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Untouchable lords of poaching in Samburu

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They are well known by the locals and operate big shops in town. They sponsor young men to kill elephants and rhinos but they are never arrested. They are well equipped and meticulous in their work. These are the dangerous lords of poaching in Samburu.

Poaching of both rhinos and elephants has reached alarming levels in Kenya. The recent killing of a family of 12 elephants in Tsavo East National Park by a gang of poachers has raised the level of alarm both nationally and internationally.

In Isiolo-Samburu region, a record 27 elephants were killed in one month which led to public outcry.

Poachers always find their way into the parks during the day and track the elephants all night.

They strike past midnight when all rangers and scouts are asleep. Their target is big bulls because their tusks are heavier. Samburu National Park is not fenced and they often escape easily.

Disguised as businessmen, the poachers, through their strong network, carry out their work with the help of security officers.

Residents say reports they have made to the police against the lords of poaching have never been investigated.

"We know them and we have made several reports to the police," says Stephen Ngelewa, a resident of Archers Post in Samburu, which is the main centre where the business is run.

"They are at times arrested only to be released a day later. So we are afraid since some people have been threatened here. We only watch now as the elephants die. We can do nothing."

Investigations by the Star established that the architects of poaching are based in Archers Post, a small tourist town 34km north of Isiolo town.

Multiple sources including police pointed fingers at two traders who are said to be behind the killing of elephants in Samburu National Reserve and the Northern Corridor at large.

One of the traders, locals and police say, has been arrested but released without charges or fined on several occasions. The traders have been intimidating the officers and their frequent release has demoralised rangers and junior police officers at Archers Post.

The traders, both of who operate wholesale shops, are the main dealers who source ivory to be ferried to Isiolo and other towns like Nanyuki and Nairobi.

"Young morans are hired to kill the jumbos and rhinos at a fee," said a source who is privy to the deals. "They are paid between Sh2,000 to Sh5,000 per ivory and in turn, the middlemen will sell it at a much



higher price." Currently, the price per kilo is Sh20,000, he says. Internationally, a kilo of ivory fetches \$7,000 (Sh600,000).

The morans, he says, are locals who know all the goings-on at the parks. "They have monitored the movements of elephants and rhinos. They also seem to understand how the security officers at the park operate," he says.

He gave three cases to illustrate this. In 2009, he says, some officers were being transferred and in those days elephants and rhinos were killed.

"They knew very well that the only vehicle was being used to carry the officers' belongings and they had a field day all day and night," he says. "So they must have had information from KWS officers."

He suspects the killers collude with KWS officers who guide them in their movements.

KWS director William Kiprono is however warning his officers against colluding with criminals. "We are carrying out our investigations and should any officer be found colluding with poachers, he will be treated as a criminal," he said. Kiprono was speaking to the Star in his office.

The elephants are trailed for several hours and the ones with huge tusks are targeted.

There was a case in which one of the oldest male elephants in Samburu called 'Changila' was killed and the carcass covered with leaves and twigs to conceal it from vultures and officers who are on aerial patrol.

Once the elephant is killed, the poachers chop off the tusks using axes and chisels. The ivory is taken to the collection point near the road where it is picked up by boda bodas after being cut into small pieces and put in travelling bags.

"They use travelling bags. They cut them into pieces and put some clothes inside so that nobody can detect them," said the source.

The two lords of poaching in Archers Post have been arrested before but released in unclear circumstances.

Their network is well organised. Those who kill the elephants, those who remove the tusks and those who ferry them to Archers Post are different teams.

One of the poaching barons, who is known as Musa, was arrested in June 2011 in Lolkumiani area with axes and two motorcycles on a mission to ferry tusks. He is believed to be operating a network of poachers as he was spotted in Suralipi in his car the same day. He was arrested along with the boda boda operators but were later released.

Another trader suspected to be a ring leader is called Muthomi. He owns a wholesale shop at Archers Post. "We have heard people saying he is a smuggler but we have not managed to arrest him with any trophies," said Archers Post OCS George Naibei. "We urge members of the public to volunteer any information when they spot them with ivory."

"The police know their vehicles and they often pass checkpoints without inspection," said a KWS ranger based in Archers Post. "As rangers, our major work is inside the parks and we are not allowed to erect barriers or stop vehicles along the highway. That is the work of the police."

A barrier that used to be near the Archers Police post was removed and only operates at night.

A middle aged man, only known as Ngitoi, is a well known broker in the town. Last year, officers from KWS and Kenya Police called him through his cell phone number pretending to be buyers of ivory.

The man presented himself with four fresh tusks in an agreed place where he was arrested. He was later set free and has been intimidating security officers in the town that they can't take him anywhere.

The traders are said to be using their trucks which often collect goods in Isiolo and Nairobi to ferry the trophies. The ivory is cut in small pieces, is put in travelling bags and fuel tanks. Some are concealed in vehicle bonnets.

When the ivory reaches Isiolo, it is handed over to big dealers who then ferry it to Nairobi.

Robert Njiru, popularly known as 'Rasta', is a 36-year-old businessman who runs a timber yard in Isiolo town.

Police suspect that he is the main link between the dealers in Nairobi and middlemen in Archers Post and Isiolo.

When contacted by the Star, Njiru declined to be interviewed and asked who had given us his number.

Last year, Njiru came out strongly and accused the KWS of trying to isolate him after he was attacked on his way to his Kulamawe estate home in Isiolo. Police however suspected the attackers to be members of his gang who had differed with him over pay.

"Rasta is a wanted man," said Isiolo OCPD Daniel Kamanza. "He is in our list of wanted men. We are also zeroing in on the others (Muthomi and Musa) and soon we will be making arrests."



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Another trader, locally known as Buko, is suspected to be a large scale dealer. He has a warehouse near the barrier in Isiolo in a place called Kampi Gabra.

His vehicles have been impounded more than once but he was released with no charges preferred.

In 2009, his white Toyota Land cruiser was nabbed with tusks and a weighing scale in Wamba.

Recently three people were arrested in connection with 345 pieces of ivory weighing 601kg intercepted at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport by KWS Canine Unit, police and customs officials. They were being smuggled to Lagos, Nigeria on June 22 last year.

The ivory which was packed in six crates and sprayed with pepper to prevent dogs from sniffing it had been further covered with aluminum foil.

Samburu residents say several reports given to the police are never taken seriously.

"We make reports to the police and they do nothing," said Lengewa. "The OCS is not being sincere. I suspect the officers could be among the beneficiaries of this illegal business."

Residents suspect that by removing the security barrier, the officers were colluding with poachers and other criminals to pass with ease. The Isiolo-Merrille highway is also suspected to be a transit point for dealers from Ethiopia.

"I was ordered by my bosses to remove the road block," says Naibei. "We only have officers there at night. Nowadays we don't have a lot of crimes being committed at night because they (criminals) can pass unstopped during the day." He says he was not told why the barrier was removed. "We (police) follow commands of our seniors. I did not ask why," Naibei said.

When contacted, Wamba OCPD Samuel Muthamia said it is the local residents who had complained about the barrier.

"It was reported that police officers manning the barrier were corrupt and we had to remove it," Muthamia said. But a police officer who sought anonymity said they always receive calls from their superiors to let go of certain vehicles without being inspected.

"We are at times asked to remove the barrier or let a vehicle pass without being inspected. This clearly shows a clear cut network between security chiefs and the dealers," said the officer based in Archers Post.

In the second part of this story tomorrow, read about [where the poachers get their military uniforms, sophisticated weapons and ammunition from.](#)

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