



**BY MARK JENKINS**  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CONTRIBUTING WRITER

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENT STIRTON**

# WHO MURDERED THE

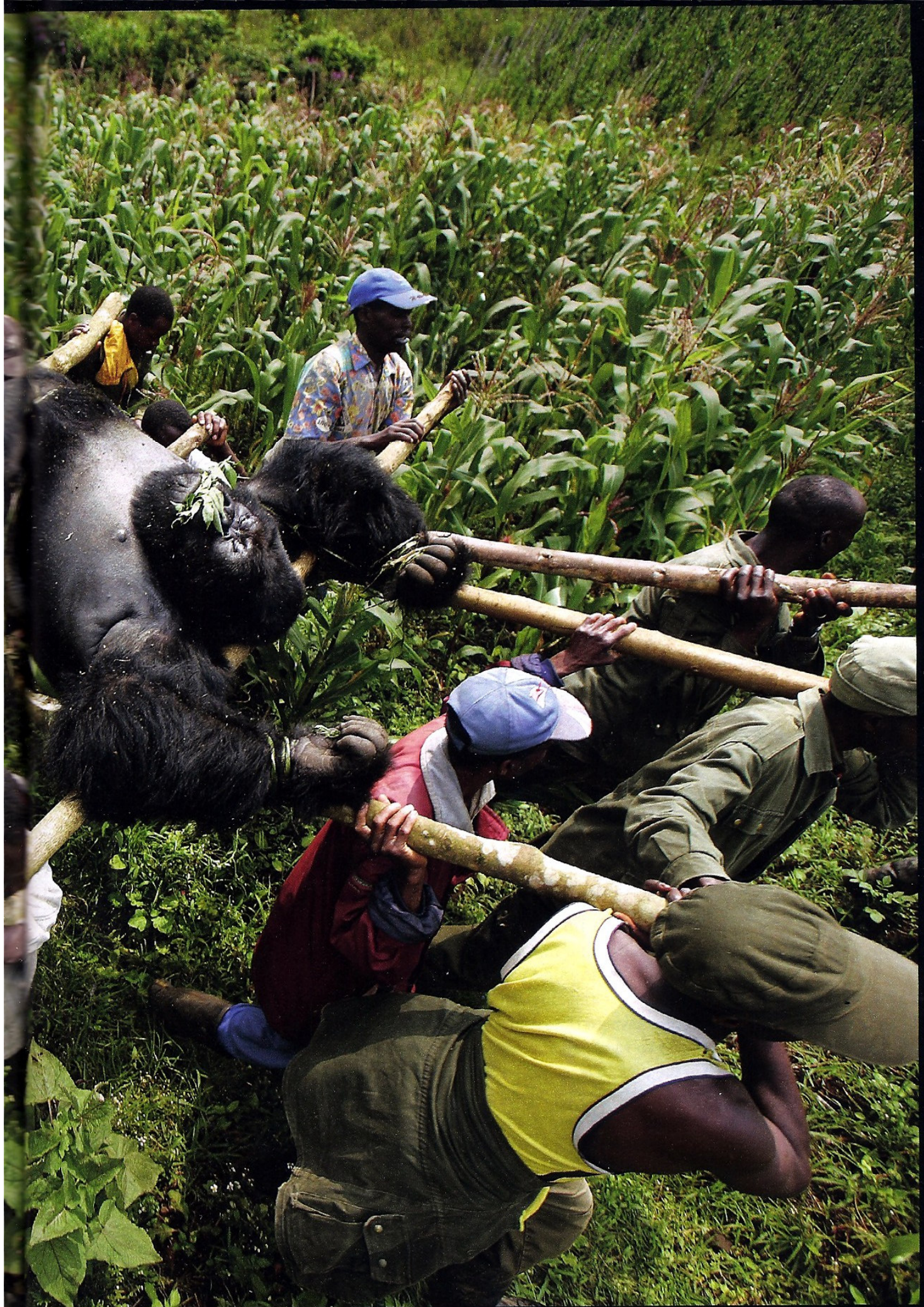
Heavily armed militias shatter the stillness in this central African park. Desperate refugees crowd park boundaries. Charcoal producers strip forests. Then, last summer, someone killed seven of these magnificent creatures in cold blood.



**VIRUNGA GORILLAS?**



**PHOTO SEEN AROUND THE WORLD** Grieving villagers carried Senkwekwe, a 500-pound silverback, from Virunga Park on July 24, 2007. His murder, and that of half his family, ignited worldwide outrage. Poachers were unlikely suspects: They remove body parts such as head and hands to sell as souvenirs.





**Undeterred by a warning cross where Hutu rebels recently attacked park rangers, UN forces advance up Nyiragongo volcano. The rebels cut trees and produce charcoal in the park, a lucrative trade that is destroying the forest. Their presence is also keeping out tourists. On this patrol, the blue-turbaned Sikh peacekeepers routed the rebels without firing a shot.**



**THE KILLERS WAITED UNTIL DARK. ON JULY 22 OF LAST YEAR UNKNOWN ASSAILANTS CROUCHED IN THE FOREST, PREPARING TO EXECUTE A FAMILY OF GORILLAS. HIDDEN ON A SIDE SLOPE OF THE MIKENO VOLCANO IN EASTERN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, ARMED WITH AUTOMATIC WEAPONS, THE KILLERS HAD HUNTED DOWN THE TWELVE-MEMBER RUGENDO FAMILY, WELL-KNOWN**

among tourists and well loved by the rangers of Virunga National Park. The patriarch of the gorilla family, a 500-pound silverback named Senkwekwe, would have sensed that the assailants were near, perhaps wrinkling his wide, black nose at their unfortunate smell, but he would not have been alarmed. Senkwekwe had seen thousands of people and had come to accept their proximity as irritating but unavoidable. So habituated to humans was the Rugendo family that the gorillas would occasionally wander out of the forest into cornfields for an impromptu picnic, angering local farmers.

Park rangers at the nearby Bukima barracks said they heard shots at eight that night. On foot patrol the next morning they found three female gorillas—Mburanumwe, Neza, and Safari—shot to death, with Safari's infant cowering nearby. The following day Senkwekwe was found dead: blasted through the chest that same night. Three weeks later the body of another Rugendo female, Macibiri, would be discovered, her infant presumed dead.

Just a month earlier, two females and an infant from another gorilla group had been attacked. The rangers had found one of the females, shot execution style in the back of the head; her infant, still alive, was clinging to her dead mother's breast. The other female was never found.

