

African Wars and the Politics of Ivory

Written by Keith Somerville

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KEITH SOMERVILLE, APR 9 2013

For over 2,000 years ivory has been a sought after commodity and one that Africa has been able to supply in abundance. The trade wiped out the elephant populations of North Africa over a millennia ago[1] and rapidly led to the mass killing of elephants in West, Central, Eastern and Southern Africa as the European introduction of firearms made it easier and safer for the hunter. Columns of forcibly recruited or slave porters carried ivory to ports such as Dar es Salaam and Mombasa, to be sold in Europe. At the height of the trade in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as much as 800-1000 tonnes was exported annually[2]. It was a legal trade and one that was lucrative for the hunter and the middleman.

Trade in ivory is now illegal and although poaching for ivory has been the bane of conservationists and wildlife departments across Africa for 50 years, recent years have seen an upsurge in poaching and a growing link between ivory poaching and African insurgent movements and armies. In Central Africa the situation is out of control with the growing involvement of heavily armed, mobile guerrilla groups, such as the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army of Joseph Kony, rebel groups in the Central African Republic (many of whom are now part of the Seleka alliance which seized power by force in March 2013), the diverse rebel armies and local militias fighting in the eastern DR Congo, the Janjaweed militia from Sudan's Darfur province and Somalia's al-Shabab. The national armies trying to combat some of these movements have also taken the opportunity of cross-border operations against armed groups to get involved in poaching and there is evidence of the involvement of the Ugandan army and members of the South Sudanese army[3].

But the poaching is not purely a matter of insurgents killing elephants in combat zones or contested territory and then utilizing the ivory to fund their activities. Over the past couple of decades as China's economy has surged ahead and previously poor East Asian states such as Vietnam have experienced economic booms, the demand for ivory (and also rhino horn for dubious medicinal and lifestyle purposes) has increased hugely in East Asia, there is more and more ready cash to pay for it and prices have rapidly increased. The freedom given Chinese commercial organizations and personnel in Africa has also increased the routes available for relatively risk free exports of ivory to East Asia, where Thailand and Malaysia have become major transit points to China and Vietnam[4].

In 2011-12 over 150 Chinese citizens were arrested across Africa for smuggling ivory as Jeffrey Gettleman reported in the *New York Times* in September 2012. Gettleman went on to report that, "there is growing evidence that poaching increases in elephant-rich areas where Chinese construction workers are building roads". He quotes Roberts Hormats of the US State Department as saying, 'China is the epicenter of demand. Without the demand from China, this would all but dry up.'[5] But that demand shows no sign of drying up and African states are desperate for investment and infrastructural development, which China is more willing to provide than the West, without political or other strings. While African governments are concerned to conserve dwindling numbers of elephants for both environmental and tourism-related reasons, they do not want to try to pressure Beijing and put at risk an increasingly important source of economic development and export earnings. One also cannot ignore the lucrative nature of the trade, with ivory selling for over \$1,000 per kg. The smuggling networks and the poaching operations often involve organized crime and political corruption, with hefty backhanders available for politicians and officials who turn a blind eye. Ivory smuggling has always been associated with political corruption, just as the present boom in rhino poaching in South Africa is linked with political corruption, organized crime and graft in South Africa.[6]

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War, insecurity and porous borders enable poaching

Given the market, the price of ivory and the possibilities for corruption, poaching is clearly going to happen. For much of the 60s, 70s and 80s this poaching was generally thought to be carried out by impoverished local people in conservation areas or on the borders of national parks. They had frequently lost land to the parks and their access to hunting or grazing lands. Locals would poach and sell the ivory for a relative pittance to middlemen who arranged the transit out of the country, often with political or official protection in return for a cut of the profits. Today, the growing evidence is that in Central and East Africa the poaching operations may be changing. Over the past few years wildlife conservation groups, journalists and concerned governments have unearthed increasing amounts of information about the role of insurgent movements and counter-insurgency units from state armies engaged in large-scale killings of elephants – not just poaching one or two elephants periodically but wiping out whole herds and smuggling out the ivory across the vast, unpoliced and largely unpoliceable borders in the locus of endemic insurgency between Sudan, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Chad, DR Congo and Cameroon.

For decades, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony fought the Ugandan Army of President Museveni and survived on looted food, money and other. His war was brutal, as was the counter-insurgency fight against him. But he had a safe haven across the border in Sudan – where successive Sudanese governments, including the current Bashir regime, supported him as a means of weakening Uganda and punishing it for its longstanding support for the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (now the army of the state of South Sudan)[7]. In recent years, the ceasefire in southern Sudan and then independence of South Sudan, the successes of the Ugandan Army and Uganda's forays into DR Congo enabled Museveni to push the LRA out of Uganda and the border areas of DR Congo. It then ranged over a swathe of territory beyond the control of governments in DR Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic. It retained links with the Sudanese through pro-Sudanese government forces in Darfur, another province at war and one that was a conduit for smuggling of ivory, gold and other precious commodities from areas of Central Africa to Khartoum and thence out of Africa. Ivory has become one of the chief commodities and one of the most lucrative.

