



POLITICAL RIVALRIES FLARE IN BOTSWANA AND ANIMALS PAY THE PRICE

DECEMBER 02ND, 2021

topics: HUNTING & POACHING

by: Cyril Zenda

located in: Botswana

tags: Africa, conservation, poaching, rhino

REPUBLIC THIS ARTICLE

The continued refusal by the government of Botswana to allow game rangers to carry firearms, coupled with the country's secrecy on poaching statistics and other wildlife data, is baffling conservationists.

On 25 September, as Botswana marked a belated World Rhino Day, former president Ian Khama - a renowned wildlife conservationist - took to his Facebook page to share his thoughts.

“For Batswana [the people of Botswana], there is nothing to celebrate because in recent times we have seen how poachers roam our wilderness as if free to do so, and have gone about with little hindrance slaughtering this wildlife icon,” the former president (2008-2018) stated. “The poachers have managed to reverse many years of hard work, time and resources that once made this country, until recently, a safe haven for rhinos and all wildlife.”

A week later, Khama was back on social media to share pictures of carcasses of three rhinos that had been poached within a week. This shows the extent to which poaching has grown in the southern African country, which until recently was celebrated as a success story in wildlife conservation and could go for years without losing a single rhino.

GAME RANGERS DISARMED IN 2018

The wildlife carnage started in mid 2018, shortly after Khama's successor, Mokgweetsi Masisi, in May of that year, disarmed Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) rangers on the excuse that the country's law only authorised the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) to use firearms.

Immediately after that, poachers began having a field day in the country, their largest jackpot being the slaughter of 87 elephants whose carcasses were discovered in August the same year.

During his term, Khama had introduced a shoot-to-kill policy against poachers and banned elephant trophy hunting in Botswana, but when Masisi took over the reigns of power, he lifted the hunting ban - a populist but controversial move that was criticised by international conservation groups and supported by local communities.

"NOTHING BUT HYSTERIA"

On its part, the government of Botswana has refused to acknowledge the link between the uptick in poaching and the disarmament of rangers, stating that the BDF anti-poaching unit has since taken over the role previously played by the disarmed rangers.

President Masisi has in the past dismissed the criticism of his government's disarmament of the DWNP as 'nothing but hysteria' when reports of an upsurge in poaching started emerging.

"This stretch of imagination of linking the poaching of any species with an alleged disarmament of the department of wildlife is nothing but hysteria," he said.

A NATIONAL CALAMITY

However, for many local and international conservationists, this link is obvious.

"The problem has been getting steadily worse since late 2018 and could easily be described as a national calamity," one wildlife conservationist told FairPlanet on condition of anonymity for fear of suffering a backlash from the government. "However," he added, "to link this poaching to the disarmament of the game rangers is to invite the ire of many within government and within our defence forces."

120 RHINOS POACHED SINCE 2018

In March, Khama drew the ire of the government when he revealed that 120 rhinos had been poached in the three years since Masisi disarmed rangers. And while the government of Botswana strenuously disputed these figures, it did not countervail Khama's claim by releasing the "correct" figures.

However, Khama's claim may not be far from the truth, as information shared by government officials in Parliament last year revealed the following trend: in 2013, two rhinos were killed, followed by one killing in 2014, none in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Then in 2018 (when disarmament policy took effect), the numbers started rising, with 12 killed that year, 29 in 2019 and 37 rhinos in the first half of 2020.

Another conservationist, also commenting on condition of anonymity, said that the figure was actually much higher than the 120 that had angered President Masisi's government.

"Although I have an idea on how many have been poached, I cannot share this with you," the source told FairPlanet in written responses. "The President himself has told the BDF and the DWNP that 'this is a national security matter', which means that anyone who leaks information can potentially be targeted by security agents. I personally think that this is a criminal activity," the source added.

SEVERE POACHING PRESSURE

In its *State of the Rhino 2021* report, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) pointed out that Botswana faces severe poaching pressure on both black and white rhinos, resulting in perilous decreases to their populations.

"Controlled by an organised criminal network that spans four countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Namibia and Botswana, rhino horn is smuggled to markets in Vietnam," the report said.

The IRF expressed concern that Botswana, together with the Kingdom of eSwatini, are the only members of the nine-nation African rhino range states that do not share population numbers or poaching data with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

"Rhinos are considered to be property of the countries they reside in and governments can choose not to report numbers," IRF communications director Christopher Whitlatch said in a written statement to FairPlanet. "For some, it is difficult to count rhinos, but census numbers and poaching data are important to understand current trends. IRF supports further collaboration between countries and the sharing of information to improve rhino conservation."

Even in the aftermath of the mysterious death of hundreds of elephants last year, the reaction of Masisi's government was very slow, and it was reluctant to co-operate and share information with other wildlife conservation partners.

SECRECY BAFFLES CONSERVATIONISTS

This secrecy also baffles conservationists in the country, most of who are now increasingly getting fearful of the government.

"The reason why the Botswana Government is not willing to share data on poaching statistics and wildlife numbers with the IUCN, amongst others, is one of the purest mysteries I can think of," said the first source.

“Every single other African country is open with the IUCN, the world and with it’s own people, but our government is a completely closed shop,” he added. “Although I can speculate on why they do not share this information, I cannot do so because they might be very vindictive in their response. You will find similar answers to mine from any private citizen or NGO in this country.”

RE-ARMAMENT MOTION SHOT DOWN

Due to the steep rise in poaching, in August 2020 opposition legislator of the Umbrella for Democratic Change Kgoberego Nkawana moved a motion for the re-arming of the rangers, but the motion was strenuously opposed by members of President Masisi’s ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) party.

The opposition lawmakers questioned the legality of the government’s decision to disarm the anti-poaching unit on the basis of Section 73 (3) of the Wildlife Conservation and National Parks Act which reads: “Where it is necessary for the discharge of his duties or the exercise of his powers under this Act, and notwithstanding the provisions of the Arms and Ammunition Act, a wildlife officer may carry a firearm with him, even on land of which he is not the owner, for the protection of himself or any other person, the prevention or investigation of offences against this Act, or the arrest of any person committing or suspected of committing an offence under this Act, and where the Director so directs, such firearm may be of a type not otherwise permitted under the Arms and Ammunition Act.”

Nkawana did not respond to questions from FairPlanet on what they are planning to do in light of the continued growth in poaching activities in the country.

POLITICAL VINDICTIVENESS?

There is bad blood between Masisi and Khama, and some analysts say Masisi’s policies are informed more by his political vindictiveness

towards his predecessor than rationale, as he is determined to undo all of Khama's celebrated achievements.

"It's political [...] the animals are paying the price of the tussle between two politicians," the source said.

Image by Matthias Mullie.

ARTICLE WRITTEN BY:



Cyril Zenda
Author

