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Park Chief Seals Historic Exit of Over 1,000 Congolese Army Troops from Virunga

Over 1,000 Congolese army troops and their families – a total of 6,000 people – have left Virunga National Park and moved outside the protected area in an effort to reduce human presence in the area and preserve the flora and fauna of Africa's oldest national park, also a World Heritage Site.

The decision to re-deploy the army troops – about 10% of the total number in North Kivu - came after intense negotiations between Virunga National Park Director Emmanuel de Merode and General Vainqueur Mayala, the army's commanding officer for the conflict-ridden province.

“De-militarizing Virunga National Park remains our greatest and most difficult challenge. The Congolese National Army has taken the first step, which represents a major breakthrough at a time when the threats to the park have never been greater,” said de Merode.

“The occupation of Rwindi park station was strategic,” said Colonel David Kitenge of the 8th Military Region. “We had to have a strong presence at Rwindi and other nearby stations to safeguard the main road north of Goma, and to prevent attack by the FDLR and the Mai Mai rebels. Today we wish to support the Congolese Wildlife Authority in their efforts. Human populations, of all kind, are detrimental to environmental conservation.”

The Congolese army – also known as FARDC - has approximately 10,000 troops in North Kivu that are stationed throughout the province. Rwindi, a main park station in the center of Virunga some 130km north of Goma, had been the army's headquarters in the area since December 2007, when violence in the region escalated. This deployment operation, that does not affect the occupation of the Gorilla Sector by rebels loyal to dissident General Laurent Nkunda, also included the removal of over 200 troops in Vitshumbi, on the southern shores of Lake Edward.



The entire operation took 3 days and required additional trucks and funds for fuel. The total cost of \$10,000 was covered by World Wildlife Fund, at the request of the Congolese Wildlife Authority (ICCN). WWF is one of the conservation groups operating in Virunga to support ICCN.

Virunga National Park, which borders on Uganda and Rwanda and covers 8,000km², is often used as a hideout and an operating base by armed groups, including the FDLR and the Mai Mai.



Editor's Notes:

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.

The **FARDC** - the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo - is the military organization responsible for defending the DRC. The FARDC has primarily land forces, and a small air force and navy. Total members number circa 130,000, and DRC has a population of an estimated 66.5 million.

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 represents 8% of North Kivu province 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).

Mai Mai – refers to a broad variety of Congolese militia groups that were active during the civil war, and remain active today. **FDLR** (Forces Democratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda) – formerly known as the Interahamwe – are Hutu rebels who came into DRC following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.



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