

Kenya insists fight against poachers not lost

March 25 2014, by Aileen Kimutai



Kenya Wildlife Services Chairman, William Kiprono, speaks during a press conference on March 25, 2014 at the KWS headquarters in Nairobi

Kenya insisted Tuesday that it has not lost the battle against poaching, resisting calls from wildlife activists for the ongoing slaughter of elephants and rhinos to be declared a national disaster.

The head of the state-run Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), in charge of guarding national parks, also dismissed allegations that known ringleaders of elephant-ivory and rhino-horn poaching groups were

acting with impunity, citing dozens of arrests and prosecutions.

"Kenya has not lost the fight against the poaching of its elephant and rhino population and thus it cannot be declared a national disaster," KWS chief William Kiprono told a news conference.

"It is not a crisis but a challenge. The issue of crisis is not there because the government is on top of things," he asserted. "We realise the magnitude of the problem is a national issue. But the war is not an event, it is a process."

The comments came a week after veteran conservationist Richard Leakey—himself a former KWS boss—said a core group of just 20 to 30 poaching bosses were operating with "outrageous impunity" and that Kenya was now the global hub of ivory smuggling.

He said the country needed to declare a "national disaster" or else see its elephants and rhinos go extinct—something that would be a major blow to the top safari destination's tourism earnings.



Renowned Kenyan palaeontologist, Richard Leakey, gives a press conference on March 19, 2014 in Nairobi

Leakey, aged 69 and a Kenyan national, was key in stemming the rampant poaching of the late 1980s, bringing in extreme measures to combat poachers including sending helicopter gunships into [national parks](#).

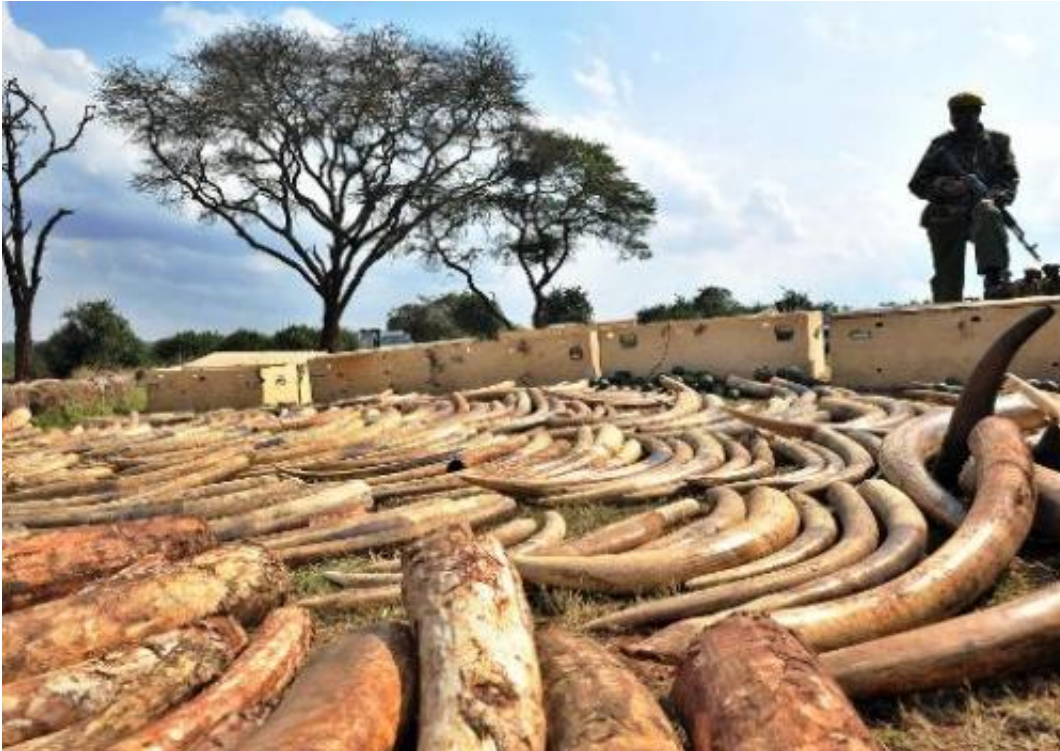
But he said the recent rise in poaching—with rhinos being killed even inside the most heavily guarded zones—showed that poachers have little fear of tough new laws.

A recent study by the Kenyan conservation campaign group Wildlife Direct also found that just four percent of those convicted of [wildlife crime](#) spent time in jail.

But current KWS chief Kiprono said Kenya now boasted the "toughest

wildlife law in Africa" and that 249 suspects have been arrested so far this year.

"Our resolve has been and remains that we shall not condone any further economic saboteurs to visit death on our wildlife," he said.



This photo taken on August 23, 2010, shows a Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS) ranger standing guard over an ivory haul seized at Jomo Kenyatta Airport in Nairobi

He said Kenya had also seen a recent reduction in the number of rhinos and elephants taken by poachers—figures that have been challenged as inaccurate by Leakey and Wildlife Direct.

"Eighteen rhinos and 51 elephants have been lost to poachers compared

to last year, when we lost 59 and 302 rhinos and elephants respectively," he said, adding that Kenya prided itself as being home to 30,000 [elephants](#) and 1,040 [rhinos](#).

Ivory is sought out for jewellery and decorative objects. Much of the ivory smuggled is destined for China, whose rapidly growing economy has encouraged those enjoying disposable income to splash out on an ivory trinket as a sign of financial success.

Asian consumers who buy smuggled rhino horn—which is made of keratin, the same material as human fingernails—believe that it has powerful healing properties.

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