

How Killing Elephants Finances Terror in Africa

Armed groups help fund operations by smuggling elephant ivory. Can fake tusks with hidden GPS trackers thwart them?



Veteran ranger Jean Claude Mambo Marindo sits beside almost a hundred tusks seized from elephant poachers at Garamba National Park, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The park has lost all its rhinos to poaching for their horns. Now it's under siege for its ivory, mainly by rogue soldiers from national armies and by the terrorist group the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

By **Bryan Christy**

Photographs by **Brent Stirton**

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When the American Museum of Natural History wanted to update the hall of North American mammals, taxidermist George Dante got the call. When the tortoise Lonesome George, emblem of the Galápagos Islands, died, it was Dante who was tasked with restoring him. But Dante, who is one of the world's most respected taxidermists, has never done what I'm asking him to do. No one has.

I want Dante to design an artificial elephant tusk that has the look and feel of confiscated tusks loaned to me by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Inside the fake tusk, I want him to embed a custom-made GPS and satellite-based tracking system. If he can do this, I'll ask him to make several more tusks. In the criminal world, ivory operates as currency, so in a way I'm asking Dante to print counterfeit money I can follow.

I will use his tusks to hunt the people who kill elephants and to learn what roads their ivory plunder follows, which ports it leaves, what ships it travels on, what cities and countries it transits, and where it ends up. Will artificial tusks planted in a central African country head east—or west—toward a coast with reliable transportation to Asian markets? Will they go north, the most violent ivory path on the African continent? Or will they go nowhere, discovered before they're moved and turned in by an honest person?

National Geographic needs your help to protect elephants and to continue reporting on wildlife crime. [Together we can make a difference.](#)

As we talk over my design needs, Dante's brown eyes sparkle like a boy's on Christmas morning. To test ivory, dealers will scratch a tusk with a knife or hold a lighter under it; ivory is a tooth and won't melt. My tusks will have to act like ivory. "And I gotta find a way to get that shine," Dante says, referring to the gloss a clean elephant tusk has.

"I need Schreger lines too, George," I say, referring to the cross-hatching on the butt of a sawn tusk that looks like growth rings of a tree trunk.

In this scene from the documentary [*Explorer: Warlords of Ivory*](#), Bryan Christy presents world-renowned taxidermist George Dante with a new challenge: creating a completely convincing fake elephant tusk. [Learn more about the *Explorer* series.](#)

Like much of the world, George Dante knows that [the African elephant is under siege](#). A booming Chinese middle class with an insatiable taste for ivory, crippling poverty in Africa, weak and corrupt law enforcement, and more ways than ever to kill an elephant have created a perfect storm. The result: Some 30,000 African elephants are slaughtered every year, more than 100,000 between 2010 and 2012, and the pace of killing is not slowing. Most illegal ivory goes to China, where a pair of ivory chopsticks can bring more than a thousand dollars and carved tusks sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

East Africa is now ground zero for much of the poaching. In June the Tanzanian government announced that the country has lost 60 percent of its elephants in the past five years, down from 110,000 to fewer than 44,000. During the same period, neighboring Mozambique is reported to have lost 48 percent of its elephants. Locals, including poor villagers and unpaid park rangers, are killing elephants for cash—a risk they're willing to take because even if they're caught, the penalties are often negligible. But in central Africa, as I learned firsthand, something more sinister is driving the killing: Militias and terrorist groups funded in part by ivory are poaching elephants, often outside their home countries, and even hiding inside national parks. They're looting communities, enslaving people, and killing park rangers who get in their way.

South Sudan. The Central African Republic (CAR). The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Sudan. Chad. Five of the world's least stable nations, as ranked by the Washington, D.C.-based

organization the Fund for Peace, are home to people who travel to other countries to kill elephants. Year after year, the path to many of the biggest, most horrific elephant killings traces back to Sudan, which has no elephants left but gives comfort to foreign-born poacher-terrorists and is home to the janjaweed and other Sudanese cross-continental marauders.

Park rangers are often the only forces going up against the killers. Outnumbered and ill equipped, they're manning the front line in a violent battle that affects us all.

Ugandan soldiers with the African Union's Regional Task Force hunt for LRA leader Joseph Kony in the Central African Republic (CAR), pulling themselves along ropes to cross rivers. Kony's men jump back and forth across borders, hiding in countries where governance is weak.

Chapter 1: Garamba's Victims

Garamba National Park, in the northeast corner of the DRC and on the border with South Sudan, is a UNESCO World Heritage site, internationally famous for its elephants and its boundless ocean of green. But when I ask a gathering of children and elders in the village of Kpaika, about 30 miles from the park's western border, how many of them have visited Garamba, no one raises a hand. When I ask, "How many of you have been kidnapped by the LRA?"—I understand why.

Father Ernest Sugule, who ministers to the village, tells me that many children in his diocese have seen family members killed by the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, the Ugandan rebel group led by Joseph Kony, one of Africa's most wanted terrorists. Sugule is the founder of a group that provides assistance to victims of Kony's army. "I've met more than a thousand children who have been abducted," he says as we talk inside his church in the nearby town of Dungu. "When they're abducted, they're very young, and they're forced to do horrible things. Most of these children are very, very traumatized when they come back home." They have nightmares, Sugule continues. They have flashbacks. Their own families are afraid that they're devils, or forever soldiers, who might kill them in the night. It is assumed that the girls were raped, so it's difficult for them to find husbands. Villagers sometimes taunt returned children with the same expression used for Kony's men: "LRA Tongo Tongo." "LRA Cut Cut"—a reference, Sugule explains, to the militants' vicious use of machetes.

Ranger Dieudonné Kumboyo Kobango, standing with his son, Genekpio, who escaped soon after the LRA seized him, says, "I search for the LRA on every patrol."

Kony is a former Roman Catholic altar boy whose stated mission is to overthrow the Ugandan government on behalf of the Acholi people of northern Uganda, and to rule the country according to his version of the Ten Commandments. Since the 1980s, and beginning in Uganda, Kony's minions are alleged to have killed tens of thousands of people, slicing the lips, ears, and breasts off women, raping children and women, chopping off the feet of those caught riding bicycles, and kidnapping young boys to create an army of child soldiers who themselves grow into killers.

In 1994 Kony left Uganda and took his murderous gang on the road. He went first to Sudan, initiating a pattern of border-hopping that continues to make him difficult to track. At the time Sudan's north and south were in a civil war, and Kony offered Sudan's government, in Khartoum, a way to destabilize the south. For ten years Khartoum supplied him with food, medicine, and arms, including automatic rifles, antiaircraft guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars. It was thanks largely to efforts by the group Invisible Children and its video *Kony 2012* that Kony became a household name in the West. In the United States, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama supported efforts either to arrest or kill him. The U.S. State Department named Kony a "specially designated global terrorist" in 2008, and the African Union has designated the LRA a terrorist organization.

Dead elephants finance terrorism. "Ivory operates as a savings account for Kony," says the U.S. State Department's Marty Regan.

When north and south Sudan signed a peace agreement in 2005, Kony lost his Sudanese host. In March 2006 he fled for the DRC and set up camp in Garamba National Park, then home to some 4,000 elephants. From Garamba, Kony signaled his desire for peace with Uganda, sending emissaries to neutral Juba, in southern Sudan, to negotiate with Ugandan officials while he and his men lived unmolested in and around the park, protected by a cease-fire agreement. His army farmed vegetables. Kony even invited foreign press into his camp for interviews. Meanwhile, flouting the cease-fire, his men crossed into CAR, where they kidnapped hundreds of children and made sex slaves of women they brought back to the park.



About the Photographer

Brent Stirton has won numerous awards for his investigative photojournalism. His subjects for this story weren't shy, he says. "They've been through a lot, and they were comfortable having their lives revealed."

[Hear Brent Stirton tell their stories in an audio slideshow.](#)

Father Sugule introduces me to three young girls, recent LRA kidnapping victims, who are sitting on a wooden bench in his church. Geli Oh, 16, spent longer with Kony's army than her two friends—two and a half terrible years. She looks at the floor while her friends whisper to each other, smile radiantly, and nibble on cookies we've brought for them. Geli Oh perks up at the word "elephant." She saw many elephants in Garamba National Park, she says, which is where the LRA took her. Tongo Tongo shot two elephants one day, she says. "They say the more elephants they kill, the more ivory they get."

Kony's force has declined from a peak of 2,700 combatants in 1999 to an estimated 150 to 250 core fighters today. Killings of civilians have likewise dropped, from 1,252 in 2009 to 13 in 2014, but abductions are rising again, and it takes the arrival of only a few of the armed militants to send fear ricocheting through communities. In village after village along the road between Father Sugule's church and what is now South Sudan, I meet Kony victims who describe being fed elephant meat and how, after elephants were killed, militants took the ivory away.

But where?

After Lucienne Lanziwa's husband died in an LRA attack on Garamba, she got a modest stipend. Widows now get a sum equal to six years of a ranger's salary.

