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## Botswana saws off horns to save rhinos from poachers

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The government said that at least 56 of the animals had been killed by poachers in the past two years, marking the worst onslaught since Botswana's black rhino population was wiped out in 1992 and the number of white rhinos dropped to just 27. Picture: iStock/ AOosthuizen

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Botswana began removing the horns from its rhinos and moving them away from the iconic Okavango Delta as an unprecedented poaching crisis threatens their survival in the country.

The government said that at least 56 of the animals had been killed by poachers in the past two years, marking the worst onslaught since Botswana's black rhino population was wiped out in 1992 and the number of white rhinos dropped to just 27.

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Mmadi Reuben

Dehorning, an exercise in which the horns are removed using chainsaws to render the animals valueless to illegal hunters, will “combat poaching and safeguard the future of this species”, the Botswana Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources, Conservation and Tourism said in a statement. Tourism accounts for a fifth of the country’s economy.

The size of Botswana’s rhino population is a closely guarded secret. Official documents show that there were 153 white rhinos living in the wild by 2014, while private reserves had some black rhinos.

An additional 87 rhinos were brought in last year from South Africa. Analysts say the number of rhinos in the delta, where almost the entire wild population lives, has dwindled to a handful.

### Crime syndicates

The Okavango Delta, a vast wildlife sanctuary and Botswana’s biggest tourist attraction, is under threat from crime syndicates which use the waterways and the lack of border patrols to hunt rhinos.

Previous wildlife intelligence indicated that poaching was led by liberation war veterans from Namibia and Zimbabwe who had ties to Asian networks.

The dehorning programme will be accompanied by increased anti-poaching operations, said Mmadi Reuben, the principal veterinary officer of the department of wildlife and national parks.

“The message that rhinos have been dehorned must be spread far and wide,” he said in a video distributed on social media by the government this week. – *Bloomberg*

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