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REPRIEVE PLANNED FOR GARAMBA'S RHINOS: EXTRA EFFORTS PROMISED TO SAFEGUARD THEIR HOMELAND

World's largest conservation union supports last-ditch effort to save Garamba rhinos and planned international efforts to save the national park

Gland, Switzerland, 21 January 2005 (IUCN) – IUCN welcomes the approval by the Congolese Government of a bold plan to save the Critically Endangered northern white rhino from extinction in the wild, and supports planned efforts to save the park and its unique suite of wildlife that is being ravaged by poaching.

The Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) recently approved a plan for the translocation of five northern white rhino from DRC's Garamba National Park to a wildlife sanctuary in Kenya. This is one element of a two-part plan to save the sub-species from extinction and secure the national park and its remaining wildlife. The second part commits the Government and its international partners to increased support for conservation activities in Garamba, so that the rhinos can be returned to the Park once security and the long-term viability of the Garamba ecosystem has been assured.

This decision was made during a trip to the DRC capital Kinshasa, by an emergency delegation headed by the African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) of IUCN's Species Survival Commission. The meeting was set up by the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN – DRC's protected area authority), and involved Fauna & Flora International, the International Rhino Foundation, IUCN's Central Africa Regional Office, UNESCO and the World Bank. It was supported by the People and Parks Support Foundation.

The group met with Vice Presidents Z'hahidi N'Goma and Abdoulaye Iherodia, the Minister of Environment and other senior officials, and was told that the President's office had approved the plan.

While the IUCN believes that conservation is primarily about conserving species in their natural habitats, the risk of leaving the animals at home and exposed to continued poaching which could eliminate them within a matter of weeks far outweighs any disadvantages and risks related to their translocation.

"We are saddened to learn that more than a decade of talks and efforts have not been enough to secure this iconic species in its homeland. The fact that we have to move these rhinos to another country as a last resort is an unfortunate set-back, but considering the sharp increase in instability and conflict which has plagued the region for years, it is the only option left." said Dr Jean-Christophe Vié, acting head of IUCN's Species Programme.

“The rhino is Garamba’s flagship species yet poaching is affecting a much wider range of animals. The promise to increase in-park conservation efforts is therefore just as critical as the emergency translocation plans to save one species from extinction,” he added.

The only wild northern white rhino population in the world has been conserved for many years in Garamba but an escalation of commercial poaching over the past 18 months has seen numbers plummet from 30 to probably less than 10. This compares with a population of 490 animals 25 years ago. Increased trans-border transgressions from Sudan and the proliferation of arms have made it impossible to secure the area.

“We all regard the plan as a Win-Win outcome,” said Dr Martin Brooks, Chairman of the IUCN/SSC African Rhino Specialist Group, “as support for the World Heritage Site of Garamba National Park will be guaranteed for the future and the northern white rhino has been given its last reprieve from extinction.”

The National Park was inscribed on the prestigious World Heritage List in 1980 following a recommendation from IUCN to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. As well as the northern white rhino, the park's vast savannahs, grasslands and woodlands are home to many other charismatic species including the elephant, hippopotamus and the endemic Congo giraffe.

Due to civil unrest and increasing pressure from poaching, the park was placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 1996 following the poaching of rhinos for their horn and the loss of three park rangers killed on site. This is one of five internationally important natural World Heritage sites in the DRC, all of which are on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

“While the planned translocation reflects the spirit of co-operation of the World Heritage Convention, it also signals the need for the Convention to place greater attention to the long-term integrity of sites included on the World Heritage List,” said Pedro Rosabal Gonzales, Senior Programme Officer in the IUCN’s Protected Areas Programme.

“If the protection and effective management of World Heritage sites such as Garamba cannot be guaranteed, the international community will face a serious conservation failure,” he continued.

The ICCN and its partners developed an emergency plan which recommended both a programme of prioritised support for Garamba to secure the park and its world-renowned biodiversity, and the relocation of a breeding group of five rhinos to a more secure area pending their later return to Garamba. Ol Pejeta Sanctuary in Kenya was chosen as the temporary home.

With the recent approval, a formal accord with the DRC Government has been drafted and is expected to be signed shortly. Planning and recruitment of a team of experts for the operation is now underway in DRC and internationally. In Kenya discussions are underway through the Kenya Wildlife Service to secure the necessary approval and support from the Kenyan authorities.

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Notes to editors:

White rhinoceros

There are two subspecies of white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*), the northern white rhino (*C. s. cottoni*) and the southern white rhino (*C. s. simum*). The northern white used to inhabit the savannahs of southern Chad, the Central African Republic, southern Sudan, and the far north of the Democratic Republic of the Congo through to western Uganda until the early 1980s. From 2,250 animals in 1960, it has now been reduced, by poaching, to possibly less than 10 individuals in Garamba National Park. Ten animals exist in two zoos in the USA and Czech Republic, but only three are capable of breeding. The zoo population is declining and is not viable. The northern white rhino is one of the three most endangered rhino taxa on the planet (along with the Javan and the western black rhino).

The northern white rhino is listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (www.iucnredlist.org).

In contrast, the southern white rhino has increased, thanks to conservation efforts, from 50 animals over a hundred years ago, to over 11,000 today and is listed as Near Threatened.

Black rhinoceros

The black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) has four sub-species. The western black rhino (*D. b. longipes*) in northern Cameroon is the most threatened. Only 10 or so animals remain from an estimated population of over 3,000 in 1980.

IUCN's role in World Heritage

IUCN is the technical advisory body to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee on natural heritage. The Union undertakes technical evaluations of the natural values of the sites nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List and has evaluated some 300 proposed sites. Each year IUCN reports to the World Heritage Centre on the conservation status of World Heritage sites under threat. IUCN's assessments on what is happening in World Heritage sites are derived from a variety of sources: IUCN Regional offices, member organisations, indigenous peoples groups, the scientific community, experts from IUCN commissions and concerned individuals.

The deteriorating situation in Garamba National Park

The Garamba National Park was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1980; but in 1996 it was placed on the danger list because of political instability in DRC and the war in neighbouring Sudan. At the start of the war in DRC in 1997, key animal populations decreased significantly, but after 1998, through increased surveillance efforts, populations remained fairly stable.

Unfortunately, in June 2003, the situation deteriorated drastically and the plight of the northern white rhino worsened again in 2004, when a survey indicated only five rhinos in an area which had 19 the previous year. Poachers are predominantly SPLA rebels and ironically, the increase in poaching seems to be connected to the progress in the Sudanese peace talks, resulting in fighters coming back from the front and available for poaching. In response, an emergency strategy was developed by ICCN and its conservation partners. The strategy focuses on re-training and equipping the guard force and taking steps to put pressure on the SPLA to withdraw their fighters from the region.

*International assistance:*Total amount of international assistance provided from the World Heritage Fund to Garamba National Park was US\$ 157,845 for equipment and staff allowances as of June 2004.