All told, seven Virunga mountain gorillas had been killed in less than two months. Brent Stirton's photographs of the dead creatures being carried like royalty by weeping villagers ran in newspapers and magazines around the world. The murders of these intelligent, unassuming animals the park rangers refer to as "our brothers" ignited international outrage.

There was no shortage of suspects. The gorillas share the park with tens of thousands of heavily armed soldiers engaged in a three-way guerrilla war between two rival militias and the Congolese army. The park is also home to poachers and hordes of illegal charcoal producers, and it is bordered by subsistence farmers and vast refugee camps overflowing with families fleeing the bloodshed. Caught in this vortex of human misery, it would be a miracle if the animals remained unscathed. But who would kill gorillas in cold blood, and why?

**BECAUSE OF ITS UNRIVALED** biological and geological diversity, Virunga National Park is the crown jewel of African parks. Founded in 1925, it is the oldest national park in Africa. A narrow strip of resplendent geography covering almost two million acres (slightly smaller than Yellowstone), Virunga is sanctuary to animals as varied as the okapi—imagine a zebra-giraffe combination—the Ruwenzori duiker, wintering Siberian birds, and three taxa of great apes.

“It contains the largest number of mammals, birds, and reptiles and has more endemic species than any other park on the African continent,” says Emmanuel de Merode, director of WildlifeDirect, a nascent Nairobi-based organization founded by conservationist Richard Leakey. De Merode, 37, a biological anthropologist, began working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 1993 and did his Ph.D. on the illegal bush-meat trade in eastern DRC.

“Virunga also has one of the largest volcano lava lakes and the greatest landscape diversity—alpine forest, moorlands, tropical forest, savanna—between 3,000 and 16,000 feet in the world,” de Merode explains. “The truth is, Virunga is arguably the greatest national park on the planet.”

There are roughly 720 mountain gorillas left on Earth; half live in Uganda’s Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and the other half 15 miles south in the Virunga Mountains. The volcano-studded Virunga range straddles the borders between Rwanda, Uganda, and DRC. Three parks share the Virunga region: Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda, which has at most a few dozen gorillas; Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda (famous for Dian Fossey’s research), with perhaps 120 gorillas; and Virunga National Park, home to as many as 200.

Mountain gorillas were once a top tourist draw at Virunga National Park and have the potential

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*Wyoming-based writer Mark Jenkins, who wrote about lowland gorillas in our January issue, has reported from conflict zones around the globe. Award-winning South African photographer Brent Stirton is on staff with Reportage by Getty Images.*

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FRONTLINE SOLDIERS.**

to bring in several million dollars a year. This matters because Virunga, like all parks in the DRC, must generate its own income to survive. Virunga is administered by the ICCN—Congolesse Institute for the Conservation of Nature—an organization that functions as an official agency but is barely funded by the national government. (In the U.S., this would be tantamount to having a concessionaire operate the national parks.) Without a guaranteed budget, Congo’s national parks are deeply susceptible to corruption and exploitation—hallmarks of a country Transparency International named as one of the 13 most corrupt nations in 2007. Notably, the wildlife agency was a pet project of former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, father of the modern African kleptocracy, who actually told his countrymen in one public address, “If you want to steal, steal a little cleverly, in a nice way. Only if you steal so much as to become rich overnight, you will be caught.”

Such leadership has had catastrophic consequences for Virunga. In particular, it set the stage for a calamitous struggle between two men: Honoré Mashagiro, Virunga National Park’s chief warden at the time of the gorilla killings, and Paulin Ngobobo, warden for the southern sector of the park.

Named a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1979, Virunga National Park has also been a fixture on the UN’s list of the most endangered places. Why? Because, for all its biotic diversity, Virunga also happens to lie at the epicenter of the greatest diversity of man’s inhumanity toward man in recent memory: the 1994 genocide in nearby Rwanda—the killing of more than 800,000 Tutsi people—and two wars in Congo, in 1996-97 and 1998-2003, which left



**Troops loyal to Congolese Tutsi Laurent Nkunda train in the park. They control the Mikeno sector, home to as many as 200 of the world's remaining 720 mountain gorillas. Nkunda's troops say they are under penalty of death if they molest the great apes, the engine of Virunga Park's once profitable tourism.**

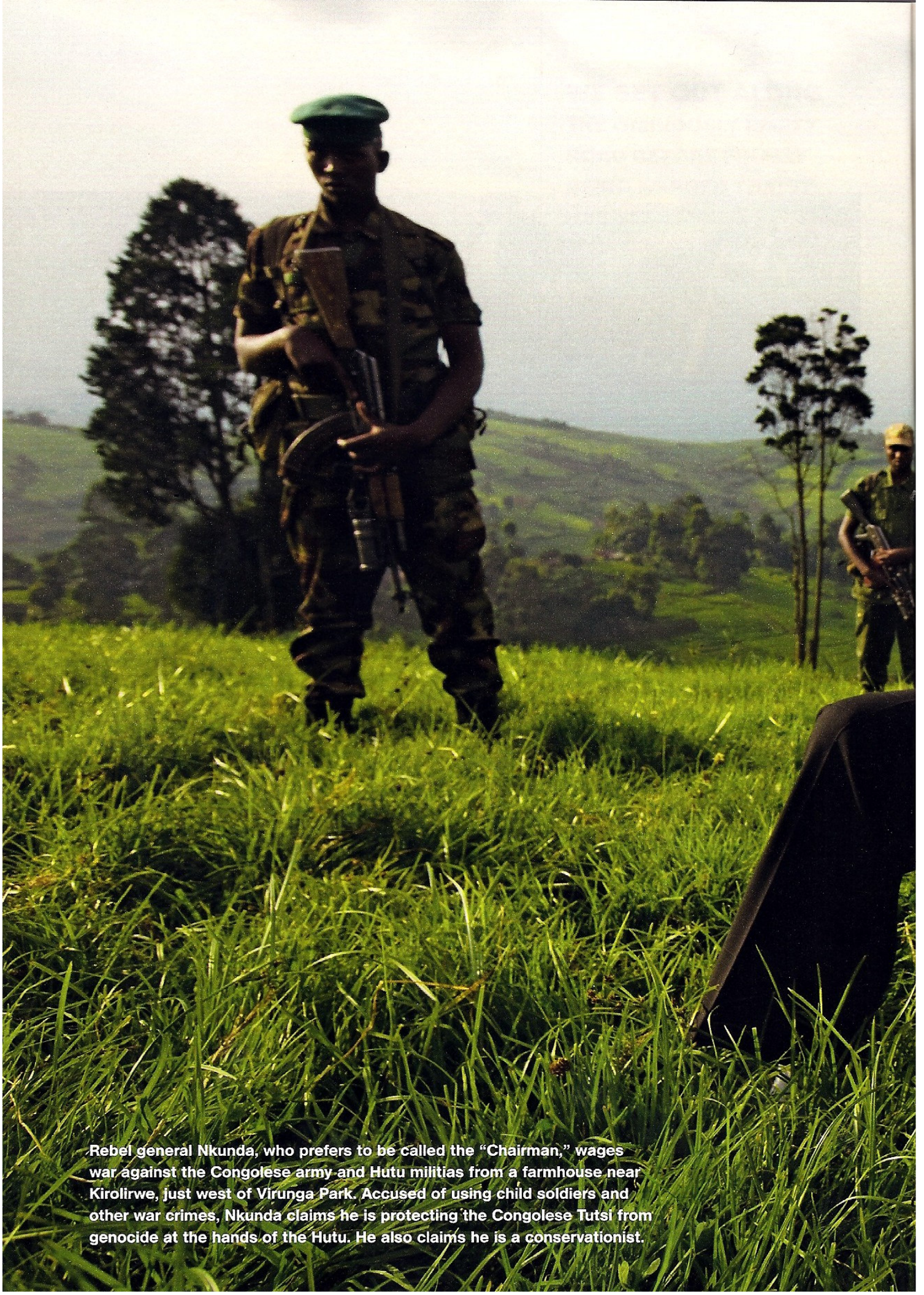
over five million people dead, more than any conflict since World War II. Given the scale of devastation, it's a wonder Virunga National Park still exists at all. Credit goes to the ineffable determination of the park's 650 ICCN rangers. In the past decade more than 110 park rangers have been killed in the line of duty—the majority shot not by poachers, but by militias.

