

Geography In The News™

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CONGO'S MOUNTAIN GORILLAS

A massacre of mountain gorillas in the Democratic Republic of Congo last month is being called the worst slaughter of gorillas in the last 25 years. Three adult mountain gorilla females and one alpha male were found dead in the canopied jungle of Virunga National Park, a vast preserve and Africa's oldest park along the eastern border of Congo.

Surprisingly, the gorillas were not killed by poachers, as their bodies were left in the jungle. Just who could be responsible for this terrible tragedy? The answer lies in the area's history and geography.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, frequently referred to as Congo, is situated at the heart of the west-central portion of sub-Saharan Africa. The country is bounded by Angola, the Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania across Lake Tanganyika and Zambia. Its territory straddles the equator with one-third to the north and two-thirds to the south. Congo, at 905,351 square miles (2,344,858 sq. km), is about the size of Western Europe, but with a population of 63 million.

As a result of Congo's equatorial location, the country experiences large amounts of precipitation and has the highest frequency of thunderstorms on earth. The annual rainfall can total upwards of 80 inches (203 cm) in some places and the area sustains the second largest rainforest in the world after the Amazon Basin. The tropical climate has also produced the Congo River system, which dominates the region hydrologically. The Congo River and all of its

tributaries drain nearly the entire country.

Congo's most recent war, the Second Congo War, has been going on since 1998. The war, a vicious battle for power and resources between militias and even armies from neighboring countries, has claimed approximately four million lives. It has been called Africa's "world war" and is the world's deadliest conflict since World War II. In the remote eastern border of the country, where the Virunga National Park lies and most of the country's wars have begun, the fighting continues to rage.

The Virunga National Park, where the recent mountain gorilla killings took place, borders both Rwanda and Uganda. The park, which was created in 1925 as Africa's first national park, covers 3,016 square miles (7,800 sq. km), or about the size of three average U.S. counties. Along with mountain gorillas, Virunga is home to hippopotamuses, elephants, chimpanzees, giraffes, buffaloes and many endemic birds.

Despite the numbers of other animals in

greatest threat to the primates' existence in the 1980s and early 1990s, the challenges now seem even more complex and difficult to abate.

One problem in the area is that Hutu extremists have crossed into the park since their massacre of Rwandan Tutsis in 1994. Their impact on the gorillas has been significant. For example, three years ago some 8,000 Rwandans crossed the border into Virunga looking for pastoral land to graze livestock and they decimated more than 3,000 acres (1,214 hectares) of prime gorilla habitat in less than three weeks.

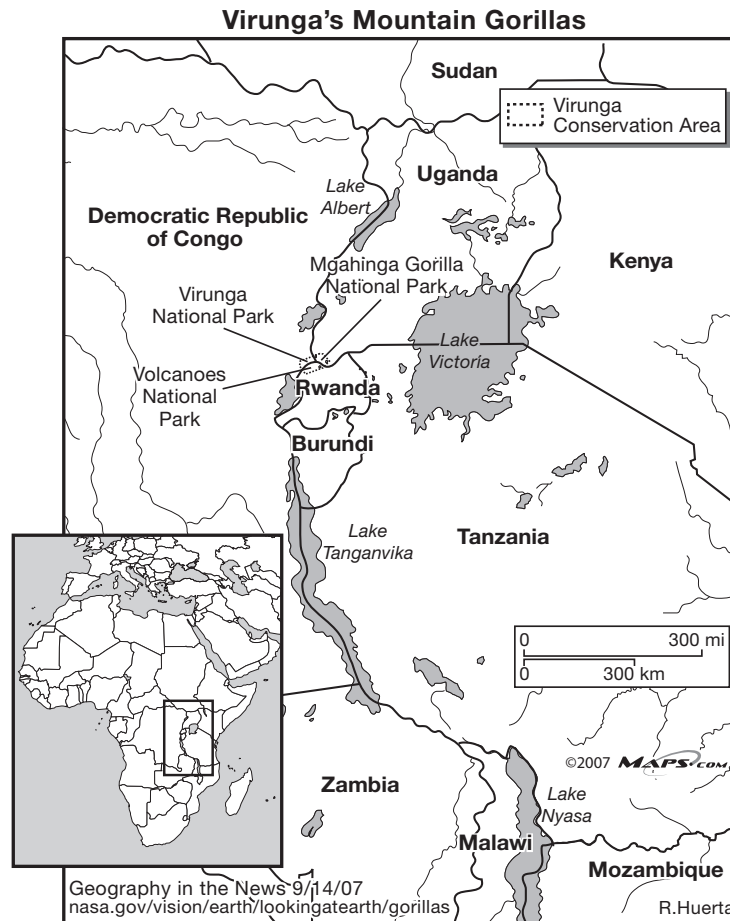
Now, a corrupt group of charcoal merchants has begun harvesting Virunga's forests to fuel a \$30 million-a-year charcoal industry. One of the park's rangers, Paulin Ngobobo, has been desperately trying to stop the charcoal trade from spreading across the Virunga. Some interpret last month's gorilla killings as political assassinations—a message from the charcoal industry that operates nearby.

This year, the Virunga also became home to Tutsi forces loyal to a renegade Congolese general, Laurent Nkunda. In January, two mountain gorillas were killed amid fighting between Nkunda and government forces in the park. Nkunda has almost 8,000 highly trained men under his command, while park rangers number only 600 and they patrol the park with few weapons or even vehicles.

Since 1994, about 120 park rangers have been killed trying to protect the Virunga and its mountain gorillas. The gorillas' very existence is in the hands of the rangers, men who take their charges very seriously. The rangers even have favorite gorillas which they follow closely and write about on a blog (<http://www.wildlifedirect.org/>). Hopefully, the rangers' good intentions will prevail and the world's mountain gorillas can be saved from their most dangerous enemy on the planet—mankind.

And that is *Geography in the News*™. September 14, 2007. #902.

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the park, Virunga's most famous residents are certainly the mountain gorillas. The park is home to an estimated 60 percent of the world's 700 surviving mountain gorillas. While habitat destruction posed the