Chapter 2: The Problem Solver

To follow my artificial tusks from the jungle to their final destination, I need a tracking device capable of transmitting exact locations without dead zones. It needs to be durable and small enough to fit inside the cavities George Dante would make in the blocks of resin and lead that formed the tusks. Quintin Kermeen, 51, based in Concord, California, has the credentials, and the personality, I'm looking for. Kermeen started in the radio-tracking business when he was 15 and has since built electronic trackers and collars for wildlife from Andean bears to California condors to Tasmanian devils. He designed a GPS tracker that the U.S. Geological Survey embedded in live Burmese

pythons to monitor the invasive snakes in the Florida Everglades. For his Judas pig project he built GPS satellite collars to enable pest control authorities in New Zealand to send feral pigs into the bush and locate their invasive piggy friends. We meet over Skype.

“You must be a real animal lover,” I say.

“I’m not an animal lover,” he snaps. “I’m a problem solver.”

I laugh. “Then you’re just the man for me.”

In May 2013 poachers with the insurgent group Seleka massacred 26 elephants at Dzanga Bai, a mineral-rich watering hole in CAR.

After months of tinkering, Kermeen’s final bespoke ivory-tracking device arrives in the mail. It consists of a battery capable of lasting more than a year, a GPS receiver, an Iridium satellite transceiver, and a temperature sensor.

While Dante set about embedding Kermeen’s tracker inside his tusk mold, a third team member, John Flaig, a specialist in near-space, balloon-based photography—images taken from at least the height of spy planes—was preparing to monitor the tusks as they moved. Using Kermeen’s technology, he could adjust how many times a day they tried to communicate with a satellite via the Internet. We would follow them using Google Earth.

In January 2014, while x-raying a Vietnam-bound container declared to hold cashews, Togolese port authorities saw something strange: ivory. Eventually, more than four tons was found, Africa’s largest seizure since the global ivory trade ban took effect in 1990. DNA suggests that some of the ivory is from elephants killed in May 2013 at Dzanga Bai in CAR.

Chapter 3: “I Want Ivory for Ammunition”

On September 11, 2014, Michael Onen, a sergeant in Kony’s army, walked out of Garamba National Park carrying an AK-47, five magazines of ammunition, and a story. Onen is short and looks even

smaller wearing a camouflage-patterned Ugandan army uniform that's too long for him in the sleeves. He sits on a plastic chair opposite me in a clearing at the African Union forces base in Obo, in the southeastern corner of CAR, where he is in custody. Onen had been part of an LRA poaching operation in Garamba consisting of 41 fighters, including Kony's son Salim. The operation was designed by Kony himself, Onen says. During the summer Kony's soldiers had killed 25 elephants in Garamba, and they were on their way back to Kony carrying the ivory.

Around us stroll Ugandan army soldiers, who make up the entire African Union contingent based in Obo and are committed to finding and killing Kony. The soldiers embrace Onen as one of their own, and in fundamental ways he is. He was 22 years old the night in 1998 that Kony's soldiers raided his village in Gulu, Uganda, and pulled him from his bed. His wife, abducted later, was killed.

From the moment of his capture, Onen says, he was a complainer. Being small, he balked at having to carry the heavy bundles that Kony's militants ferry from camp to camp in their patrols across central Africa, and for his whining, he was beaten with a machete. But Onen got his way. Instead of being made a soldier, he was designated a signaler—a radioman privy to Kony's secret communications.

This is a photocopy of the diary of the LRA's Lt. Col. Vincent "Binany" Okumu, who, defectors say, was in charge of ivory hunting in Garamba National Park. Written in Acholi, it details Kony's order for a hundred elephant tusks. Ugandan forces killed Binany in 2013 and recovered the diary.

During the failed peace talks with Uganda, while Kony hid in Garamba from 2006 to 2008, Onen had been assigned to Kony's lead peace negotiator, Vincent Otti. Otti liked elephants, Onen recalled, and forbade their killing. But after Otti left Garamba to participate in the peace talks, Kony began killing elephants for ivory.

Otti was furious, Onen says. "Why are you collecting ivory?" Otti demanded of Kony. "Aren't you interested in peace talks?"

No, I want ivory for ammunition to keep fighting, was Kony's reply, according to Onen, who was listening to transmissions. "Ivory operates as a savings account for Kony," says Marty Regan, of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. Kony's army had arrived

in Garamba in 2006 with little ammunition left to continue its war, Onen tells me. “It’s only the ivory that will make the LRA strong,” he recalls Kony saying.

These LRA defectors—all abducted as children and pressed into service—now fight for the Ugandan military. With an average of 16 years in the bush with the LRA, the men bring a wealth of experience to the hunt for Kony and his fighters.