After the Rwanda genocide, the perpetrators, largely Hutu fighters and Rwandan soldiers, fled west into the Congo and made alliances with the distempered Congolese army. Over the years, these exiles reorganized themselves into the Democratic Forces for the Liberation

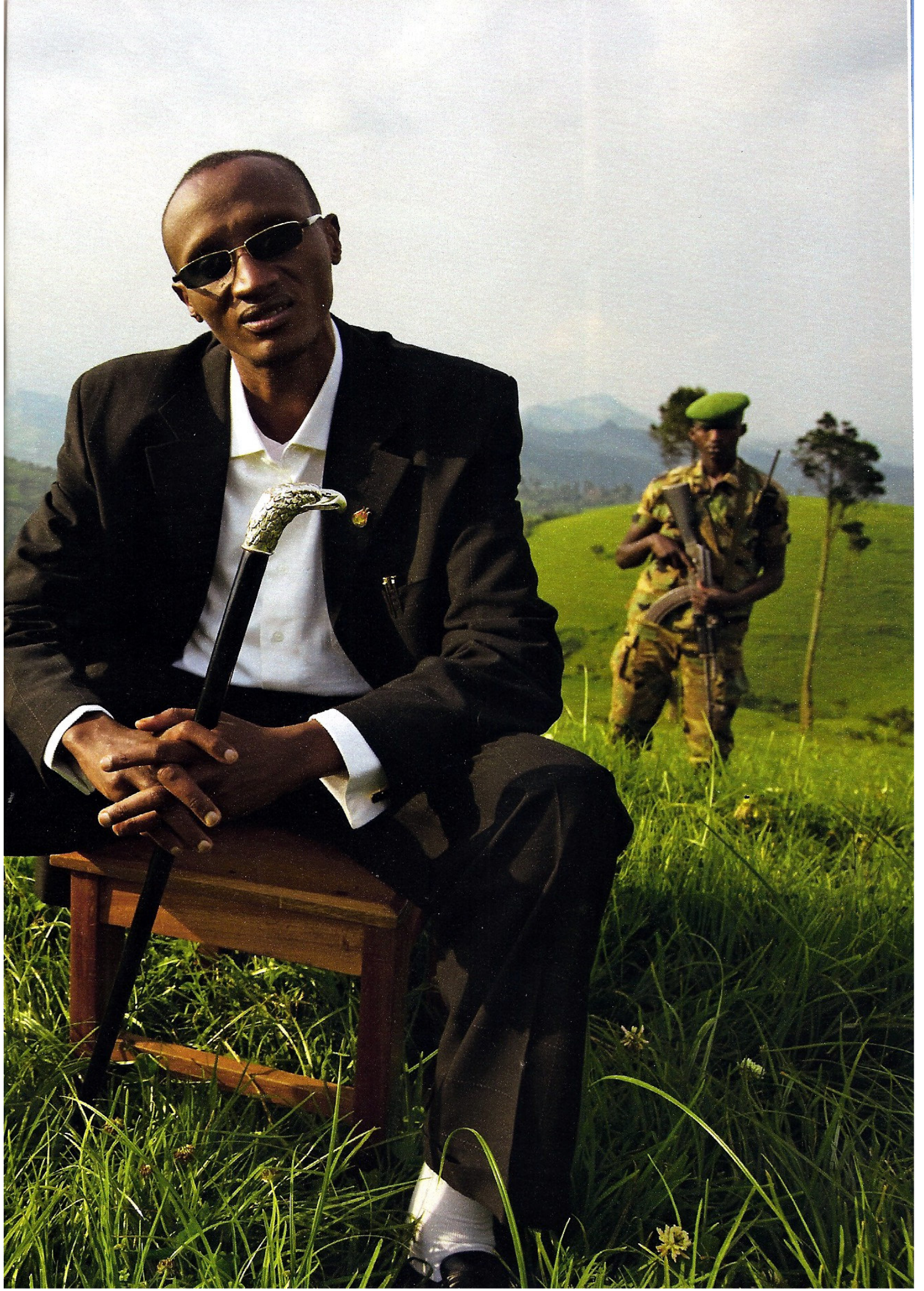
of Rwanda, better known as the FDLR. By seizing and exploiting the region's rich resources—mining gold, tin, and other minerals with forced labor and cutting old-growth forests to produce charcoal—the Hutu militias were able to rearm, indoctrinate a new generation into their ideology of ethnic hatred, and continue to prey on Tutsi, this time in eastern Congo.

