no longer come and buy in the souk as they have been cheated with a mixture of rhino and water buffalo horn shavings, but agents come and buy occasionally, although exports of these shavings were banned in 1987 after our last visit.

The main trader complained that the 'friends of the animals' organizations had caused many people to leave the business of



New rhino horn daggers like this one are rarely made today in Yemen.

smuggling rhino horn. Everyone in the souk was aware that rhino horn was illegal to import because rhinos were endangered and protected, but they were more concerned about their business, regretting that plastic substitutes had to be used. A couple of recent incidents have warned rhino horn traders of the risks involved. At Sanaa airport, customs officials confiscated and burned on the spot some rhino horn shavings intended for export; also, some rhino horns were confiscated on arrival at the airport from Africa.

Smugglers see no point in bringing the horn into the country if the risks are too great and the rhino horn jambia-making business is suffering anyway with the economic recession. There has been a significant decrease in the amount of rhino horn imported into Yemen over the past five years, mainly because the Taiwan market can offer prices of about 50 per cent higher than in Sanaa. Some of the craftsmen in the souk are forced to use old stocks of rhino horn as they cannot afford new supplies from Africa.

The craftsmen also complained that it is difficult to import water buffalo horn because the government does not want to allocate scarce hard currency for it. One trader told us he had gone that morning to the Ministry of Supply and Trade in order to try and obtain an import permit to bring from India domesticated Indian water buffalo horns. Sometimes the Ministry gives permission, but it is usually a struggle. Saudi Arabia has now clamped down on smuggling at the border, making importing everything more difficult. Yemen's cow horns cannot be used as they are hollow; instead, the keepers of Turkish baths collect them and use the horns as fuel to heat the water.

The other main souk in Yemen where jambias are made is in the city of Dhamar, a two-hour drive south of Sanaa. We visited the Dhamar souk to find out if rhino horns were still being carved there. One craftsman said he had stopped using rhino horn five years ago as it was not allowed into the country and has become unavailable. Nobody uses rhino horn there today. A lot of men in the souk wore daggers with rhino horn handles. Prices were similar to those in Sanaa: a 20-year-old one was

offered to us for \$1,000 and a 30-year-old one for \$2,000; both had been made in Dhamar. Today, craftsmen in Dhamar are making handles from camel nails. These are not used in Sanaa, but Dhamar is a poor area, and when times are hard the carvers use these nails, which are very difficult to chisel and work on. They have become the speciality of Dhamar. In Yemen, cars have mostly replaced camels, so most nails come from Saudi Arabia for \$1.70 each. A carver can make one or two handles from each nail. He sells the finished handles with a cheap Syrian blade for \$13.60. Camel nail handles turn green and are quite distinctive, but because they are considered inferior, there was much resistance to us photographing them. The craftsmen were quite sceptical of our study, as in the past, such surveys have resulted in cheaper imports of metal nails and blades from Syria which have hurt the local industry. A poor quality Syrian blade costs \$1.70 whereas a Yemeni one is as much as \$17. This foreign substitution is putting local people out of business. Before the Gulf Crisis, there were about 30 dagger craftsmen in Dhamar making blades and handles, but now, with shortages of supplies and because of high inflation, they have decreased to ten, and former craftsmen are now farming. Jambia making in Dhamar has become a depressed industry.

Cheap plastic dagger handles have become increasingly popular in Sanaa. This is partly because of the increase in foreign tourism in recent years and many want to buy cheap plastic souvenir daggers (although some purchase expensive rhino horn ones). Also, poor people can now afford a plastic dagger, and without a dagger, you are considered to be a *dhimmi* – of the lowest class, who traditionally were not allowed to wear weapons. More people now wear them in the poor coastal Tihama area, where daggers were not seen before. A plastic handle roughly shaped is bought by carvers in the souk for about two dollars; the carvers finish them off, producing about 20 handles a day per craftsman.

Most craftsmen still work on water buffalo horn. One horn costs a dollar; on average each craftsman can produce two to three handles a day which he can sell for about \$10 each. The blade makers produce

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about four to five blades a day and earn about \$4 for each. On the retail market, new plastic daggers sell for as little as seven dollars while water buffalo horn ones are about \$13 to \$34; this includes the scabbard, but not a belt.

By counting the number of craftsmen using specifically plastic, water buffalo horn or rhino horn in the souk, and multiplying these figures by the number of handles carved in each substance per day, we can make a rough estimate of how many daggers are made using the various raw materials. More plastic handled jambias are made numbering in the tens of thousands each year. We estimate that perhaps half as many are made out of water buffalo horn compared to plastic. We have more precise data on rhino horn. About two to three craftsmen on average work on rhino horn each day. If it takes about two to three days to complete one handle, then on average one handle is completed per day or 365 in a year. Since about three handles can be carved from one kilo, then approximately 120 kilos of rhino horn are used per annum. This is less than a quarter the amount consumed in Yemen in the mid-1980's, when the main trader claimed craftsmen were producing about 200 rhino horn jambias a month, and when we estimated 500 kilos of rhino horn were being imported per year. Furthermore some of the horns being used today are old stock.

We had two separate meetings with government officials to discuss the problem of Yemen's continuing, albeit small, rhino horn trade. Both the American Ambassador, Charles Dunbar, and the British Ambassador, Mark Marshall, were instrumental in kindly setting up our meetings. The first was with Mohsen Al-Hamdani, Minister of State, who is also Chairman of the newly formed Environmental Protection Council. We discussed possible ways WWF could help the Council, such as by providing environmental education equipment. In Yemen there is an increasing awareness of the environment; we were extremely pleased to discover that such a Council has now been set up. Minister Hamdani was interested to learn about our activities and suggested that this Council could arrange a one-day seminar for those involved with rhino horn and the jambia industry in Sanaa in order to discuss the plight of the rhino and to encourage substitutes. It would indeed be very helpful to have some dialogue between the traders, craftsmen, the EPC and government officials.

Our next meeting was with Dr Abdul Karim Al-Iryani, the Foreign Minister, with whom we had meetings in December 1986 and March 1987. Again, he was extremely helpful and supportive. The American Ambassador attended the meeting with us. First we thanked Dr Iryani very much for acting upon the 1986 action plan which we had devised together. The main trader had been brought to the Prime Minister's office in 1987 and told it was not

appropriate to use rhino horn. He claimed then he was only using up his old stocks and not buying new horn from importers. Dr Iryani had talked to officials from the United Arab Emirates about the problem of rhino horn moving via the Emirates; this has since been curtailed. Minister Al-Wajir, formerly the Minister of Environment, Supply and Trade, had got the dagger craftsmen to sign a commitment to stop using rhino horn — although this seems not to have entirely worked. In 1987, the government lifted restrictions on water buffalo horn imports by eliminating the previously heavy import duty, as a way to encourage this substitute for rhino horn. Also, in 1987, exports of the left-over rhino horn shavings (which had been mostly sent to China and South Korea) were banned. The sixth point in our 1986 action plan had been to ask the Grand Mufti (religious leader) about issuing a *fatwa* (religious edict) stating that it is against God's will to endanger an animal species. He had been approached on this subject, but no *fatwa* had yet been issued. We were very glad to learn that in 1987, the government stopped giving daggers with rhino horn handles as presents to departing ambassadors and other VIPs, and that daggers with water buffalo horn handles are now being given instead.

We explained that more pressure was needed to halt the rhino horn trade in Sanaa, as we had seen rhino horn still being carved in the souk. Dr Iryani agreed that the main rhino horn trader should be asked to make an inventory of his rhino horn stock and to sign an affidavit that he will not obtain new supplies. Dr Iryani suggested that the Minister of State, Mr Hamdani, and the Minister of Trade could supervise this and inspect regularly the trader's rhino horn stock. In order to prevent new illegal horns being confused with old legal supplies; all the horn in his present stock should be clearly marked by the two ministries. If a time limit of several months were given for the trader to use up his old supplies, it would prevent him claiming indefinitely that he was still using up his old stocks. Dr Iryani and Charles Dunbar agreed to follow this up and have a stock-taking done as soon as possible.

Dr Iryani thought it would be good for Yemen to join CITES and we agreed to have the CITES papers sent to him directly so he could obtain the cabinet's approval and have the papers signed by the Minister of Trade. It would be a promising step for Yemen to join this international trade convention for endangered species, along with the 109 nations who are already signatories.

Dr Iryani agreed to talk to the Governor of the Central Bank of Yemen to ask him if he could allocate the appropriate foreign exchange for the import of water buffalo horn and to ask him to declare that traders can bring water buffalo horn into Yemen without a licence. This would greatly improve relations with the traders and their co-operation generally.

After our very productive meeting with Dr Iryani, we had the great privilege of being taken to meet the Grand Mufti himself, accompanied by the Grand Mufti's

Opposite (clockwise): Yemeni men pay the highest prices in the world for antique daggers;

today, most dagger handles produced in Sanaa are made from plastic, unlike ten years ago when rhino horn and water buffalo horn predominated;

this unique photograph shows two full black rhino horns in the Sanaa souk in 1990.

