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Attack on Ranger Patrol in Congo's Virunga National Park leaves 8 dead and 3 critically injured

Three rangers and five Congolese soldiers have been killed during a violent attack on their patrol vehicle in Congo's Virunga National Park. A rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) hit the early morning patrol when it fell into an ambush approximately one kilometer north of Mabenga, just inside the park border. The rangers were being deployed along a road that passes through the national park in an attempt to secure a safe passage for the public. The attackers, who escaped on foot, are believed to be FDLR Rwandan militia, an illegal movement believed to include the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

The attack is thought to have been carried out in retaliation for the destruction of two of their camps by park rangers in December 2010. The attack took place about 100 km north of the city of Goma. This is the worst attack on Virunga Park patrols in over a year. Park rangers and regular army units have been working together to secure the area within the national park known to be heavily frequented by FDLR militia.

"We are deeply saddened by the loss of our colleagues who were killed in their efforts to protect the public from illegal armed groups" said Virunga Park Director Emmanuel de Merode. "130 of Virunga's rangers have died since the beginning of the war in 1996, but the park's staff remains determined to protect the park".

The rangers will be buried tomorrow morning at the park cemetery on the banks of the Rutshuru River. The injured are in a critical state and have been moved to Rutshuru hospital. Some 400 Park Rangers protect Virunga National Park in eastern DRC, a region affected by a 12-year civil war and political instability. The Park is home to mountain gorillas, lowland gorillas, chimpanzees, forest elephants and rhinos, among other wildlife. The Rangers have remained active in protecting these parks, four of which have been classified as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. Poaching, wildlife trafficking and habitat destruction remain the key threats to the survival of the wildlife in the park.

Editor's Notes:

The Congolese Wildlife Authority (ICCN) and its Rangers work throughout the country to protect the National Parks of Congo and their wildlife from poachers, rebel groups, illegal miners and land invasions. Over 160 Rangers have been killed in the last 10 years protecting the 5 parks of eastern DRC, and Rangers worked throughout the civil war, rarely receiving a salary.

Virunga National Park, Africa's oldest national park (established in 1925) and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979, is home to 200 of the world's mountain gorillas and a small population of eastern lowland gorillas. Formerly known as Albert National Park, Virunga lies in eastern DR Congo and covers 7,800 square kilometers. The park is managed by the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature, the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN).

For additional information and/or photographs go to www.gorilla.cd/blog or contact:

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