In response to the collusion between the Hutu and the Congolese army, a Congolese Tutsi general, Laurent Nkunda, formed his own rebel force, called the National Congress for the People's Defense, or CNDP. Nkunda's soldiers, with tacit support from Rwanda, have been fighting





Rebel general Nkunda, who prefers to be called the "Chairman," wages war against the Congolese army and Hutu militias from a farmhouse near Kiorirwe, just west of Virunga Park. Accused of using child soldiers and other war crimes, Nkunda claims he is protecting the Congolese Tutsi from genocide at the hands of the Hutu. He also claims he is a conservationist.





**A close encounter with a gorilla from the Kabirizi family awes soldiers from Nkunda's forces. Unseen by outsiders for six months while fighting raged, this family seems unharmed. The gorillas are highly susceptible to flu and other human diseases, the reason the park service requires all visitors to keep at least 23 feet away. Nkunda has revived gorilla tourism without park service permission.**

the Hutu forces for years, transmogrifying the southern half of Virunga National Park into a blood-pooled battlefield. The Congolese army, depending on which way the political wind is blowing and which way the money is flowing, sometimes fights with Nkunda's forces, and at other times joins ranks with the FDLR.

All three forces have committed unspeakable atrocities upon the civilian population in the province of North Kivu. Gangs of barely paid soldiers armed with machine guns (grotesquely referred to as the "AK credit card") have taken whatever they want, whenever they want, from whomever they want. Tens of



thousands of women and girls as young as five have been raped, some gang-raped by Congolese or FDLR soldiers and then, when their village was retaken by Nkunda's soldiers, raped again. Scores of innocent people have been tortured, hundreds of civilians shot to death, and more than 800,000 people forced to flee their homes, only to become starving refugees in their own country. North Kivu is a Hieronymus Bosch painting come alive.

**ONE THING SEEMED CERTAIN** from the moment the bodies of the gorillas were found last July: Poachers had not killed them. Poachers who

prey on gorillas leave an unmistakable calling card: They kidnap the infants and cut off the heads and hands of the adults—to be sold on the black market. But these bodies were left to rot where they fell, and the motherless infants left to starve to death.

What about the soldiers swarming in Virunga National Park? When Brent and I arrived this February in Goma, the grim capital of North Kivu only ten miles south of the park, Nkunda had just signed a peace agreement with the Congolese army, but his rebels still controlled Mikenko, the sector of the park inhabited by gorillas. Nkunda's troops are thought to have killed and eaten two mountain gorillas last year. The rebels had not allowed anyone in to see the creatures for six months, and most of the rangers had fled. Naturally we were told it would be impossible to go behind enemy lines. It wasn't, but first we would have to meet the "Chairman," as Nkunda prefers to be called.

Our audience takes place at a hilltop farmhouse near Kiorirwe, just west of the park in Masisi District, much of which Nkunda controls. The general is surrounded by armed bodyguards, but he himself is dressed in a sharp black suit, pressed white shirt, and sunglasses. He looks like a jazz musician, but don't be fooled.

Nkunda's soldiers have been accused of war crimes by Human Rights Watch, and Nkunda himself is "of interest" to the International Criminal Court. He is known for dragooning child soldiers. But he dismisses the charges with a wave of his hand. He tells me that all the incidents in question occurred when his troops and the Congolese army were a coalition force, so he was not in direct control of his soldiers.

"Even if our past was bad," Nkunda says, "I tell my people that we must always focus on the future."

It is evident that Nkunda no longer views himself as a dissident general. He is a politician. When I ask him where he sees himself in the future, he grins knowingly and says, "Kinshasa"—the capital. I query him about the gorillas.

"It is an honor to have them in my country. It is my obligation to protect them."

He says that the Mikeno sector needs the expertise of the Congolese wildlife service. He invites the rangers back with open arms.

"You are welcome also. Go see the gorillas for yourself in Bukima. Tell the world what you find there."

Late that night Brent and I learn that at the very hour when Nkunda was inviting us into his domain, top ICCN rangers, escorted by UN forces, tried to visit the gorilla sector. Nkunda's rebels told the rangers that had they not been escorted by the UN, they would all have been executed on the spot.

The next morning we decide to test Nkunda's offer. Apparently, neither he nor his commanders thought we would go to the trouble, for they fail to tell us they have mined the road to Bukima. Alone and on foot, Brent and I set out across no-man's-land along the ominously empty road before finally being warned. And despite satellite-phone calls to Nkunda's commanders, we wind up walking right into the barrels of his frontline soldiers, none of whom has been told who we are or what we're doing there. Luckily we are captured rather than killed by the rebels, and that night we share warm milk straight from the cow in a smoky dirt bunker and fall asleep to the surreal sound of soldiers singing a cappella in camouflaged trenches.

In the morning, led by seven rangers and two dozen guerrillas armed with AK-47s and RPGs (rocket-propelled grenade launchers), we march into the forest. It takes the trackers two hours to find the gorillas. The alpha male, a silverback named Kabirizi, annoyed by our presence, immediately turns his muscled, piano-size back to the bandoliered guerrillas. Squatting in the mountainous, verdure world of vines, he keeps an eye on his harem, chews leaves, occasionally pivots his huge head and scowls at the soldiers. He is king of his remote kingdom.

The Kabirizi family appears healthy and unmolested. According to Kayitare Shyamba, 45, the lead ranger guiding us, the gorillas are being monitored every day. He says no gorillas have died since the killings last year and that he and his rangers are also monitoring a few

**"THE GUARD REMOVED  
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AND MY BOOTS AND MADE  
ME LIE FACEDOWN IN THE  
MUD. HE COUNTED, ONE,  
TWO, THREE, AS HE WAS  
WHIPPING ME."**

— PAULIN NGOBOBO, WARDEN  
SOUTHERN SECTOR, VIRUNGA PARK

other families, one of which has a new baby.

Before being escorted out of Mikeno, I talk to a dozen of Nkunda's foot soldiers. They are at least nominally knowledgeable about and respectful of the animals. One young man who says he's 25 but can't be more than 17 tells me privately that they are under penalty of death not to disturb the gorillas—perversely ironic, given the agonies some of Nkunda's soldiers have perpetrated on innocent humans.

