

Attachment 1. INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE ARTICLE

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Liberian gold rush threatens forest preserve

By Philip Smucker

Rare animals, sheltered from war, are at risk from an invasion of hungry miners

SAPO NATIONAL PARK, Liberia

Red and black Diana monkeys lunge through the air, azure peacocks flap in the jungle canopy and a tiny zebra antelope stops in its tracks to heed the low moans of a Liberian hunter marking his prey for slaughter.

Here in Sapo National Park, a vast swath of Liberian rain forest, two decades of civil war have kept intact a treasure: one of the world's most diverse wildlife populations.

During 15 years of bloodshed that left about 200,000 Liberians dead, warriors intent on killing one another spared the large concentration of mammals, birds and other species that inhabit the 1,800 square kilometers, or 700 square miles, of this protected forest.

But now that the fighting has subsided and a 14,000-man United Nations peacekeeping mission has spread out to protect Liberia's human population, new threats to wildlife have emerged. A gold rush has invaded the forest, and with it a booming trade in "bush meat" to feed the prospectors, many of them homeless ex-combatants.

Liberia has some of the largest unexploited gold and diamond deposits in the world, but until fighting subsided in 2003 little mining took place in officially protected forests.

Now several thousand miners have moved into Sapo National Park, living in enclaves they call "Iraq" and "Afghanistan" - references to other chaotic lands occupied by strangers. They live in hastily constructed shacks; in their spare time, they relax at newly set up video entertainment halls. But most of their time is spent ripping trees of the virgin rain forest out at their roots in search of gold nuggets.

The miners use portable generators and water pumps to tear through the topsoil and pan for treasure, a technique that environmentalists say is likely to scar the Sapo reserve beyond recognition.

Western and Liberian wildlife experts warn that African elephants, pygmy hippos, bongos, duikers, leopards, chimps and dozens of other rare species are at risk. Because of the long civil war, surveys of Liberian forests are incomplete. But the jungles, which make up 42 percent of the Upper Guinean rain forest, are believed by Western wildlife experts to harbor 125 mammal species, 590 bird species, 74 kinds of reptiles and amphibians, and more than 1,000 insect species.

Ecologists say that peacekeepers have not done enough to halt the devastation. In response, the head of the UN mission this month ordered his forces to enter the forest and determine what it would take to expel the trespassers.

The envoy, Jacques Klein, special representative of Secretary General Kofi Annan, said, in an interview in Monrovia, the Liberian capital, that the ultimate goal of his peacekeepers was to persuade miners and poachers to abandon the national park.

The extent of the problem was apparent during treks into the forest with UN officials or Liberian guides over the past two weeks. On Sunday, after a helicopter ride from Monrovia followed by a

grueling nine-hour hike through dense jungle in Sapo, a UN civil affairs officer confronted several hundred residents of the "Afghanistan" camp.

"It is illegal for you to live and work here," said the officer, Erin McCandless. "We will bring more people next week - including environmentalists - who are ready to help you with an alternative means of income." Several camp residents said they were ready to leave, but feared armed men outside the park.

Liberian forestry officials and environmental advocates contend that even a threat of serious force would probably frighten the gold miners and poachers from the park. They are lobbying the UN mission to drop leaflets from the skies and then move to drive miners and poachers out by torching thatch huts if necessary.

Anthony Taplah, head of forest conservation for the Forestry Development Authority of Liberia, said in an interview that no one, including the United Nations, was willing to assist him in the fight against miners and poachers. "Our timber industry went bust, and now villagers and ex-combatants have taken their fight into the forest," Taplah said.

Some UN officials have countered that Taplah is not competent to save Sapo and would serve Liberia better by resigning in favor of a broad-minded international conservationist with a track record of saving wildlife.

The rough conditions and sweltering heat make it difficult for officials to control the problem. On Sunday, a young Ethiopian peacekeeper who entered the forest with McCandless, Abdusemed Abamoga, died from heat stroke during the trek.

Other dangers were encountered during an earlier weeklong trek into the forest guided by a Liberian forestry official, Emmanuel Washington.

A research center set up in the 1980s, Gbaboni Camp, has fallen into the hands of a disgruntled former fighter, Torbor Sneh, who boasts that he can kill a dozen mammals in a day, Liberian park officials say. One of Sneh's recent kills was a giant pangolin, an endangered African anteater, Washington said.

"His fighters are killing with a vengeance, and you can kill a lot of animals with an AK-47," said a Western ambassador who has visited the camp, and who asked not to be identified.

Around the sprawling gold mining area, another warlord, General Patrick (Zena) Koko, known as the Elephant Hunter, deploys his former fighters to collect mining and trading fees, according to foresters.

Forestry Development Authority officials in Liberia believe that Koko is responsible for the deaths of several African forest elephants slaughtered since September for their ivory.

A German forestry officer, Wulf Gatter, who built the Gbaboni research station two decades ago to study Sapo's rich biodiversity, said that Koko was leading a rebel contingent that the UN should have disarmed months ago.

Gatter's assertions about Koko were backed up by villagers encountered in Sapo during the weeklong trek.

Officials with Conservation International and other Western environmental aid groups insisted in interviews that without the deployment of UN peacekeepers to force out the miners, they would be unable to resume park management and community development programs inside the forest, which were interrupted by fighting that broke out in 2002 and subsided late in 2003.

A Swedish and Irish UN contingent attempted an expedition into the park as recently as December last year, but retreated for lack of road access.

The discredited government of Charles Taylor, accused of rampant corruption and forest exploitation, handed over power in October 2003 to the UN's security and humanitarian mission.

As Taylor's grip began to slip in 2002, rebel leaders seized villages in and around the Sapo reserve.

Villagers, no longer employed in the timber business, fled into the jungle to hunt for wild meat - one mammal at a time. When rebel leaders confiscated the villagers' guns between 2002 and 2003 near Sapo, locals invented ingenious slip-knot trapping techniques.

Monkeys and deer driven from the park's primary sanctuaries fled to secondary forests, where hunters now pick them off and transport the meat to Monrovia or back across the forest to the park's gold miners.

"The UN and government must find a way to pacify the area," said Tyler Christie, the American technical director for Conservation International in Liberia. "Liberia has little hope of long-term peace and development until it can control its forests."

"This country has gold, diamonds and lumber," said Klein, the UN's coordinator of operations, as he accepted a "Peacemaker of the Year Award" in Monrovia. "Liberia needs a government that administers well and uses its resources in the interest of the people."

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