Instead of signing a peace agreement, Kony had his peace negotiator executed.



About the Author

“This assignment was exciting for me because it wasn’t just another animal exploitation story,” says writer [Bryan Christy](#), who reports on wildlife trafficking frequently for this magazine. “It was the story of an unspoken war.”

[Hear Bryan Christy discuss the investigation on *Fresh Air*.](#)

From Garamba, Kony sent an exploratory team to Darfur to look into forging a new relationship with the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), who had supported him against Uganda, hoping to exchange ivory for rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons. Meanwhile, according to Onen, Kony’s men hid ivory by burying it in the ground or submerging it in rivers. His account was corroborated by Caesar Achellam, a former intelligence chief for Kony who is now in the Ugandan government’s custody. Achellam told me that Kony’s men planned for the future. He said they bury sealed buckets of water along parched travel routes and bury ivory for safekeeping as well.

“They can get what they want today,” he said, “and keep it there for two, three, or even more than five years.”

The Ugandan military finally attacked Kony’s Garamba camps in late 2008. The air strike, dubbed Operation Lightning Thunder, included support from the DRC, southern Sudan, and the U.S. But it failed to rout Kony or his leadership. Kony’s response was immediate and savage. Beginning on Christmas Eve, his soldiers spread out in small teams and murdered civilians. In three weeks Kony’s brutes killed more than 800 people and kidnapped more than 160 children. The UN estimated that the massacre displaced more than a hundred thousand Congolese and Sudanese. On January 2, 2009, the horror bled into Garamba’s headquarters, at Nagero, where Kony soldiers burned the park rangers’ main building, destroyed equipment, and killed at least eight rangers and staff members.

Six years later, on October 25, 2014, Onen tells me, his poaching mission to Garamba was scheduled to deliver its ivory to Kony in Sudan. Kony was adamant in his radio transmissions. “Do not lose even one tusk,” he instructed the group, according to Onen, who said the plan was to carry the ivory to a rendezvous in CAR and then on to a market town in Darfur called Songo, not far from the Sudan Armed Forces garrison in Dafaq. There, Onen says, Kony’s men trade ivory with the Sudanese military for salt, sugar, and arms. The relationship is close: “SAF warns Kony if there’s trouble,” Onen says.

As far as Onen knew, the poaching squad he abandoned was still making its way north from Garamba through CAR to Sudan. To me, it seems reasonable to think that the radioman’s defection might have slowed the progress of the 25 elephants’ tusks headed to Kony.

Maybe I could get my fake tusks to Kony too.

Members of the Ugandan army’s dog-tracking team lift weights at the African Union base in Obo, CAR. The dogs are Belgian Malinois shepherds, famed for their use in military operations, especially in tough conditions like the dense central African bush.

Chapter 4: “You Are a Liar!”

An official in Dar es Salaam’s international airport, in Tanzania—one of several countries I scouted for launching my tusks into the illegal trade—squints at an x-ray screen as my luggage rolls through his scanner.

“Open that one,” he orders.

I unzip my suitcase to expose two fake tusks and hand him letters from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and *National Geographic* certifying that they’re artificial. A crowd gathers. Officials are pointing fingers and arguing. Those looking at the tusks think I’m an ivory trafficker. Those looking at the x-ray screen, which shows the trackers inside, think I’m smuggling a bomb. After more than an hour of animated debate, they phone the airport’s wildlife expert. When he shows up, he picks up a tusk and runs his finger over the butt end. “Schreger lines,” he says.

“Exactly,” I say. “I had them ...”

All of central Africa is a hand grenade, its pin pulled by a history of resource exploitation from abroad, dictatorships, and poverty.

He points a finger at me, and yells, “You are a liar, *bwana!*” (Bwana is Swahili for “sir.”)

In ten years he’s never made a mistake, he says: The tusks are real. I spend a night in police custody, where I’m given a desk to sleep on. National Geographic television producer J. J. Kelley takes the floor in the waiting area. He asks for water for me and is led out of the building. When he returns hours later, he has three chicken dinners and several bottles of beer, paid for by the police chief. The three of us eat together (the police chief, a Muslim, leaves the beer to us). In the morning, after officials from Tanzania’s Wildlife Division and the U.S. Embassy arrive, I’m released.

Our airport incident was one of many hiccups with the artificial tusks. Several Tanzanian officers who had presided over my arrest at the airport, including the wildlife expert, returned the next day to wish us bon voyage. “You did exactly what you were supposed to do,” I said, shaking their hands.