Brent and I manage one other excursion into Nkunda's territory, this time to Bunagana. Once the staging area for cash-flush tourists heading in to see the gorillas, Bunagana is now a bleak, war-ravaged village patrolled by adolescent soldiers stroking their AK-47s. We are met by Pierre Kanamahalagi—"Kana" for short—a former ICCN ranger with a fluorescent green shirt, who installed himself as the new warden of the Mikeno sector when Nkunda took the region. He assigns three rangers to accompany us.

We find a gorilla family just inside the park. The silverback is rolling backward down a hillside, like a gigantic bowling ball. Two young males are wrestling with each other; a female, nibbling on leaves, is tucked into the foliage away from the ruckus. These gorillas, too, are safe. We learn that this is a family that has crossed into the park from Uganda; what's more, tourists from Uganda, the first in more than six months, will be arriving in just three hours.

"All of the gorillas in the park are now safe and healthy," Kana says triumphantly when we return to Bunagana. He claims to have 32 rangers working under him. When Nkunda routed Congolese and Hutu forces from Mikeno, he says, the wildlife service removed all the other rangers—"It was a political act." The rangers he

has left were those brave enough to stay and protect the gorillas.

Rangers outside Nkunda's territory had told me a different story. They said that rebels ransacked their patrol posts, stole their uniforms, boots, rifles, and GPS's, and gave rangers the option of joining Nkunda's forces or running for their lives. One ranger I spoke with, accused of collaborating with Congolese forces, was bayoneted through the hand, beaten with clubs, then thrown into a pit with 12 other accused civilians. Each day, he said, three prisoners were dragged from the pit and beheaded. After four days, the ranger was the only one left. His life was spared because a rebel suggested he might make a good tracker in the jungle.

When I relay all this to Kana, he objects. He tells me the rangers I interviewed are liars. "The ICCN is corrupt," he says. "They were taking money from gorilla tourists and putting it into their own pockets. All the top ICCN officials in Virunga must go to jail."

Kana acknowledges that he has restarted gorilla tourism without the sanction of the ICCN. The agency has stopped paying the salaries of the rangers, and he needs the money to pay them. Kana says he wants to work with NGOs that have gorilla experts, like the International Gorilla Conservation Program, which is already providing rations to his rangers. He insists that Nkunda's soldiers have all been "sensitized about the mountain gorillas," and that his rangers are doing a far better job protecting them than the wildlife agency ever did. He then intimates something I'd heard when interviewing the ousted rangers myself.

"Who killed those gorillas last July?" Kana challenges me. "Who? Ask anyone. It was not soldiers."

I try to remind myself that not everything a dishonest man says is a lie.

**"FOLLOW THE TRAIL** of charcoal," de Merode had said at the WildlifeDirect office. "Charcoal is the biggest threat to the park."

Charcoal, as we discover over the next few days, is the main source of energy, and evil, in

North Kivu. Charcoal is used by 98 percent of the households for cooking, boiling water to make it potable, and also for heat. In the city of Goma, a constant pall of charcoal smoke smudges out the sun and makes the rough streets, rumped with hardened lava from the 2002 eruption of Nyiragongo, appear to be pathways to hell.

Bound by Lake Kivu to the south, Goma is a tin-roofed shantytown that in the past decade has swelled with people fleeing conflict. Its population now stands at roughly 700,000, with several hundred thousand more in nearby refugee camps. The UN has a force of 5,700 mostly Indian soldiers garrisoned in and around the city. Their headquarters, like most of the office buildings and homes of NGOs, is a miniature fortress—armed guards, metal gates, 12-foot-high concrete walls strung with razor wire.

Because of the fertile, volcanic soil, the area around the park is one of the most densely populated regions in Africa, with more than a thousand people per square mile. Neatly hand-hoed fields of potatoes, cassavas, bananas, and beans run right up to the park boundaries. There is no buffer zone between human activity and the verdant hysteria of the forest, just a rock wall buried beneath foliage. Charcoal, made from trees cut and reduced to carbon in makeshift mud ovens, comes from inside the park.

The most valuable, old-growth trees are the source of hardwood charcoal, which burns hotter and longer than softwood charcoal. To try to save the forests, NGOs like the World Wildlife Fund have planted millions of trees, especially fast-growing eucalyptus, around the park as a sustainable source of wood. Experts are also looking to more efficient stoves and other fuels, such as butane, leaves, grass, and even sawdust. But for now, the illegal charcoal business is thriving.

One 150-pound sack of hardwood charcoal lasts the average family about a month. With more than 100,000 families living within 20 miles of the southern end of Virunga National Park, the demand amounts to 3,500 to 4,000 sacks of charcoal (Continued on page 58)

(Continued from page 47) a day, and this does not include the needs of Rwanda, which has outlawed the production of charcoal to protect its forests.

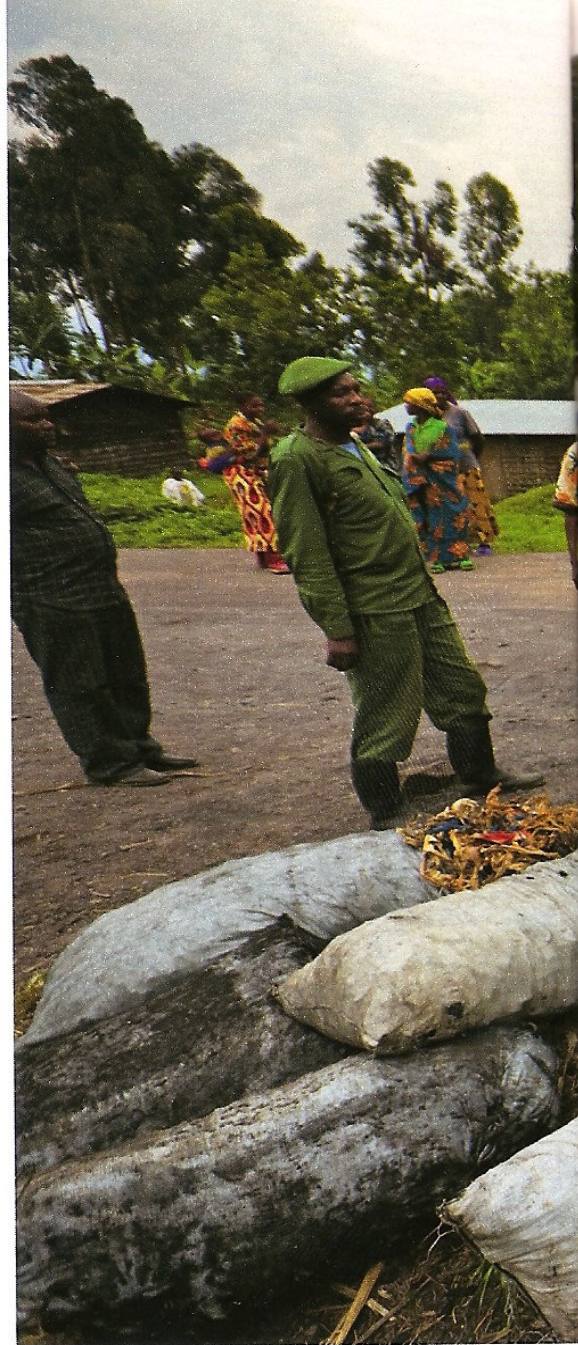
This much charcoal cannot be transported without a fleet of trucks. The Congolese army has the trucks, and it has suppliers in the forest: the Hutu militias. A sack of charcoal sells for \$25 on average. Do the math: De Merode estimates that in 2006, when gorilla tourism brought in less than \$300,000, the Virunga charcoal trade was worth more than \$30 million.

