

# BDF Should Ask China for Help with Anti-Poaching

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The recent death of a BDF soldier has actually disrupted my sequenced Botswana military history write-ups. The death of this Special Forces operative will certainly become a turning point in the way the country has approached the growing problem. It has been almost thirty years since the first Special Forces operative was killed by poachers in the Chobe National Park in 1991. At that time I had just earned my commission as a second lieutenant and we were therefore given a serious briefing on what was going on in the field.

At that time southern Africa was emerging from a period of turmoil. Nelson Mandela had been freed from prison and the ANC was unbanned in South Africa. Namibia had attained independence in 1990. Once South Africa had withdrawn its military from Namibia, there was a problem. Certain units such as 32 Battalion and the notorious Koovoet were disbanded and a bulk of their soldiers were left idle in Namibia. For some unknown reasons, the new Namibian military could not absorb them as it was consolidated at the time of independence. Interesting enough, some of these soldiers were citizens of Botswana and were forced to return home. Soon they had to put their skills to use through illegal hunting. Some of these were hunting for subsistence reasons so that they could put food on the table.

But soon someone realised that they could use these skilled men for more serious crimes such as the killing of elephants and rhinos. Surely the moneyed individuals were involved at this stage. These ex-combatants were armed with military grade weapons. They had more experience than most BDF soldiers as they were bringing with them experience from the theatre of war in Namibia and Angola. Something extra-ordinary had to be done and flooding the wildlife areas with more BDF troops was not the ultimate solution. A deliberate decision was taken to employ the Namibian ex-soldiers then resident in Botswana and engage them in anti-poaching operations. All of them were enlisted at the rank of private and their base was in Maun. Their primary role was to conduct tracking.

Trackers became very useful to the anti-poaching operations of the BDF. At the same time, Botswana's military had to change its approach to patrols. Initially the patrols were motorised and they immediately resorted to foot patrols. They had to adapt to the enemy's tactics. Each foot patrol would last as long as a week in the bush. This approach helped to reduce the rate of poaching particularly in northern Botswana. Several poachers were killed while a few others were arrested and gave information on who the ring leaders of the syndicate were. Currently BDF still uses the same tactics and has clearly shown that the enemy has changed. Obviously those old soldiers can no longer operate like they did back in 1990 when Namibia attained independence. And who is now doing the bidding for the animal trophy syndicates?

There is a conspiracy theory taking rounds regarding the current poaching surge in Botswana. The theory is that the poachers are working with actors from within the country. In the 1990s the poachers were just crossing the border from a neighbouring country and hoping not to encounter a BDF patrol. Conspiracy theories often help generate hypotheses that in some cases help with some breakthrough research findings. There is need to do a concerted study around the issue of poaching and particularly around rhinos and elephants to some extent. The questions to be raised would be; who are the poachers, who was previously involved in the security of wildlife but has been withdrawn? This will on its own generate an array of questions that will lead those in authority to finding the correct means of dealing with the current problem of poaching.

In this case BDF needs to seriously introspect. Ordinarily, poachers should not outsmart troops and particularly our elite Special Forces. This is a pointer to a much bigger problem than what we seem to perceive on the surface. There is a real need to tailor BDF anti-poaching operations to the real reality on the ground; they should be superior in firepower and tactics. Under normal circumstances, the rate of poaching should have been reduced to bare minimum because China has done everything right to diminish the appetite for ivory. China has made the import of rhino horns, elephant tusks, pangolin and turtle products illegal. This has diminished the appetite on many Chinese consumers for these products. Before China clamped down on the import of these items, Botswana was not having serious problems with the poaching of rhinos. Incidents were few and far apart and South Africa was experiencing far more problems than we did. Technology is the way forward for BDF to transform themselves and be on top of the game.

Thirty years down the line, the military should have adapted the use of technology and be ahead of the poachers. The application and use of drones is the first thing that will come into the minds of the Chinese authorities if approached for help. China has made serious strides in the area of technology and literally in all aspects in the industry. Drones have become very essential in playing a role in the development of China. They are used in the security industry and successfully so. Drones play a key function in the development of China as they are used for survey and construction applications. In the television and photography industries, drones have taken over from helicopters and they are far much cheaper to operate.

This is the approach BDF needs to take. As things seem to be going, the next thing coming will probably be the poachers taking tourists hostage and that will devastate our economy. Coupled with technology, the population in the wildlife areas needs to be mobilised to take part in the crusade against poachers. The lifting of the hunting ban has been one of the steps that are helping these communities but surely someone who is not happy about it is fuelling the poaching. And who is this player?

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