There are no totally verifiable figures available for the numbers of elephants slaughtered for their ivory in 2012 and the opening months of 2013, but reports from Cameroon, Chad, DR Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic suggest a massive and continuing rise in killings involving not only the LRA but also the Sudanese Janjaweed militia (used by Bashir to fight and massacre rebels and non-Arabic-speaking communities in Darfur), Chadian armed gangs and professional poachers and well-established Darfur smugglers. Information from Cites (Convention of the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora)[8], Resolve[9] and UN data points towards a growth in ivory poaching across a wide belt of Central Africa – all in areas affected by insurgent or militia activity. The illegal killings of large number of elephants for their ivory increasingly brings together organised crime, corrupt government officials and well-armed rebel militias.

In Bouba N'Djida National Park, in northern Cameroon, up to 450 elephants were killed by groups from Chad and the Sudan in 2012. Cites believes the poached ivory is traded for money, weapons and ammunition to enable the groups to continue their conflicts in neighbouring states. One result is the militarization of the fight against poaching; Cameroon's government deployed up to 150 soldiers into the park to support the lightly-armed rangers. Perhaps even more worrying was the killing of 22 elephants in the Garamba National Park, DR Congo, in April 2012. Rangers said they were thought to have been shot from a helicopter all at the same time. The ivory was then flown rather than carried out of the park. DR Congo wildlife sources believed that the poaching was carried out by heavily-armed, helicopter born soldiers of the Ugandan Army, who had located the elephant herd during counter-insurgency sweeps against the LRA or during operations to assist Ugandan-backed militias in the DR Congo. The soldiers killed the elephants, took the tusks and flew back to bases in Uganda, where army facilities were mostly likely used to smuggle the ivory out of the country.

Central African countries agreed at the end of March to deploy 1,000 soldiers and law-enforcement officials as part of a joint military operation to protect the region's last remaining elephant populations from a group of 300 poachers believed to be from Sudan, according to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).[10] The decision followed evidence of a recent killing spree by Sudanese poachers. Well-armed men on horseback slaughtered 89 elephants in Chad

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between the 14th and 15th of March. This was the worst single massacre since the killings in Cameroon's Bouba N'Djida National Park in February 2012.[11] The use of large groups of men on horseback bears all the hallmarks of the Darfur-based Sudanaese militia, the Janjaweed.

A history of ivory as a prize or military resource in African wars

The involvement of militias and rebel groups in ivory poaching and smuggling is nothing new. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, South African special forces fought in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) backing the white minority government against Zimbabwean African nations led by ZANU and ZAPU. As the guerrilla war intensified, South African intelligence officers established a trade in ivory from Rhodesia to South Africa. The Rhodesian army's notorious Selous Scouts were financed in part by South African Military Intelligence and the poaching and sale of ivory appears, according to Stephen Ellis, to have been required by the South Africans as part-payment for their support of the Selous Scouts. Cargoes of ivory and other commodities were flown Rhodesia to Pretoria in military aircraft from the mid-1970s.[12]

In the 1970s and 1980s both UNITA in Angola and Renamo in Mozambique (with the very active participation and to the profit of members of South Africa's special forces and military intelligence) were both heavily involved in the killing of elephants and the export of illegal ivory. South African Military Intelligence organized routes through Pretoria and then out of South Africa. There were personnel in South Africa's special forces who had been professional hunters, game park wardens or in other way involved in the wildlife business before being trained for bush warfare. They assisted UNITA and the Mozambican resistance movements in establishing extensive and well-organized ivory poaching and trading operations. The sale of the ivory in East Asia brought in funds that went into further destabilization of the Southern African frontline states, though much went into the pockets of South African officers and intelligence officials, as Stephen Ellis clearly identified in his extensive research in the 1990s.[13]