Robert Muir, project manager for the Frankfurt Zoological Society's Virunga National Park conservation effort, says that charcoal production has already devastated approximately 25 percent of the old-growth, hardwood forest in the southern half of Virunga National Park, and at the current rate of destruction, the entire southern sector could go up in smoke in ten years.

"But it can be stopped, it must be stopped, and it will be stopped," he says.

Muir, an Englishman who speaks fluent French (as did his mother), who has the guts of a gunner (his father was a colonel in the British military), whose first language was Cantonese, who passed his youth in Cyprus chasing butterflies and scorpions, who holds university degrees in ecology and anthropology, has been in Goma for four years. He spent the first three years trying to protect Virunga's rangers. Now he has turned his considerable passion to the charcoal trade. Just outside his office are 50 sacks of charcoal that he personally helped the rangers seize.

Muir explains the challenge: Nkunda's forces won't leave Virunga National Park until the Hutu guerrillas leave, and the Congolese army won't leave until they're both out. It's a stalemate no one really wants to end. Not when there's so much money to be made off charcoal. (Nkunda claims he has banned all tree felling in his regions of control. While that may be true for the Mikeno sector, he has reportedly taken over charcoal operations near Kirokirwe.) And if the charcoal production isn't stopped, the forest will



be gone: no habitat, no gorillas. Muir understands that the removal of all military from the area—perhaps 15,000 Congolese soldiers, 4,000 Hutu (FDLR) guerrillas, and 4,000 Nkunda (CNDP) troops—is the ultimate answer, but given politics in Congo, the park itself could be gone by then.

"Nothing happens in meetings," Muir says. "You want to get something done, you go into the field. The FDLR has been controlling the forests, making charcoal, at the base of Nyiragongo. For six months no one has been able to get in there. The UN has agreed to lead a combat patrol. You're welcome to come along."



**WE HIKE IN THE NEXT MORNING.** Our force numbers almost 50, including 12 rangers and Muir. At its core are 18 Sikhs, all veteran fighters, commanded by Maj. Shalendra Puri. UN soldiers are typically called “blue helmets,” but in this case they are the blue turbans. Hiking 11,385-foot Nyiragongo was once another major source of income for Virunga National Park. Tourists paid \$175 to hike to the top, gaze into the abyss, and camp on the rim. The treks were halted in mid-2007 when the Hutu militias increased charcoal production. The rangers attempted to thwart the guerrillas several times, most recently two weeks ago,

Rangers at the Kibati patrol post seize charcoal hidden under a load of vegetables and bamboo. Many of the trucks are escorted by armed soldiers prepared to shoot their way through checkpoints, but UN forces supported the rangers making this bust. Confiscated charcoal is distributed to refugee camps and orphanages.



but were turned around by machine-gun fire.

Our column snakes up through jungle interspersed with open slopes of ropy black lava that burned through the forest during the 2002 eruption. It is raining, but the presence of the disciplined Sikhs quickens the hearts of the rangers. This is an emancipatory patrol, and they are inspired for the first time in months.

At the point where the rangers were forced to retreat last time, we come upon a bamboo cross—a warning. Major Puri is unimpressed. He instructs his Sikhs to fan out and move up the hill. They do so methodically, communicating via hand signals, fingers on their triggers. Major Puri has his sidearm drawn.

We can see blue smoke curling into the sky ahead. Major Puri directs five soldiers to investigate. Minutes later, some distance above us, we spot four armed Hutu rebels running across the talus. Another hundred yards uphill, and three more disappear into the jungle.

Not a shot is fired. After the Sikhs secure the area, Major Puri allows us to follow the footpath toward the smoke. We pass through a line of trees and enter a clear-cut several acres in size. In the middle is a smoldering dirt mound.

“My God, it’s enormous,” breathes Muir.

Perhaps 20 feet in diameter and 15 feet tall, packed with dirt on all sides, it looks like a smoking volcano itself.

“This is a charcoal kiln,” says Muir exuberantly, “and this is the first charcoal kiln bust for a long, long time.”

Muir explains that the oven is loaded with old-growth hardwood but fueled with soft woods. This kiln would have produced 50 to 100 sacks of charcoal. Muir calls in the rangers, who attack the kiln with years of pent-up frustration, tearing it apart with sticks and shovels.

The rest of the hike is a breeze. Everyone is in high spirits. The Sikhs have accomplished their mission, and the rangers have, at least for the moment, regained some measure of self-respect.

We reach the rim by dusk and erect our tents, then stand on the edge and stare down into the crater. Far below, as if we were looking

into Hades itself, is a circular pool of boiling, orange stone. The lava lake spurts and bubbles, appears to harden into a black carapace, then fractures and is swallowed anew by explosions of molten lava—a constant, mesmerizing metamorphosis.

That night in a torrential thunderstorm, Major Puri and Robert Muir squeeze into our two-man tent for a celebratory dinner. Muir pulls two bottles of champagne from his raincoat. Buzzing from the success of the bust, he shoots the top off the first bottle.

“This is just the first step. The charcoal mafia can be stopped! We can do it together.”

**AT THE KIBATI PATROL POST** at the southern entrance to the park, a dozen armed rangers man a checkpoint, searching for illegal charcoal. The ubiquitous white NGO Land Cruisers, the UN peacekeepers in armored trucks, and the *matatus*—Toyota Hiace vans loaded with as many as two dozen people—are quickly waved through the roadblock, which consists of nothing more than a bamboo pole across the road. Trucks are what the rangers stop and search—“about 20 vehicles a day,” says John Iyamorenye, 35, a well-spoken ranger. “Two to four of those are carrying large loads of charcoal.”

