

Africa

# Botswana Denies 120 Rhinos Poached in 18 Months

By Mqondisi Dube

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GABORONE, BOTSWANA - Botswana, confronting an unprecedented rise in poaching, has refuted reports by former President Ian Khama that at least 120 rhinoceroses have been killed in the last 18 months. Instead, the government says, wildlife crimes have dropped by 70 percent since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Botswana's former president, Ian Khama, who stepped down in 2018, said Monday that poachers have killed 120 rhinoceroses in the past 18 months.

Khama said poachers were killing rhinos with or without horns, and that "after corona there will be none left for tourists to see," referencing the coronavirus.

But the government swiftly moved to deny the accusation, instead saying wildlife-related crimes were down by 70 percent since coronavirus restrictions were introduced last March.

The Department of Wildlife and National Parks director, Kabelo Senyatso, said Khama's claims were misleading.

In a statement Tuesday, Senyatso said the government could not disclose official figures and other information as it was a sensitive matter.

Senyatso said revealing the numbers and location of poached animals jeopardizes the anti-poaching operations.

However, the Bhejane Trust, a non-profit rhinoceros conservation group, said 12 of the animals had been killed in the iconic Okavango Delta in just the last two weeks.

Current President Mokgweetsi Masisi said during a recent graduation ceremony for senior army officers that the country is facing a poaching challenge.

"Today you graduate at a time when this country is facing a security challenge, such as high levels of poaching which threatens to wipe out our wildlife resources, that's threatening the tourism sector which is one of the key engines of our economy. The number of poaching incidents, the tactics and the boldness employed in

targeting Botswana Defense Force members is not only disturbing but a national security threat as well," said Masisi.

Conservationist Neil Fitt said the government needs to involve other players more in the fight against poaching.

"I think our government needs to open up more and get help from outside of government. Government cannot do everything. Yes, it is a security issue. Other countries are using NGOs and other bodies to assist them in doing things," he said.

In a bid to combat poaching, Botswana began dehorning rhinos and relocating them from the Okavango Delta last year.

Most of the poachers are from neighboring Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The poaching is fueled by demand for rhino horn in Asia, especially China, where the horns are used in traditional medicine.

Scientists have determined that rhino horns have no medicinal value.

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