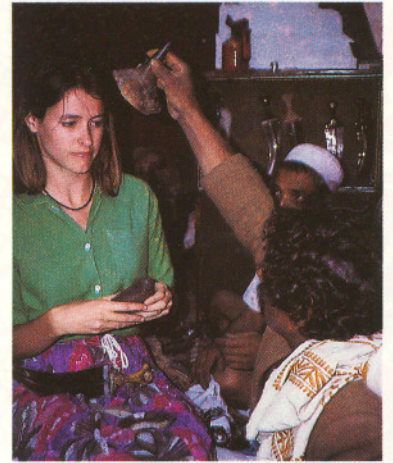
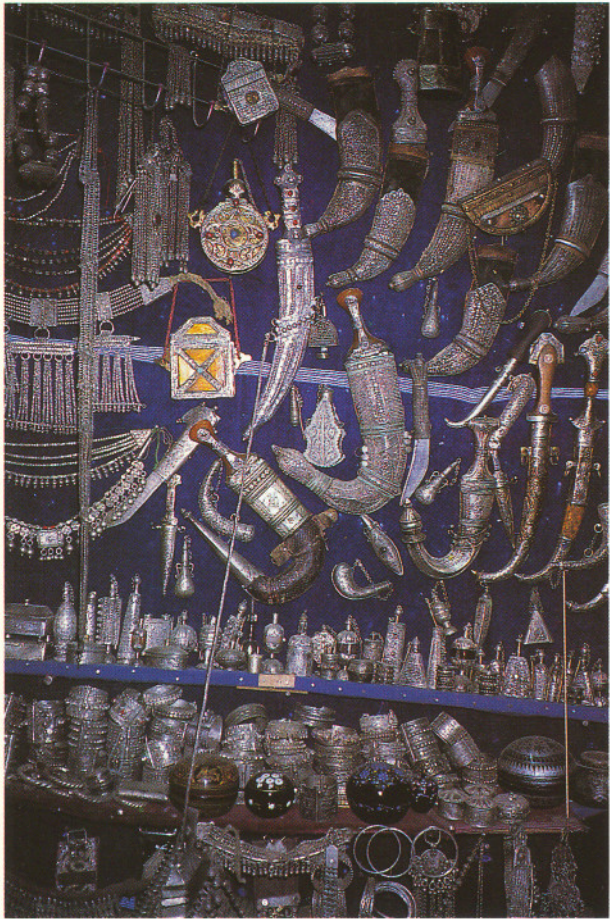
Rhino horn imports are banned, so normally traders cut the horn into smaller pieces at home in privacy;

rhino horn dagger handles can be identified by the amber-like translucency at the top corners.

son, who kindly interpreted for us, and the American Ambassador, who had arranged this meeting. We all drank coffee with the 83-year-old religious leader of Yemen, seated on cushions, and hearing about his recent journey to America, Russia and China. We explained, with the assistance of the Ambassador, about the illegal rhino horn trade that was threatening Africa's last rhino populations, and we asked him if he could issue a religious edict stating that this is against Islam. He unhesitatingly agreed to do this, and Charles Dunbar helpfully offered to follow it up. We all agreed that if this edict were published in the local newspapers, it could be very effective in reducing people's wish to trade in the horn or to make rhino horn dagger handles.

Although the economic recession, which it seems probable will continue for quite a while now, may keep the rhino horn trade in check for at least a couple of years, it is important that the various new measures we discussed during our meetings are acted upon. This is especially so as there seems to be a growing demand for jambias south of Sanaa and even south of Taiz. More and more Yemeni men want to emulate Sanaa, the power centre, and to be a true Yemeni. In their opinion, a man must chew qat and wear a jambia. Now that unification has occurred, many southerners want freedom of expression and may well start wearing daggers and chewing qat daily also. So the dagger-making industry will certainly continue, with good reason, as it is part of Yemen's cultural heritage and tradition. Hopefully, with the help of the government, the availability of substitutes will increase, and rhino horn will be a thing of the past.

Certainly the government remembers the international criticism it received a decade ago for its major role in depleting the rhinos of Africa. It realizes that for many African countries, such as Kenya, rhinos, as well as being part of their natural heritage, are extremely valuable for tourism; and to improve global relations, the Yemen government will, we hope, clamp down on the small and lingering trade in rhino horn in their country. 7



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