His uniform is ragged and his boots split. I notice that the barrel of his rifle is rusted shut.

“We only get \$30 a month,” Iyamorenye says, responding to my unspoken observations, “and this is paid by NGOs, not by the government. We don’t have radios, we don’t have support from the ICCN, we don’t have enough money to feed our families.”

Another truck is stopped. Congolese soldiers recline as languorously as cats on top of the load. They start shouting and leap to the ground, pointing their machine guns at the rangers. Undaunted, the rangers haul themselves up onto the truck and discover sacks of charcoal hidden beneath a layer of firewood. The soldiers wave their machine guns and scream at the rangers to get down.

Unbelievably, the rangers ignore the threats. They begin rolling the heavy sacks off the

truck, the bags bursting open when they hit the ground. Nearby waits the serendipitous source of their courage: a UN vehicle with a dozen well-armed, flak-jacketed Sikh soldiers.

“Usually we can never stop the Congolese military,” says Iyamorenye. “They,” he nods imperceptibly at the incensed Congolese soldiers, “they may kill us.”

In operations like this, the rangers have captured more than a thousand sacks to date, handing them over to the UN to help support the refugees. But the seizures have hardly altered the trade. That night, right after dark, a convoy of four military trucks loaded to the gills with charcoal blasts straight through the roadblock.

**BACK IN GOMA**, Muir confirms what Brent and I had begun to suspect. “It was the battle over charcoal that provoked the gorilla killings last year. It was all about one incorruptible ranger, Paulin Ngobobo. You need to talk to Paulin. He’s the real hero. He’s the man that risked his life to try and save this park.”

Paulin Ngobobo is in Kinshasa; last July the wildlife agency removed him from the park for his own protection. Muir arranges for him to be flown quietly into town. Several days later, in the deep of the night at an undisclosed location, I meet Ngobobo. We sit in plastic chairs beside stygian Lake Kivu. A candle on the table flickers light on him. His visage is a chiaroscuro portrait of anguish, his eyes so creased he appears much older than his 45 years.

Ngobobo insists on starting the story at the very beginning. He speaks in French, his voice so soft I can hardly hear it above the lapping of the water.

Before becoming the ICCN warden for the southern sector of Virunga National Park, Ngobobo explains, he had 20 years of conservation experience. He’d worked as the program officer of the International Gorilla Conservation Program. Before that he’d run his own NGO for a decade, teaching Pygmies how to become self-sufficient farmers rather than poachers.

When he became the sector warden in May 2006, he launched internal investigations into

**ONE RANGER, ACCUSED OF COLLABORATING WITH CONGOLESE FORCES, WAS THROWN INTO A PIT WITH TWELVE OTHER CIVILIANS. EACH DAY, HE SAID, THREE PRISONERS WERE DRAGGED OUT AND BEHEADED.**

the illegal charcoal trade and quickly discovered that practically everyone, top to bottom, was on the take. The Hutu militia, the Congolese army, the village chiefs, even his rangers. Upper level ICCN officials were skimming income from gorilla tourism. In extreme cases, they would report having 20 gorilla tourists—at \$300 a person—when the real number was 200, pocketing a cool \$54,000.

Ngobobo speaks with a kind of sorrowful exactitude. Like a clean cop who was put in charge of a rotten-to-the-core precinct, he explains everything in detail—names, numbers, dates.

By rotating out a few embezzlers, Ngobobo says, he was able to restore the rangers’ salaries, which were also being skimmed by their bosses, making it easier for them to resist the paltry five dollars a month the charcoal mafia would pay them to look the other way. This gradually restored their sense of duty and pride, and he began personally leading charcoal busts.

I had spent the previous two days in the park headquarters, Rumangabo, interviewing rangers and their families. They were intimately aware of the impact of Ngobobo’s war on charcoal.

“This was extremely dangerous work,” Marie Therese Nsangira, 53, said one dreary afternoon. She has nine children and no shoes. Her husband was one of the inspectors responsible for interdicting charcoal trafficking.

“He was on his way to work one morning when his matatu was stopped. He was dragged from the vehicle by soldiers and shot dead with his own rifle.”

Aza Ayubu, 27, the wife of a Rumangabo ranger named Iyomi Imboyo, had her own horrifying tale. She was riding on the top of a



**Fellow park rangers bury Kambale Kalibumba, a 36-year-old father of eight who was shot on February 27 while trying to apprehend a Congolese soldier. The soldier had allegedly murdered a doctor to steal his motorbike. In the past decade more than 110 Virunga Park rangers have been killed in the line of duty.**

truck on the way back from the market when soldiers attacked it. Her right leg was practically blown off by bullets. She doesn't know if the soldiers wanted to use the truck for charcoal smuggling, or whether the attack was in retaliation against the anti-charcoal campaign.

"I even don't know which soldiers did this," she says, pointing to her leg. "They change uniforms before they do these things."

**BY THE FALL OF 2006**, Ngobobo's campaign against the charcoal poachers was beginning to gain traction. Then, out on patrol, he and seven rangers were attacked by Congolese and FDLR

soldiers. Ngobobo and his rangers hid in the forest until late into the night, then escaped. The following morning he went directly to the colonel at the military camp in Rutshuru to lodge a complaint.

"That was the beginning of the end," Goma-based attorney Matthieu Cingoro told me. Cingoro, 52, is a clean-cut gentleman who has the quiet dignity of someone with enormous responsibility. After the gorilla killings, UNESCO and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) started an investigation, which, though never made public, created pressure on the ICCN to instigate its own investigation. The wildlife

**IN TRYING TO STOP  
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agency hired Cingoro and his firm to pursue the case, and he has been working it ever since.

“Paulin, one man, was now going up against a system of corruption that has existed in the Congo for 50 years. Naturally, he was immediately arrested. It is very dangerous to be a principled man in the Congo.”

Faint starlight is bouncing off Lake Kivu. It is after midnight when Ngobobo recounts what happened.

“It was raining. The colonel’s bodyguard took me outside and stripped me. The colonel had spoken to Honoré Mashagi, and Mashagi had said that I was undisciplined and needed correction and I must be given 75 lashes.”