It was reassuring to find the Tanzanian law enforcers so vigilant, because the country is plagued by perhaps the worst elephant poaching in Africa, and corruption is rife. In 2013, Khamis Kagasheki, then Tanzania’s minister of natural resources and tourism, declared that the illegal ivory trade “involves rich people and politicians who have formed a very sophisticated network,” and he accused four members of Tanzania’s Parliament of being involved in it.

In this scene from the documentary [*Explorer: Warlords of Ivory*](#), a screener at Tanzania's airport accuses Bryan Christy of smuggling. [Learn more about the *Explorer* series.](#)

Chapter 5: Garamba's Warriors

All around me I hear the click-clack of automatic weapons being loaded. I've flown from Garamba park headquarters to a dirt airstrip deep inside the park to join an antipoaching patrol. I arrive at what amounts to the park rangers' northern front, an outpost vulnerable both to Sudanese poachers and Kony's army. Here a ranger unit is permanently deployed to protect one of the park's most important assets: a radio tower that was being built. Garamba is managed through a partnership between the DRC's wildlife department and African Parks, a group based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Since the 2008-09 attack by Kony's soldiers, rangers have finished building a new headquarters and acquired two airplanes and a helicopter. But ammunition is in perilously short supply—not even enough for basic training—and the rangers' largest weapon, a belt-fed machine gun, tends to jam every third round or so. The rangers I'm going out with have each been allocated a handful of rounds for old and unreliable AK-47s, most of them seized from poachers.

We plunge eight hours through elephant grass so tall and thick it's possible to get lost just 20 feet from the man in front of you—down grass ravines, up hills exposed to the enemy, across a murky, waist-deep pond. At the sound of a twig cracking or the detection of an unexpected scent on the wind, a ranger in front of me, Agoyo Mbikoyo, signals caution, and I drop with the team into a collective crouch and wait silently. I make a mental note that Kony's soldiers and other armed groups walk hundreds of miles from Sudan into this endless grass curtain to kill elephants. I wonder if Kony's men are out there now.

Congolese soldiers undergo training by Mathieu Eckel of African Parks, an NGO that manages Garamba National Park with the DRC's parks authority. These soldiers are tasked with helping rangers fight

poachers and armed groups like the LRA.

The recent death toll of elephants in Garamba has been staggering, even by central African standards. Poachers killed at least 132 last year, and as of this June, rangers had discovered another 42 carcasses with bullet holes, more than 30 attributed to a single Sudanese poaching expedition—a combined loss amounting to more than 10 percent of the park’s entire population of elephants, estimated now to be no more than about 1,500.

From March 2014 to March 2015, Garamba’s rangers recorded 31 contacts with armed poachers, more than half of whom were with groups traveling south from the direction of South Sudan and Sudan. They included South Sudanese armed forces (SPLA) and Sudanese military, as well as defectors from those militaries and an assortment of Sudan-based rebels. Congo’s own soldiers threaten the park’s southern border, and villagers around the park sometimes poach elephants too. And someone—it’s unclear who—is believed to be killing elephants from helicopters, as evidenced by bullet holes in the tops of skulls and the removal of tusks by what can only be chain saws.

“My interpretation,” says Jean Marc Froment, then director of the park, is that the Ugandan military “is conducting operations inside Garamba and at the same time taking some ivory.” But, he adds, the poachers could be SPLA, which uses the same type of helicopter seen over the park. An adviser to the Ugandan military rejects the helicopter accusation, and suggests that the elephants might have been shot in the top of the head after they were down.

Having worked extensively throughout central Africa, Froment transferred to Garamba in early 2014 after rangers discovered dozens of elephant carcasses in the park. It was supposed to be a short posting, but he saw too much death to leave. He’d grown up not far from Garamba at a time when it was possible to fly over the park and see 5,000 elephants in a single gathering. Now it was rare to see 250 in a herd.

Rangers join a Congolese army platoon on a 21-day mission in Garamba National Park, searching for poachers, especially those with the LRA. Rogue militias and army soldiers from the DRC, Sudan, and South Sudan are slaughtering elephants in the park. Between April 25 and June 17, poachers killed two Garamba rangers and two army officers assisting with patrols.

Froment uses the word “war” to describe the fight Garamba’s 150 rangers are in with poachers. Money is available to outfit the rangers with better equipment, but buying new weapons requires formal approval of the Congolese army, something Froment has been unable to get.

Halfway through our patrol, we come upon a clearing of burned grass beside the Kassi River, the site of a recent battle between Garamba rangers and SPLA poachers, in which, rangers tell me, they killed two poachers. I find a human skull fragment, and I nearly pick up a live hand grenade near where the SPLA had camped, mistaking it for a baby tortoise. It hadn't exploded—yet.

