

PRESS RELEASE

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Saving the unicorns: A triumph over organized crime and a beacon of hope By Dr Jimmy Borah & Ivy Farheen Hussain

In the heart of the enchanting eastern Himalayas, where lush grasslands and dense forests converge, a charismatic giant roam - the Greater One-horned rhinoceros. This magnificent creature not only serve as critical indicators of the health of their habitat but also play a pivotal role in maintaining the delicate balance of the ecosystem. However, their survival is threatened by a shadowy underworld: the illegal wildlife trade (IWT). This trade, intricately linked to organized crime, transcends borders, involving national and international criminal syndicates operating with ruthless precision. It encompasses arms smuggling, money laundering, cross-border trafficking, and even terrorism, all driven by the insatiable demand for rhino horns and body parts in black markets.

The Dark Side of Rhino Poaching:

The demand for rhino horns, primarily from traditional medicine markets in Asia, has fueled a devastating wave of poaching across rhino range areas within India. Rhino horns are falsely believed to possess medicinal properties and are often used as status symbols. The poaching of rhinos has transformed into a highly lucrative and illicit industry, leading to the rapid decline of rhino populations.

Behind the scenes of rhino poaching, organized crime networks operate with alarming sophistication. National and international gangs work in close coordination, leveraging their vast resources to orchestrate elaborate smuggling operations. These criminal enterprises are not limited to wildlife alone; they often branch into arms smuggling, money laundering, and even links to terrorism, further destabilizing regions.

Government and Conservation Efforts:

In the face of this grave crisis, the Government of Assam, in collaboration with the forest department, has mounted a heroic defence of its rhino population. Over the years, their tireless efforts and innovative strategies have succeeded in minimizing rhino poaching, culminating in an astounding achievement—zero poaching in the year 2022. This remarkable turnaround offers hope for the survival of these majestic creatures.

Today, there are approximately 4018 Indian rhinos in the wilderness of India and Nepal. A significant portion of this population resides in Assam's Kaziranga National Park (KNP), with a staggering 2,613 individuals, as reported in an estimation conducted in March 2022. Additionally, more than 250 rhinos thrive in other parks such as Orang, Pobitora, and Manas.

In the ongoing battle against rhino poaching, Aaranyak, are spearheading an initiative called D.E.T.E.R.S.© (Disrupt and End Trade of Endangered and Rare Species). The initiative serves as an umbrella for needed capacity building, workshops, meetings, collaborations and liaisons with various sectors like Judiciary, Enforcement agencies, , Border security agencies, Forest departments and Transportation agencies. The initiative also open dialogues between different agencies to fast-track information generation and communication along with encouraging quick actions from Enforcement

agencies in order to effectively curb wildlife trade. By alerting law enforcement agencies through actionable intelligence, D.E.T.E.R.S. © is playing a pivotal role in deterring wildlife crime and safeguarding the rhino population in Northeast India.

The plight of India's rhinos stands as a testament to the intertwined nature of conservation, crime, and international networks. However, the resolute efforts of the Government of Assam, the forest department, with complimenting support from organizations like Aaranyak, underscore that with determination and innovation, it is possible to turn the tide against organized crime and secure a brighter future for these magnificent creatures. The story of India's rhinos is not just one of survival but a beacon of hope for the preservation of our planet's precious biodiversity. It is worth mentioning here that Aaranyak had provided vehicles, motorbikes, other field equipment for use by forest officials in enhancing their efforts to secure the future of Greater One Horned Rhinos in Assam.

(The authors are from Aaranyak)

*Press statement issued by Bijay Sankar Bora, Publicity Secretary, Aaranyak.
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