



## Press Release

### **Operation COBRA III records Largest Number of Seizures of Wildlife Contraband Ever**

**Bangkok, 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2015:** Law Enforcement officers from 62 countries in Africa, Asia, America and Europe successfully completed joint month-long global Operation “codenamed COBRA III”, targeting transnational wildlife and forest crime mainly in elephants, rhinos, pangolins, great apes, big cats, birds, fish, reptiles, timber and other forest products. The global wildlife enforcement operation carried out from 4 - 27 May 2015 was organized by regional enforcement networks and international organizations under the Chairmanship of the Association of South East Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network Law Enforcement Extension Office (ASEAN-WEN LEEO). Officers from South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network (SA-WEN), Lusaka Agreement Task Force (LATF), European Union Police (EUROPOL) as well as countries namely China, USA, South Africa (Department of Environmental Affairs and South African Police Service) and etc. Participating agencies in Operation COBRA III included ASEAN-WEN LEEO - PCU, LATF, SA-WEN, INTERPOL, WCO, RILO AP, RILO ESA, UNODC, CITES, India Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), China National Interagency CITES Enforcement Coordination Group (NICECG), ASEAN Police (ASEANPOL), EUROPOL and US Fish Wildlife Service (USFWS).

This operation was coordinated by the International Coordination Team (ICT) based in Bangkok and comprised officers drawn from wildlife, Customs, Police, Forestry and other law enforcement agencies as well as inter-governmental agencies. The operation was conducted simultaneously across source, transit and destination countries of wildlife contraband in Africa, Asia, America and Europe. Participating countries gathered and exchanged information and intelligence among themselves and with the ICT. At the national level, the operation was executed by a multi-agency team led by a national coordinator.

COBRA III resulted in more than 300 arrests of suspects including kingpins and over 600 seizures of assorted wildlife contraband, with more tip-offs leading to unearthing of criminal networks and activities. The seizures included over 12 metric tons of elephant ivory, 119 rhino horns, 10 metric tons of rosewood and 344 black terrapin turtles. Also recovered were assorted firearms and ammunition.

Notable outcomes of the operation included seizure of 4.3 tons (one of the largest elephant ivory hauls) in Thailand on transit from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Lao PDR; followed by another seizure of 3.1 tons of ivory from Kenya a week later. Other large quantities of contraband ivory were seized in Singapore (3.7 tons), Mozambique (1.3 tons) and Uganda (0.6 tons). Also notable seizures were of rhino horns in Mozambique (77), Vietnam (31), Namibia (14) and Kenya (4), and 249 pangolin scales in Hong-Kong SAR, China. In addition, there were 8,300 units and 1 ton of abalone seized in South Africa. In India, 10,974 Kgs suspected tiger bones were recovered.

In Hong Kong SAR, China a speedboat was impounded with illegal live tortoises, lizards, spiders, 249 kilograms of pangolin scales and about 10kg of hornbill beak. In UK, there were 243 seizures of CITES listed specimens as well as assorted drugs, weapons, tobacco and alcohol. In Germany, there were more than 110 seizures related, in particular, to traditional medicine and in Austria 63 seizures of illegal shipments mostly pills containing *Aloe ferox*, a CITES Appendix II listed plant.

The arrested suspects included eight (8) kingpins: one (1) a Chinese national involved in Namibia's biggest rhino-horn smuggling case; a notorious elephant poacher in India; two (2) Chinese nationals in relation to the seizure of 1.3 tons and 65 rhino horns and four (4) Vietnamese nationals in the seizure of 12 rhino horns in Mozambique. Six (6) key suspects were arrested in Kenya in connection with the 3.1 tons and 3.7 tons of elephant ivory seized in Thailand and Singapore respectively while two (2) kingpins involved in these cases are fugitives. In India, three (3) suspects were arrested in connection to possession of suspected tiger bones.

In addition, vital intelligence on poaching and trafficking syndicates was collected, facilitating governments to continue investigations with increasingly clearer targets. Follow up investigations are still ongoing in many Asian, European and African countries.

Mr. Vatanarak Suranartyuth, Director of ASEAN-WEN Law Enforcement Extension Office noted that "the success of Operation COBRA III resulted from the commitment of all partners to exchange intelligence and tackle the illegal wildlife trade across source, transit, and consumer countries." Mr. Suranartyuth also stressed that "we are really focusing on taking action against wildlife crime syndicates by cooperating and coordinating closely through International Coordination Teams and will follow up on our investigations".

Mr. Bonaventure Ebay, Director of Lusaka Agreement Task Force, was delighted by the results of Operation COBRA III and said COBRA should be a model, to be developed further with increased support from governments and international community. He noted the alarming level and frequency at which illegal wildlife trade is taking place within and across the regions aggravated by the many forces at play including incentives, corruption and fraud by criminals

and officials across the entire illicit trade chain. He reiterated that the Lusaka Agreement Task Force is confident with the COBRA initiative, and that with sufficient funding the global community will build a strong platform for cooperative enforcement operations especially linking Africa and Asia to win the war against illegal wildlife trade.

Operation COBRA III was financially supported by the European Commission through the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC) and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), the ASEAN-WEN Law Enforcement Extension office, LATF and participating countries.

**Note to editors:**

*Please note that the number of seizures and arrests indicated above includes those made during the planning and post-operation wrap up, as reported by participating law enforcement agencies to CENcomm, COBRA III's official real time intelligence and information sharing platform.*

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