All of central Africa is a hand grenade, its pin pulled by a history of resource exploitation from abroad, dictatorships, and poverty. “The poaching issue is a governance issue,” Froment says. “We protect the elephant to protect the park. We protect the park to give the people something of value.” He fights for elephants because he knows that without the animals' presence, no one will support Garamba, and the park—which he calls “Africa's heart”—will be lost. Garamba is a crucible within a crucible, a park under siege in a country often in civil war in a region that has nearly forgotten peace.

On our patrol we don't encounter any poachers or rebel groups. But time is stalking our team: Months later, on April 25, 2015, while on patrol, the ranger who led me into Garamba, Agoyo Mbikoyo, was shot and killed by a gang of poachers. In June three more Garamba-based officers were killed. The culprits are believed to have been South Sudanese, according to African Parks.

Chapter 6: Planting the Fake Tusks

After visiting Garamba, I arrange with a confidential source to put my tusks into the black market near Mboki, a small village in CAR midway between Garamba and Sudan that has been the target of attacks by Kony's army and where some people who have escaped from Kony have found safety. According to data stored in a GPS unit taken off the body of LRA commander Vincent “Binany” Okumu, who was killed in a 2013 firefight with African Union forces on his return from poaching in Garamba, this village is on the path of ivory headed to Kony's base in Darfur.

Where did the tusks end up? [Track the GPS unit in an interactive map.](#)

Rangers practice their riding skills at Zakouma National Park, in Chad. The park has four mounted ranger teams because horses are the only way to effectively patrol during the wet season, when the elephants

Chapter 7: Unwitting Targets

It was just after 4 a.m. on Heban hill, in Chad, 80 miles from the Sudanese border and 60 miles northeast of Zakouma National Park, home to the country's largest remaining elephant herd, 450 animals. Six antipoaching rangers and their cook, the entirety of the Hippotrague (French for "roan antelope") unit, were awake, dressed in camouflage uniforms, and preparing for morning prayers—devoted even in the darkness. It was the rainy season, and the rangers, like the elephants they were guarding, had left the park for higher ground.

Zakouma breathes its elephants. Dry season in, rainy season out. During the rains the park is more lake than land, and elephants split into two groups to escape the floods. One moves north toward Heban, the other west toward central Chad.

A welcome sight returns to Zakouma: babies. Thanks to stepped-up enforcement, the park hasn't lost an elephant to poachers since 2012. Without the stress of poaching, the elephants started breeding again, and more than 40 calves have been born.

The rangers on Heban hill had little reason to be concerned for their safety. They were relieving a ranger team that had raided a Sudanese poachers' camp three weeks before and seized more than a thousand rounds of ammunition; mobile phones holding photographs of bloated, dead elephants; a satellite phone with a solar panel charger; two elephant tusks; a pair of camouflage pants; and a uniform with the insignia of Abu Tira—Sudan's notorious Central Reserve Police, alleged to have committed mass killings, assaults, and rapes in Darfur. The rangers also recovered a stamped Sudanese army leave slip granting three soldiers permission to travel from Darfur to a town near the Chadian border.

Zakouma National Park has lost nearly 90 percent of its elephants since 2002. Most—up to 3,000—were poached from 2005 to 2008. During those years Sudanese poachers arrived in groups of more than a dozen armed men, camping inside the park for months at a time, killing, in one instance, 64 elephants in a single hunt. When in 2008 the Wildlife Conservation Society introduced a surveillance airplane, poaching declined, but Sudanese marauders adapted, returning in hit squads

of under six men, who infiltrated from outside the park on one-day hunts. They killed fewer elephants per hunt but were much harder to track and stop. Now, says the park's director, Rian Labuschagne, of African Parks, "my biggest fear is that they'll start coming in pairs."

The men of the Hippotrague unit assumed that after the previous team's raid, the poachers had all fled home. But instead, that morning the poachers were hiding among trees surrounding the rangers' camp. The poachers opened fire, killing five rangers. A sixth, a young lookout, ran down the hill, disappeared, and is presumed dead. The team's cook, also wounded, struggled 11 miles to get help. Later, when Labuschagne examined the trajectory of bullets at the scene, he concluded that the poachers had been trained in how to set up a cross fire, which, combined with evidence found at the scene, pointed to President Omar al-Bashir's Sudan Armed Forces.

The story typically would have ended with the wanton killing of these park rangers protecting elephants. But one of the murdered men, Idriss Adoum, had a younger brother, Saleh, who resolved that, when the rains stopped, he and a cousin would hunt the killers in Sudan, where so many ivory roads lead.

