

The Asahi Shinbun

Illegal assault rifles taking deadly toll on African elephants

June 09, 2013

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

KABO, Republic of Congo--AK-47 assault rifles have taken a heavy human toll during civil wars in various African nations, but now the weapons are being used to slaughter African forest elephants.

The greater firepower of the rifles has led to a sharp increase in their use by poachers of elephant ivory.

An example of some poachers' deadly handiwork was found in the village of Kabo in the northern part of the Republic of Congo. The village serves as a base for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), which has been working with the forestry ministry to crack down on poaching.

A secure warehouse contained about a dozen elephant tusks that had been seized from poachers. The largest were about 1.5 meters long and weighed about 16 kilograms.

African forest elephants are found in the Republic of Congo and neighboring Gabon in central Africa. Their ivory is considered to be the highest quality because of the hardness of the tusks.

Dead elephants found in the forest have huge bullet holes in their heads, making it evident the animals were killed by the assault rifles. Many of the weapons have also been seized from poachers.

"Because elephants have tough skin, they cannot be killed with shotguns," said Tomoaki Nishihara, who works for the WCS, which supports patrols of the forest. "The AK-47s are much more lethal because they have rapid-fire action."

Most of the assault rifles used by poachers were once used in African civil wars. Fierce fighting occurred in the Republic of Congo during the late 1990s.

Naobi Okayasu, the director of conservation for the Japan office of the World Wildlife Fund, worked as a researcher during that time in Africa.

"The AK-47s were distributed free of charge to militia," she said. "After the fighting ended, the rifles were used by poachers instead of being collected by the government."

Although possession of the rifles is illegal, it is possible to buy one on the black market for about \$40 (about 4,000 yen).

Many of the rifles are believed to be brought in from neighboring Congo, where fighting still continues.

According to TRAFFIC, which monitors wildlife trade, there has been an increase in the volume of seized ivory. In 2011, 35 tons were seized, the largest amount since 1989 when the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), also known as the Washington Convention, instituted a ban on ivory.

Elephants are not the only victims of assault rifles. Last year in the Republic of Congo, seven individuals working to protect wildlife were gunned down by poachers. The attack was believed to be in retaliation for clamping down on poaching.

Most of the poached ivory goes to China and Thailand, where the ivory is prized as a symbol of wealth and social status. There are concerns that greater demand will accelerate poaching in Africa.

Efforts have begun, though, to set up an international network against the practice.

A meeting was held in Thailand in March among nations that have signed CITES. A representative of the Republic of Congo said, "Smugglers are providing the AK-47s to poachers. The priority should be on ending the demand for ivory."

At the meeting, an official with the United Nations Environment Program said that over the past decade, ivory poaching had doubled and the number of illegal transactions had increased threefold.

WCS researchers said that 60 percent of the African forest elephants in five nations in central Africa had been killed.

Ten nations in central Africa have begun a cooperative effort to strengthen a crackdown on poachers. They are considering establishing joint border patrols.

At an international conference held last November on illegal trade in wildlife, the U.S. government announced that it would provide \$100,000 for the creation of a global network to protect these animals.

"Those who profit from (wildlife) illegally are not just undermining our borders and our economies," said then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. "They are truly stealing from the next generation."

(This article was written by Hirohiko Nakamura in Kabo and Shiho Tomioka.)

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN