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### **FIRST SIGHTING OF MOUNTAIN GORILLAS BY CONGOLESE SURVEY TEAM**

**This morning a team of Rangers and scientists from the Congolese Wildlife Authority (ICCN) went into the Gorilla Sector of Virunga National Park for the first time in 15 months as part of a comprehensive survey to establish the status of Congo's mountain gorillas. This breakthrough was made possible after clearance was given by both the Congolese government and the CNDP authorities who have controlled the Gorilla Sector since September 2007.**

**"We are extremely pleased that all sides in this conflict accept the importance of protecting Virunga's Gorilla Sector as one of the world's most important wildlife areas " said Virunga Park Director [Emmanuel de Merode](#). "The survey will give us an accurate assessment of Congo's mountain gorillas and how they have been affected by the war. The work is huge boost to the morale of our Rangers whose families are still living in internally displaced camps in Goma."**



**Today the survey team was able to find the Humba family group and have already begun collecting data for the month-long census of the status and health of Virunga's gorillas. The last estimate in August 2007 indicated there are 72 habituated gorillas, but this figure is expected to have changed due to births, death, and interactions.**

**Fighting between Laurent Nkunda's CNDP and the Congolese army has been intermittent in this area for over 1 year, but the conflict intensified late October, bringing renewed instability and chaos to the park, including the Gorilla Sector that is home to 200 of the last remaining 700 mountain gorillas in the world.**

The Gorilla Sector was 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 Park 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, 4 of which have been classified as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO.

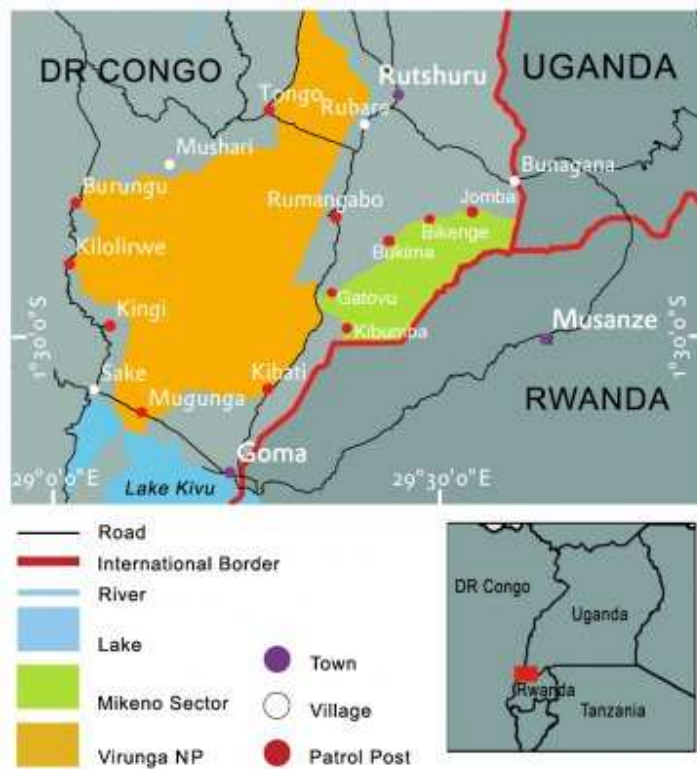
#### **Editor's Notes:**

**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.

**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).



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