Five of the six men in Zakouma's Hippotrague patrol unit were killed by elephant poachers outside the park; the sixth is presumed dead. The family of Idriss Adoum (top, second from left) tracked one suspect to Sudan. The cook, Djimet Said (below), was shot but survived, walking 11 miles to the nearest village for help.

Chapter 8: Sudan's Complicity

As Somalia is to piracy, Sudan has become to elephant poaching. In 2012 as many as a hundred Sudanese and Chadian poachers on horseback rode across central Africa into Cameroon's Bouba Ndjidah National Park. They set up camp and in a four-month rampage killed up to 650 elephants. According to Céline Sissler-Bienvenu, Francophone Africa director for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, who led a group into the park after the slaughter, the poachers were most likely from Darfur's Rizeigat tribal group, with ties to the janjaweed—the violent, Sudanese-government-

backed militias that have committed atrocities in Darfur. Sudanese and Chadian poachers were likewise implicated in the 2013 butchering of nearly 90 elephants—including 33 pregnant females as well as newborn calves—near Tikem, Chad, not far from Bouba Ndjidah.

That members of the Sudanese military trade arms for ivory with the LRA raises questions about the highest levels of Sudan's government. In 2009 Bashir became the world's first sitting head of state indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In presenting that case, ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo underscored Bashir's control of the groups said to be behind Sudan's ivory trafficking: "He used the army, he enrolled the Militia/Janjaweed. They all report to him, they all obey him. His control is absolute."

Michael Onen, the defector from Kony's army, told me that the LRA and the janjaweed had battled over ivory, with one group robbing the other, and that it was the janjaweed's success in trading ivory that originally gave Kony the idea to start killing elephants. The LRA sells to the Sudan Armed Forces, Onen said.

The artificial tusks follow a route LRA defectors tell me ivory takes to Kony's Kafia Kingi base. By now the tusks may be in Khartoum.

Despite Sudan's role as a safe haven for groups known to traffic ivory, such as the LRA, janjaweed, and other poaching gangs, the country has drawn limited official attention as a poaching state. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a treaty organization that governs international trade in ivory—and its continuing ban—has identified eight countries "of primary concern" when it comes to international ivory trafficking: China, Kenya, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Uganda, Tanzania, and Vietnam. Eight more are considered of secondary concern: Cameroon, Congo, the DRC, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mozambique, and Nigeria. Three more are classified as of "importance to watch": Angola, Cambodia, and Laos.

Sudan is not on these lists, even though Sudanese poachers are a primary reason elephants are killed in several of the countries listed by CITES as of primary or secondary concern. Sudan is also a well-documented supplier of ivory to Egypt and is the recipient of substantial Chinese infrastructure investment, which typically comes with Chinese workers, a source of ivory smuggling in many parts of Africa. Ivory shops in Khartoum advertise in English and Chinese as well as Arabic. According to CITES Secretary-General John Scanlon, Sudan does not appear on these lists

because CITES sets priorities based mainly on ivory seizures, and there have been few ivory seizures linked to Sudan in recent years. Which raises the question: If ivory is poached by Sudanese, where is it going?

Margaret Acino was 23, pregnant, working in the fields near Gulu, Uganda, when an LRA commander called for a razor and ordered his boy soldiers to slice off her lips, ears, and nose. Seven surgeries later she's forgiven them. "It's easier to live with things," she says.

Chapter 9: A Kony Hideout

My artificial tusks sit motionless for several weeks, a pair of tear-shaped blue dots on my computer screen, which displays a digital map of the eastern corner of CAR. Then, like a bobber in a fishing hole, a nibble. They shift a few miles. Suddenly they move steadily north, about 12 miles a day along the border with South Sudan, avoiding all roads. On the 15th day after they began to move, they cross into South Sudan and from there make their way into the Kafia Kingi enclave, a disputed territory in Darfur controlled by Sudan.

Kafia Kingi is so widely recognized as a Kony hideout that in April 2013 a coalition of groups, including Invisible Children, the Enough Project, and the Resolve, issued a report called "Hidden in Plain Sight: Sudan's Harboring of the LRA in the Kafia Kingi Enclave, 2009-2013." LRA defectors I spoke with consistently placed the warlord in the Kafia Kingi area too. So did the African Union military forces, whose CAR-based men in Obo are tasked with finding Kony. "It's not a secret to anyone that Kony's in Sudan," says the State Department's Marty Regan. "It's his sanctuary."

