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**President Jacob Zuma and Ms Tina Joemat-Pettersson, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries braving the weather at the project in iNkandla, KwaZulu-Natal.**

# Rhinos in jeopardy

By **Galoome Shopane**

**Rhino poaching has become a skirmish dilemma for the wildlife industry and the South African government. Everyday, newspaper pages are inundated with reports on the number of rhinos killed so far, captured suspected rhino poachers and raging gun battles between poachers and game rangers.**

The poaching of rhinos is not a new trend as it dates back to a tradition of more than 2 000 years in Asia. Apart from money, one of the reasons for the accelerating rate in the decimation of rhino populations is the belief among Asian

countries that rhino horn has healing properties (especially cancer-curing properties), even though there is no scientific corroboration or correlation to support this perception.

SANParks' Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Mr David Mabunda, once said that: "Rhino poaching has increased for various reasons, including the recent announcement by a Vietnamese government Minister that he was cured of cancer through mixing a rhino horn concoction".

In the last eight months the police have arrested 155 people for poaching, a noticeable and large percentage of whom are from Thailand and Vietnam.

The rhino poaching scourge is not a "typical" poaching event; it has really become a big and somehow profitable illegal business. The current wave of poaching is being directed and conducted by well-equipped, positioned and sophisticated criminal syndicates which use helicopters, night-vision equipment, animal tranquilisers and silencers in their attacks. The "rhino poaching industry" is estimated to be raking in more than R637 million a



year. At the moment the wholesale price of a rhino horn is about R65 000 and the price is expected to increase because of the measures which will be put into place and the difficulty in obtaining rhino horn. However, on the black market prices have soared to R300 000 per kilogram.

The rhino poaching epidemic first became noticeable in 2008 when 83 rhinos were lost, all allegedly killed for their horns. The figure kept on surging ever higher from then on, with the numbers doubling each year. In 2009, 122 rhinos were lost and last year a shocking 333 rhinos were poached. This year the figure is set to rise again to an astonishing 400 rhinos, with 279 rhinos already dead. South Africa is home to about 21 000 rhinos, which is more than any other country in the world. If the current rate continues, by 2020 there will be no rhinos left in the world. The question is what will happen then, will these predators find another endangered animal to prey on and drive it into extinction.

Earlier this month it was reported that two Vietnamese nationals were sentenced

to eight and 12 years imprisonment without the option of a fine for attempting to smuggle rhino horns out of the country. The South African National Defence Force is also doing its part in trying to combat the scourge by sending its troops to patrol the Kruger Park, especially the South Africa/Mozambique border. The Minister of Environmental Affairs, Ms Edna Molewa, has announced that her department is considering to impose a moratorium on rhino hunting in an effort to

curb the catastrophic slaughtering of these endangered animals. It is estimated that the authorities are spending R450 million a year to combat rhino poaching compared to R160 million a few years ago, and this is in the Kruger Park alone where 169 rhinos were have been poached since the beginning of 2011.

The brutality of the onslaught is posing a threat to the tourism industry as well as the survival of wildlife. South Africa's tourism industry prides itself on having the big five, now imagine if rhinos were to become extinct which is not long from now and if the trend continues to prevail, how the unstable tourism industry will market itself. Most people who come to South Africa for a holiday expect to go on "safari", if one of the fundamental sights of the safari is lost, not many visitors will come here just to be told that there was once an animal which was part of the big five but, unfortunately, it is now extinct. Hopefully the proposed moratorium will do some good and salvage these nearly extinct and magnificent animals.