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CONGO REBELS SEIZE GORILLA PARK HQ AFTER HEAVY FIGHTING; RANGERS FORCED TO FLEE INTO FORESTS

Rebels in DR Congo loyal to dissident General Laurent Nkunda seized the Headquarters of [Virunga National Park](http://www.gorilla.cd) and its Gorilla Sector today after intense fighting with the Congolese army since the early hours. Over 50 Rangers were forced to flee into the forests and abandon the park station, in fear of their lives. The road south of Rumangabo towards Goma, 45km away, has also been blocked by the rebels.

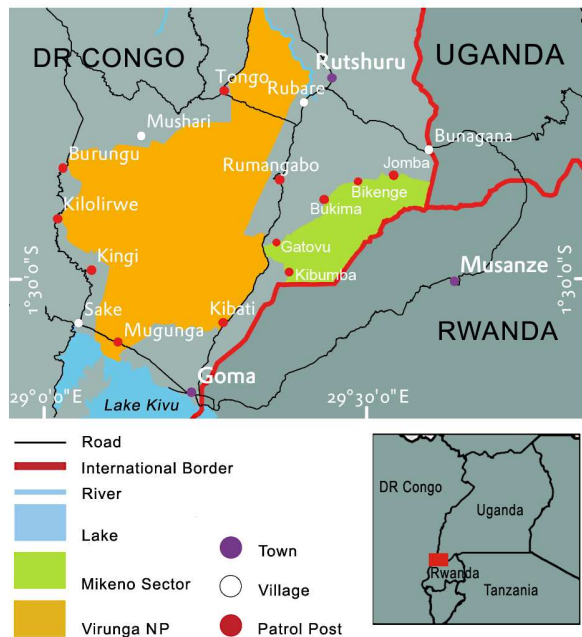
"The seizure of our Park Headquarters at Rumangabo by rebels is unprecedented, even in all the years of conflict in the region. We have now instructed all Rangers to withdraw and make their way on foot through the forest to Kibumba, 20km south of Rumangabo, where we are sending trucks to bring them to safety in Goma. The conflict on the ground is chaotic and dangerous and we cannot allow our Rangers to become targets," said Virunga Park Director Emmanuel de Merode.

Park Ranger Bareke Sekibibi, 29, spoke by mobile phone from the forest earlier today as he makes his way to safety. "When the rebels started approaching the park station we thought we were all going to be killed. We are not military combattants, we are Park Rangers protecting Virunga's wildlife."

Fighting between rebels loyal to Nkunda, and the army has been intermittent in this area for over 1 year, but the conflict intensified late August, bringing renewed instability and chaos to the area, including the Gorilla Sector of Virunga National Park that is home to 200 of the last remaining 700 mountain gorillas in the world.

The Gorilla Sector was also attacked repeatedly in 2007 during which 10 mountain gorillas were killed. It was attacked in January 2007, when two Silverbacks were killed. An adult female was executed in June 2007 and in July 2007, 5 were massacred causing an international outcry. In September a dead infant female was found in the hands of alleged traffickers.

Some 1,100 Wildlife Rangers protect the National Parks of Eastern Congo, a region affected by a 10-year civil war and current political instability. These parks are home to mountain gorillas, chimpanzees, forest elephants and rhinos. The Rangers have remained active in protecting these parks, four of which have been classified as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO.



Editor's Notes:

Mountain Gorillas are critically endangered, with only 700 remaining in the world, about 380 in the Virunga Volcanoes Conservation Area (shared by DRC, Rwanda and Uganda) and 320 in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, Uganda. Despite the conflict in the region, their decline had been reversed up until January 2007 thanks to international support and courageous conservationists coupled with the popularity of gorilla-watching tourism. At September 2007 there were 72 habituated Mountain Gorillas in DR Congo.

The **Congolese Wildlife Authority** (ICCN) and its Rangers work throughout the country to protect the National Parks of Congo and their wildlife from poachers, rebel groups, illegal miners and land invasions. Over 150 Rangers have been killed in the last 10 years protecting the 5 parks of eastern DRC, and Rangers worked throughout the civil war without receiving a salary. For more information go to www.iccn.gorilla.cd.

Virunga National Park, Africa's oldest national park (established in 1925) and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979, is home to 200 of the world's mountain gorillas. Formerly known as Albert National Park, Virunga lies in

eastern DR Congo and covers 7,800 square kilometers. The park is managed by the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature, the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN).

For additional information and/or photographs please contact:

Samantha Newport, Communications Director, Virunga National Park:
samantha@gorilla.cd or +243 99 384 1267

Emmanuel de Merode, Director of Virunga National Park:
edemerode@gorilla.cd or +243 99 344 8133