A few days later the tusks proceed to Songo, the Sudanese market town where Onen said Kony's men trade ivory. In Songo the tusks are held for three days in what looks like a clearing outside town. Then they head south six miles, back into Kafia Kingi. I order a satellite shot of their location from DigitalGlobe, a commercial vendor of space imagery, and ask for outside help interpreting it. According to Col. Mike Kabango, of the African Union forces, the image shows a large tent and two smaller ones; to Ryan Stage, a remote-sensing specialist in Colorado, it shows a large truck and two small tents. After three weeks the tusks turn north again, back into Sudan. Gathering speed, they continue north before abruptly turning east, in the direction of Khartoum.

Other roads also lead to Sudan. The relatives of murdered Zakouma ranger Idriss Adoum tracked one of the alleged Heban hill poachers to Sudan and arranged to have him brought back to Chad to stand trial. Soumaine Abdoulaye Issa had been in Darfur, he told a team of African Parks investigators, when he heard about an elephant poaching mission to Chad led by a member of the Sudan Armed Forces. Issa, who is Chadian, said he joined the team of three Sudanese men and that together they rode more than two weeks to get to Heban, where they killed nine elephants in four days. After Zakouma's rangers destroyed their camp and confiscated their equipment, the poachers were unable to return to Sudan, so three weeks later they went back to Heban hill and attacked the Hippotrague unit.

Zakouma's Mamba Team 1 antipoaching unit includes driver Issa Adoum (brown shirt). After Sudanese poachers killed his ranger father, Adoum refused *diya*, a traditional community payment. "Diya is for accidents," he says.

Issa claimed he was merely a lookout, not a poacher. He wasn't contrite. In a public square in Am Timan, shortly before his trial, he shouted, "I know who betrayed me! I will escape from your jail, and I will kill him." He did escape, and a rumor in Zakouma is that he fled south to CAR.

"We've heard he went to Seleka," Idriss Adoum's son Issa tells me, referring to the violent rebel coalition that overthrew the CAR government on March 24, 2013. If true, Soumaine Issa will find poachers working with Seleka. Seleka and its rival, anti-Balaka, have set fire to people, thrown them off bridges, and murdered people wantonly, turning CAR into a lawless state—the kind of place where Kony's group and other terrorist organizations thrive. In May 2013 Seleka-backed Sudanese poachers attacked Dzanga Bai, an elephant oasis in Dzanga-Ndoki National Park of southwest CAR, killing 26 elephants. Dzanga Bai—also known as the village of elephants—is a mineral-rich mudhole where the animals congregate.

Earlier this year Kony suffered the defection of his commander of operations, Dominic Ongwen, who told African Union forces that Kony's desire for ivory was reinforced by Seleka. "Seleka rebels had a stock of about 300 ivory tusks that they sold, which enabled them to get the supplies that helped them overthrow President François Bozizé in CAR," Ongwen told African Union forces, according to his debriefing. Ongwen said Kony's plan is to obtain as much ivory as possible "for his future survival should he not be able to overthrow the government of Uganda."

Ongwen also said that Kony intends to form a squad to establish contact with [Boko Haram](#), the Nigerian terrorist group responsible for widespread killings and the kidnappings of hundreds of

Nigerian women and schoolgirls. Boko Haram also uses the bush as a base—Nigeria’s Sambisa Forest, a game reserve south of Lake Chad. In March 2015 Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, pledged allegiance to ISIS, and his group was renamed Islamic State’s West Africa Province, giving that Middle East terrorist group a foothold in West Africa.

Chapter 10: Where Next?

As of this writing, my artificial tusks sent out their last communication from a Sudanese town called Ed Daein, 500 miles southwest of Khartoum. I know which house they’re in: Using Google Earth, I see its light-blue roof on my screen. They’re in a place 2.2 degrees Fahrenheit cooler than the ambient temperature, so perhaps they’ve been buried in the backyard. So far they’ve traveled 600 miles from jungle to desert in just under two months. Their path is consistent with the route Kony’s defectors tell me ivory takes on the way to the warlord’s Kafia Kingi base. By the time you read this, my tusks might have gone to Khartoum. Or possibly even shown up in illegal ivory’s biggest consuming country: China.

Meanwhile, as leaders in Europe, the Middle East, and the U.S. strategize about how to stop the ever expanding network of international terrorist organizations, somewhere in Africa a park ranger stands his post, holding an AK-47 and a handful of bullets, manning the front line for all of us.

Poaching has been curbed in Chad’s Zakouma National Park, but rebuilding the park’s herd, now at 450, will take years.

This story was originally published in the [September 2015 issue](#) of National Geographic magazine. This story launches the National Geographic Society’s Special Investigations Unit, which will report on wildlife crimes. This project was made possible by a grant from The Woodtiger Fund.

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