

National

Rhino carnage continues

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The illegal slaughter of at least 12 rhinos over the festive season brings the number of the animals poached in South Africa in the past year close to 100. The rising death toll comes amid allegations that Mozambican authorities are not doing enough to crack down on known suspects and, in some cases, might be abetting the poachers.

Another two rhino deaths in Mpumalanga have been reported but not confirmed — some game reserves are reluctant to comment on such killings. If the figure is correct it would put the unofficial death toll of rhinos poached in South Africa since January last year at 96. The dead animals include critically endangered black rhinos.

An Mpumalanga ranger who has tracked poaching across South Africa's border into Mozambique said the country's law enforcement failures were contributing to the problem.

"Not a single poacher arrested in Mozambique for killing a rhino has gone through the full process prescribed by the conservation law," the investigator said. "Unfortunately, the Mozambican legislation cannot deal with modern poaching methods and this is being exploited by the poaching lords."

He said many suspects are repeat offenders who simply return to poaching. And even if they point out their handlers the handlers can simply pay a fine if they are ever arrested.

No poachers arrested in Mozambique for offences in the Kruger park and Mozambique's Sabie Game Park have been jailed for longer than two weeks. "This includes offenders who have been apprehended twice for similar offences," the investigator said.

A report he has drawn up reveals that poachers killed at least 43 rhinos between January 2004 and July 2008 in the Kruger park and around its border. Though the Kruger park would not provide official figures, the *Mail & Guardian* understands that more than 40 rhinos were shot there between January and the end of November last year.

In many cases Mozambicans, allegedly employed by Vietnamese syndicates operating out of South Africa, are the prime suspects. The syndicates are said to provide their local recruits with high-calibre weapons. Crossbows are also used because they are silent.

The investigator said that a community leader from Mozambique's Limpopo National Park had shot rhinos in the Kruger National Park on three different occasions. Kruger law enforcers pursued him into Mozambique, where he was arrested each time, but on all three occasions the cases were either not finalised or no sentence was given.

When the poacher tried his luck a fourth time he was apprehended on South African soil. The investigator said that South Africa's laws should ensure that he is taken "out of the poaching system".

In another case in 2007 five rhinos were shot on the border of the Kruger park, in Mozambique. A task team comprising the Mozambican border police and staff from Kruger and Sabie Game Park arrested two suspects along with high-calibre weapons, the tracking equipment and binoculars. The investigator said the suspects and the evidence were handed over to the police commander in Moamba, Mozambique.

But the investigator also sent letters about the case to the national government in Maputo because he felt Moamba police had bungled previous cases. In addition, he met with police leaders in Maputo and raised the lack of detective competency in Moamba. Despite his efforts, he said, the two suspects were simply fined R1 250 and released.

"The fine should have been at least R1,5-million if it was properly investigated and proper channels followed," he said. "The horns were worth at least R1,5-million."

The investigator said he suspected that some of the police in Moamba were corrupt and actually assisted the poachers. In one case the name of the poachers' handler was obtained and the man was arrested. But the suspect a freedom-fighting history and has close ties with politicians and the police, the investigator said. Within one week he was released and South African investigators believe he did not even pay a fine.

The Mozambican police had not responded to emailed questions by the time of going to print. Carlos Come, a director in the Mozambican police, merely commented that joint commissions between South Africa and Mozambique had been put in place to help Mozambique with its challenges.