Kony, the LRA and poaching

The current massive increase in poaching and the consequent reduction in elephant numbers in central Africa may not be as organized and "official" as sanctioned by the SADF and Military Intelligence operations in southern Africa, but it suggests that military involvement in poaching spreads across an area from Cameroon's Bouba Ndjida National Park to Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo and then up into the Central African Republic, with smuggling routes going on into Darfur and then Khartoum for export out of Africa. It became headline news when the LRA was believed to have been involved, due to the brief upsurge in interest in the LRA following the *Kony 2012* video affair and the attention this gave to the LRA's war and attempts to track down Kony. However transitory the interest, the media attention brought Kony's atrocities to a global audience and put the spotlight, albeit briefly, on the LRA and the US-backed military operation involving Uganda, South Sudan, CAR and the DRC in trying to track him down. This has so far failed as he has proved able to traverse large areas of this region of multiple insurgencies, rebellions and essentially porous borders. Operations in the CAR have currently been suspended due to the rebellion there, the deposing and flight of President Bozize and the shock in Africa over the victory of the Seleka rebels movement and the killing of South African forces in Bangui by the rebels. However, the Ugandan government has said it will keep its troops in south-eastern areas of the CAR to deter the LRA and continue to search out LRA units in the region bordering CAR, South Sudan and the DRC.[14]

Paul Ronan of the Resolve NGO, which attempts to track LRA activities and their whereabouts, told the author in January 2013 that Kony is believed to be in an area straddling the border between South Sudan and Sudan's Darfur province, close to the border with the CAR. The area is beyond the control of any of the states in the region and is a well-known smuggling route (notably for gold and ivory) used by gangs from Darfur. The ivory connection to this region is through its long-term use as a route for smugglers moving various contraband commodities through Chad and CAR into Darfur. *The New York Times* report in 2012 on the LRA and ivory smuggling, said that the LRA, the Somali al Shabaab movement and Darfur's Janjaweed, were poaching elephants and using the tusks to buy weapons and getting the ivory out using this route.

Porous borders hinder wildlife protection and search for insurgents

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The problem for those who want to stop this trade and to work effectively to conserve efforts across Africa, and not just in a few well-protected national parks or reserves, is that in Central Africa, West-Central Africa, the Sahel and parts of Central-East Africa are large areas of territory – beyond the control of national governments. This is particularly so in the DR Congo, southern and eastern CAR and Darfur. In these areas, borders cannot be policed even when it comes to fighting anti-government insurgencies and rebel movements. In addition, the mutual suspicion between governments and the tit-for-tat funding or support for rebel/insurgent movements mean that even if you beat the LRA in Uganda, for example, it can then spring up in South Sudan, CAR or DR Congo. Additionally, the levels of political and military corruption are such, as are levels of impunity for senior politicians and military officers, that involvement in poaching and profiting from the slaughter is so widespread that even if the resources are there to stop the poaching, the will is lacking or political expediency overcomes conservation needs.

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[1] *New Scientist*, 6 November 1986;

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Keith Somerville, The Ivory Wars: how poaching in Central Africa fuels the LRA and Jnjaweed, *African Arguments*, London, Royal African Society, 14 January 2013, <http://africanarguments.org/2013/01/14/the-ivory-wars-how-poaching-in-central-africa-fuels-the-lra-and-janjaweed-%E2%80%93-by-keith-somerville/> accessed 28th March 2013

[4] <http://www.traffic.org/home/2012/12/11/massive-african-ivory-seizure-in-malaysia.html>

[5] Jeffrey Gettleman, Elephants Dying in Epic Frenzy as Ivory Fuels Wars and Profits, *New York Times*, 3 September 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/04/world/africa/africas-elephants-are-being-slaughtered-in-poaching-frenzy.html?ref=ivory&pagewanted=print>, accessed 10th January 2013.

[6] See Keith Somerville, Rhino poaching in South Africa: organised crime and economic opportunity driving trade, *African Arguments*, Royal African Society, <http://africanarguments.org/2012/10/29/rhino-poaching-in-south-africa-organised-crime-and-economic-opportunity-driving-trade-%E2%80%93-by-keith-somerville/> accessed 29th March 2013.

[7] See Jok Madut Jok, *Sudan: Race, Religion, and Violence*, Oxford: One World, 2007, pp.240-1.

[8] http://www.cites.org/eng/news/pr/2012/20121222_UNSC_elephant_LRA.php

[9] <http://www.theresolve.org/blog/archives/category/lra-crisis-tracker>

[10] http://www.cites.org/eng/news/pr/2012/20121222_UNSC_elephant_LRA.php and *Sudan Tribune*, 27 March 2013 <http://www.sudantribune.com/> accessed 29th March 2013.

[11] <http://wwf.panda.org/?unewsid=207951>

[12] Stephen Ellis, Of Elephants and Men: Politics and Nature Conservation in South Africa, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Mar., 1994), pp. 53-69, p.

[13] Ellis, 1994.

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[14] *New Vision* (Kampala), 26 March 2013 – <http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/641051-uganda-to-keep-troops-in-central-african-republic.html>, accessed 29th March.

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