India Takes Hard Line on Rhin

State of Assam Beefs Up Security and Arms Guards With Automatic Weapons in Bid to C

By Vibhuti Agarwal

KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK, India—Sotybon Pegu, a forest guard here, is proud of his role in the deaths of two poachers this month.

Mr. Pegu said his crew came under fire from a group of four men armed with AK-47s hunting vulnerable one-horned rhinos. They shot back, killing two, while the others fled.

"I'm not answerable to anyone to protect the rhinos. I will not let anyone harm them," he said.

Authorities in the northeastern state of Assam, where Kaziranga is located, are taking a more muscular approach to combat poachers who killed 22 rhinos in the park last year, three times the number in 2010. So far this year, they have killed 13 rhinos from a species painstakingly brought back from the brink of extinction.

The state government is pushing hundreds more guards into Kaziranga, a park that draws more than 100,000 tourists each year to a poor region that has been torn by separatist violence. Assam is arming the guards for the first time with automatic weapons and plans to soon deploy drones to monitor poachers by air. The park guards also are now shielded from prosecution by the extension of state laws that protect them if they kill poachers in the line of duty.

The legal changes have alarmed human-rights groups, which say the changes could open the way for undocumented killings deep in the forest. Park authorities say 13 alleged poachers were killed in Kaziranga in the past three years. In 2009, no poachers were killed, with one killed the year before that.

"It is totally illegal and unconstitutional," said Kirity Roy, an activist working with the civil-rights group Masum in the neighboring state of West Bengal.

But park authorities, state and federal officials and lawyers, and the police investigating the latest deaths all say the new aggression against poachers is in line with federal laws and the constitution. They say it is needed to reverse the rise in rhino killings and allow park guards to defend themselves.

Poachers, they say, have become increasingly sophisticated, brandishing automatic weapons that have fueled simmering, decades-old separatist conflicts in India's northeast.

"Sometimes this is the only way" to stop poaching, said A.P. Rout, additional director general of police in Assam, of the latest killings.

Kaziranga, a 330-square-mile expanse on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River, which flows to the Bay of Bengal, is one of the final sanctuaries of *Rhinoceros unicornis*, the one-horned rhino. The park, also home to tigers, wild elephants and numerous other animals, is a Unesco World Heritage Site and is popular with tourists for its elephant-back safaris.

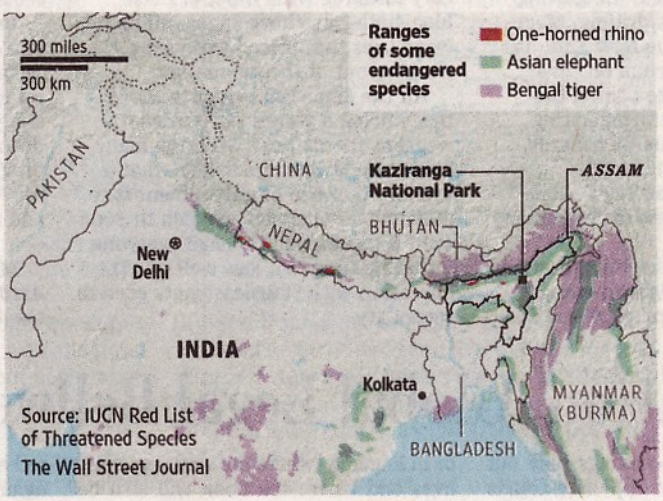
In 1905, the British colonial government began to protect the area amid concerns that hunting had brought the number of rhino down to only a dozen animals. Those numbers in Kaziranga now have risen to almost 2,500, about 80% of the world-wide total, due to heavy penalties for poaching the animal since the 1950s.

"To keep it this way, it is important to guard every inch of land inside the park," said Niranjan Kumar Vasu, the park's director.

Experts say the increase in poaching is fueled by demand in East Asia for rhino horns, which are believed in traditional medicine to treat ail-

Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Tourists on elephants follow a one-horned rhinoceros with her calf at Assam's Kaziranga National Park last year.



no Kills

Quell Rise in Poaching

ments such as arthritis and hangovers. The horns, which can fetch thousands of dollars, also are carved into bowls, cups or a piece of jewelry.

"This is an alarming situation," said Dipankar Ghose, a New Delhi-based rhino-conservation expert at the World Wide Fund for Nature. "The soaring demand for rhino horns in China and Vietnam is driving the slaughter."

Assam Police Phief Jayanta Narayan Choudhury says separatist groups operating in the Northeast have gotten involved in poaching to raise money, often teaming up with villagers who live on the park's periphery.

"Rebel groups from neighboring states, flush with money and armed with sophisticated weapons and communications are involved in the crime," he said.

In October, the state government began providing automatic weapons such as AK-47s to its Assam Forest Protection Force, a special armed unit. Some 500 guards from the force have been sent to Kaziranga in the past five months to back up the park's 150 permanent guards. The federal government said in December it would contribute 381.74 million rupees ($7 million) for the rhino-protection effort, Mr. Vasu said.

He said the government recently sent 300 automatic weapons to supplement aging Lee-Enfield rifles. Guards have not been given shoot-on-sight orders, but are allowed to fire in self-defense, he added.

Guards said that on March 6, a predawn patrol—including some guards armed with automatic weapons—followed the sound of gunfire to find four men hunting a rhino.

Forest guard Nomal Boro said the poachers opened fire and then tried to flee toward the Brahmaputra River. Mr. Boro said he and the other guards returned fire, killing two of the men.

Mr. Boro said he has no regrets, as he wants to save the rhinos. "Protecting them is difficult and dangerous," he said. "But we don't want to lose them."