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'Butcher' poacher locked up for 30 years

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by Arlana Shikongo

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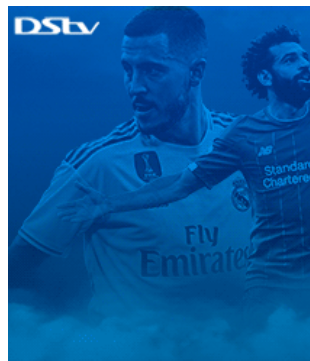


NATIONAL TREASURE ... The Republic of Congo's rare forest elephants are a separate species from the larger African savanna elephant. Photo: African Forest Elephant Foundation

NOTORIOUS Congolese poacher Mobanza Mobembo Gérard, who is said to have poached some 500 elephants in the Republic of Congo, was last month sentenced to a 30-year jail term in an unprecedented wildlife crime conviction in that country.

Gérard, commonly known as 'Guyvanho', is said to have led a group of approximately 25 poachers who, based on the number of hunts reported, could have killed upwards of 500 elephants in the area since 2008.

The 35-year-old hails from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and has been dubbed 'the butcher of Nouabalé-Ndoki', after the Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park where he targeted elephants. Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park is a dense lowland rainforest spanning 4 000 square kilometres, and has served as a refuge for the region's rare forest elephants, which were only confirmed to be a separate species from the larger African savannah elephant in 2010.



It is also a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) World Heritage Site.

Gérard was charged with the attempted murder of park rangers, trafficking of ivory from poached elephants and possession of military weapons, among others.

He was also required to pay damages of 38 million Central African francs (approximately N\$1,2 million) to the injured rangers. In a statement, Emma Stokes, regional director of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), said the extraordinary conviction in the criminal court is a major milestone in the protection of wildlife in the Republic of Congo as all environmental crimes were previously tried in civil courts where the maximum penalty under the wildlife law was only five years.

"The sentencing is the culmination of more than three years of work by the Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park's wildlife crime unit and anti-poaching department.

"This unprecedented conviction in the criminal court is a major milestone in the protection of wildlife in the Republic of Congo. [It] sends an extremely strong message that wildlife crime will not be tolerated and will be prosecuted at the highest levels. We are confident the sentence will serve as a deterrent to would-be criminals that you will serve hard time if you break our wildlife laws and put park rangers and Congo's national security in danger," Stokes said.

After Gérard's sentencing, an official from the Sangha district court declared: "This verdict confirms the fact that under the pretext of being poaching gangs, it is actually well-organised criminal gangs operating in our forests."

Stokes said Gérard was first arrested in May 2018 and remanded in custody to await trial.

On 2 June 2018, 12 days before his trial was to take place, Gérard escaped from the Ouessou prison.

His trial went ahead, and he was sentenced in absentia to five years in prison with a five million Central African francs (approximately N\$156 886) fine.

- Additional reporting from Deutsche Welle