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PRESS RELEASE

Wildlife Enforcement Task Force meets to combat organized crime targeted at elephants and rhinos

Nairobi/Geneva, 25 May 2011 – The Ivory and Rhinoceros Enforcement Task Force of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) met in United Nations Environment Programme headquarters (Gigiri, Kenya) from 17 to 19 May to discuss urgent actions against crimes targeting these two pachyderms.

The meeting was attended by 20 top law enforcement officers representing wildlife authorities, Customs, investigations, national parks, the police and enforcement agencies in 12 countries (China, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United Republic of Tanzania, Viet Nam and Zimbabwe). The Task Force also considered intelligence supplied by Australia, Canada and the United States.

Four of the five organizations of the recently-formed International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (a partnership between CITES, INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the World Bank and the World Customs Organization) were also present at the meeting and offered their support to national agencies in their battle against organized crime groups and networks. A representative of the Lusaka Agreement dealing with regional enforcement issues in East Africa also attended.

Despite considerable successes on the part of the law enforcement community, the smuggling of elephant ivory continues to occur at significant levels and those behind the illegal trade do not appear to be deterred by the regular losses they are suffering at the hands of border control agencies. For example, in 2009 alone, Customs agencies intercepted over 25 tonnes of ivory being smuggled from Africa to Asia. As recently as last week, officials in Kenya seized over one tonne of ivory that was about to be smuggled out of the country.

The status of some populations of rhinoceros species seems bleak. For instance, South Africa has seen dramatic increases in rhino poaching in recent years: 13 rhinos poached in 2007, 83 in 2008, 122 in 2009, 330 in 2010 and already 159 illegally killed in the first four months of 2011. This level of poaching is putting South Africa's rhino population, estimated at 21,000 individuals, under high pressure.

The market dynamics of the illegal trade in ivory and rhinoceros, including supply and demand mechanisms leading to a sharp increase in the black market price, are not yet fully understood. The World Bank has offered to provide its expertise in the fields of combating money-laundering and asset recovery, which was highly welcomed.

The Task Force learned of possible new demands for rhino horn, including within the art and antiques trade, which will require further investigation. Elephants are poached for their ivory tusks that are traditionally carved into decorative items that consumers are willing to pay high prices for in emerging economies. This demand appears to have increased in recent years due to a growing

affluence among some parts of society in east Asia. The poaching of rhinoceros, on the other hand, has been regarded as primarily due to a demand for its use as a traditional medicinal product and a recently-emerging rumour that it may be an effective treatment for cancer.

Participants agreed that greater communication, collaboration and coordination are needed at national and international levels and they committed to increasing exchanges of information. In particular, data will be regularly exchanged regarding persons who travel to countries, such as South Africa, to engage in purportedly legal hunting but whose actual intention is to obtain animal body parts that can be sold on the black market.

The Task Force members agreed that enforcement agencies should be encouraged to delay releasing news of significant seizures until information has been provided to relevant counterparts in countries of origin and destination as well as to international enforcement bodies. This would enable action to be taken against those along the 'chain' of criminal activity, instead of providing them with early warning and an opportunity to cover their tracks. The Task Force encouraged the media to support enforcement agencies in this regard and to appreciate why the issuance of press releases relating to seizures may be delayed in future.

John Scanlon, Secretary-General of CITES, said: "The CITES Secretariat has issued several Alerts and intelligence briefings to national and international law enforcement agencies in recent years. These have contained information to enable them to improve their risk-assessments, targeting and profiling in relation to illegal trade in elephant ivory and rhinoceros horn. Last week's Task Force meeting has enabled us to acquire the most up-to-date overview of what is happening and we will soon prepare and circulate fresh briefings. It has also confirmed suspicions we held regarding new 'markets' or consumption areas in relation to rhinoceros horn."

John Sellar, CITES Chief Enforcement Officer, declared: "Understandably, we cannot provide full details of the Task Force discussions but it is clear that the illicit activities are directed by organized crime groups that care for nothing but profit. They are regularly exploiting impoverished persons who live in the areas inhabited by elephants and rhinoceroses and are, quite literally, sending some of the poachers to their deaths. In southern Africa this year, 14 poachers, equipped with automatic weapons and high-calibre firearms, have been killed during encounters with park rangers."

David Higgins, INTERPOL's Environmental Crime Manager, who participated in the meeting, said: "The illegal trade in wildlife can have a significant effect on a nation's economy and security. In the case of ivory and rhinoceros horn illicit trafficking, where heavily armed poaching gangs and international organized criminal networks are involved, illegal activities reduce tourism revenue, may place the individual tourist in danger, damage the balance of biodiversity and ultimately erode the rule of law."

Mr Higgins added that: "To combat this illegal trade, there is an urgent need for well-built and well-designed strategies at the local, national and international levels, and at the frontline of this there must be effective criminal intelligence management, exchange and analysis."

The CITES Secretariat was able to convene the Task Force meeting with funding support from the European Commission.

Note to journalists: For more information, contact Juan Carlos Vasquez at +4179-552 27 32 (mobile), or juan.vasquez@cites.org