In the course of trying to stop the charcoal poaching, Ngobobo had come to believe that his own boss, the chief warden of Virunga National Park and the ICCN provincial director for North Kivu, was the kingpin of the charcoal trade. He had uncovered cooked books, faked records, protection schemes, payoffs, and charcoal “taxes.” Cingoro says the evidence showed that Mashagi had been earning hundreds of thousands of dollars a year from the trade.

“The guard removed my jacket and my belt and my boots and made me lie facedown in the mud,” says Ngobobo. “He counted, one, two, three, as he was whipping me.”

As he speaks, I search Ngobobo’s face, but he is too stoic to allow more than a wince, as though he can still feel the whip. He says his scars have healed, but not his psychic wounds.

“Anyone that is a victim of violence, all they ever want is justice. The worst part for me was that my beating had actually been ordered by my superior.”

A leading ICCN officer who spoke only

on condition that he not be named, confirms Ngobobo’s account. “The provincial director was doing everything possible to try and disrupt the investigation and have Paulin removed from Rumangabo.”

But it didn’t work. Ngobobo went right back to dismantling the charcoal network. In June 2007 Ngobobo arrested six top rangers for participating in charcoal trafficking, but Mashagi overruled the arrest and reinstated the rangers. On June 8 a female gorilla from the Kabirizi family was executed.

“I immediately began an investigation into the killing,” Ngobobo says, slowly shaking his head. “I identified one of the six rangers I had arrested as the likely suspect. However, my investigations were prematurely terminated.”

Mashagi canceled Ngobobo’s investigations. According to Ngobobo and sources within the conservation community, he also accused Ngobobo himself of killing the gorillas and prevailed upon the North Kivu governor to have him arrested.

“When rangers on patrol could not arrest people directly involved in the charcoal trade, it was because Mashagi himself was protecting them,” says a field officer with WildlifeDirect.

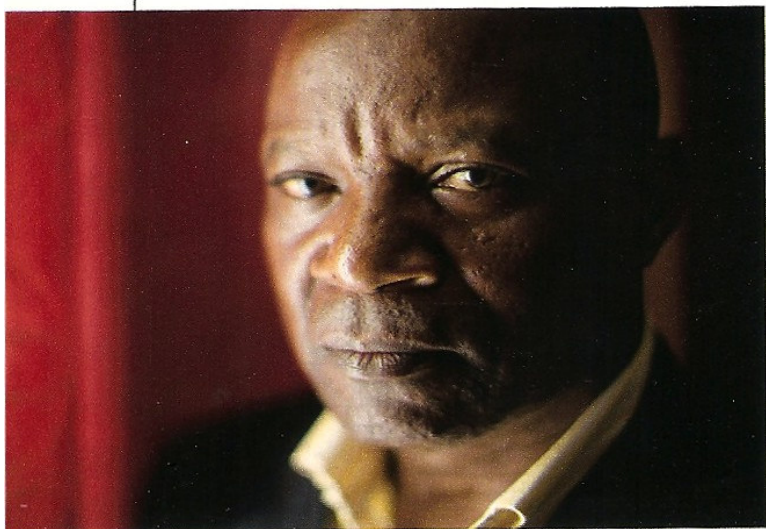
“I was thrown into prison in Goma for one night and one day,” Ngobobo says. “After that, I was allowed to go home at night, but had to go to prison every day and stay until dark without moving, without talking.”

The second night Ngobobo was allowed to go home was July 22. The next morning, the first of the six gorillas was found dead.

“Mashagi had the gorillas killed to discredit Paulin,” says a conservation researcher familiar with the case, who requested anonymity out of fear for his life. “This wouldn’t have been difficult. You can have someone killed for a crate of beer in Congo.”

Ngobobo says that three attempts have been made on his life, but—with the help of four bodyguards and the support of local police and military officers—he has escaped injury so far.

Matthieu Cingoro laid out the charges against Mashagi in a complaint filed March 10 on



**Arrested in March for trafficking in charcoal, former chief park warden Honoré Mashagiro (above) awaits his day in court. He was also charged with plotting the murder of gorillas to silence Paulin Ngobobo (right), who fought to stop charcoal poachers. Ngobobo cradles the skull of Macibiri, one of the seven gorillas he was falsely accused of killing. With support from international NGOs, Congo's park service is renewing its efforts to save Virunga's peerless ecosystem.**



behalf of the ICCN to the prosecutor general of the Court of Appeals of North Kivu Province, in Goma. The complaint specifically alleges that Mashagiro ran an illegal charcoal network, intimidated Ngobobo and other rangers, and met with six rangers to plan the gorilla murders in order to undermine Ngobobo's standing in the community and ultimately remove him from the park service.

Ngobobo is clearly exhausted. He has flown across Africa to tell me his story. It is two in the morning. He speaks slowly.

"Everyone knew I was innocent, but Mashagiro blamed the killings on me. He had to remove

me to continue his charcoal industry."

Honoré Mashagiro, interviewed by phone, has denied all accusations of misconduct and maintains he was "not in the charcoal business. My business was to protect the park." He also denied having any role in the killings of the gorillas. Although he was the park director, he says, "the gorillas were not my responsibility; they were Paulin's responsibility."

Within a week of the July killings Brent's pictures of the murdered gorillas were splashed across the globe. Mashagiro was removed as provincial director of North Kivu. Ngobobo was transferred to Kinshasa and exonerated of any



wrongdoing. Two villagers were found guilty for their involvement in the gorilla murders and given eight-month sentences.

“It is difficult to know who pulled the trigger,” attorney Cingoro had told me before I met with Ngobobo, “but Mashagirote orchestrated the killing of the gorillas. That is a fact.”

**IN THE PAST TWO MONTHS**, Robert Muir has received a promise from General Mayala, the commander of the Congolese army in Virunga Park, that charcoal carried on military trucks will be seized and anyone in the military caught trafficking in charcoal will be imprisoned for 15

days. Muir also persuaded UN commanders to step up joint charcoal patrols with rangers to two to three a week.

Laurent Nkunda and his forces still control the gorilla sector of Virunga National Park. Paulin Ngobobo is waiting for a position as a park warden somewhere in the Congo. And Honoré Mashagirote—suspended by ICCN—has been arrested in Goma and is awaiting trial for the killing of Virunga’s gorillas. □

➤ **Charcoal Wars** Get the latest news from imperiled Virunga National Park and watch a video to learn how to help endangered mountain gorillas at [ngm.com](http://ngm.com).