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BLOOD IN THE FOREST

The dangerous job
of catching phayung
smuggling gangs





When a ranger falls in the forest

The scarcity of Siamese rosewood is driving up prices and giving rise to increasingly organised and dangerous illegal logging gangs like the one that gunned down a young national park officer earlier this month *By Piyaporn Wongruang*



PHOTOS: TAWATCHAI KEMGUMNERD

REST IN PEACE: Thaweesak's mother, Dueang, holds his photo during the funeral ceremony at the family home.

On the evening of March 14 in the deep forest of Pang Sida National Park, a ranger was shot dead in an encounter with a group transporting illegally logged Siamese rosewood. At the same time in Bangkok 300km away, international conservationists were wrapping up a meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites), which gave greater protection to the tree which is rapidly disappearing from Thai forests.

Thaweesak Chomyong was a 33-year-old former paramilitary border patrol ranger stationed in Kan-cha-naburi province who returned to his small village in Sa Kaeo province near the park late last year to help care for his ageing parents. He was soon hired as a park ranger on a temporary basis with a salary of 7,500 baht a month. Much of his work consisted of conducting patrols through the rugged terrain of the national park, looking for illegal loggers, encroachers and so on. It's a demanding job, but his military training prepared him for the rigours and he never thought of quitting.

On March 13, Thaweesak and five other rangers, along with two wildlife experts from non-governmental organisations, went into the forest to monitor conservation efforts to protect tigers in the park. Before they left, they were warned by the park chief, Nuwat Leelapata, and other staff that they might encounter illegal loggers along the way as they would be on a route commonly used to smuggle rosewood, known in Thai as *phayung*, out of the park. The rangers were equipped with HK33 rifles, but had a limited supply of ammunition. >>



Source: The Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation

POSTgraphics



DRIVEN BY GREED: From far left: Park officials look over seized rosewood in the Huay Sala Wildlife Sanctuary in Si Sa Ket province; bank notes seized at the scene in the wildlife sanctuary; logged rosewood hidden near a reservoir at Khao Phra Viharn National Park, Surin province. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARKS, WILDLIFE, AND PLANT CONSERVATION DEPARTMENT



SOMBRE CHIEFS: Pang Sida National Park Chief Nuwat Leelapata, left, and Thap Lan Chief Taywin Meesap were visibly upset at Thaweesak's cremation.

» On March 14 at midday the team detected tracks made by two-wheeled contraptions that were probably being used to push heavy loads through the forest. The rangers decided to split into two groups, one to monitor the tigers and the other to follow the tracks. Thaweesak joined the second group.

Led by experienced park ranger Choo Buphangam, the team eventually spotted some men conveying logged rosewood through the forest on the two-wheelers. The poachers spotted the rangers at the same time, and an exchange of gunfire ensued. All of the illegal loggers managed to escape, but Thaweesak lay dying on the ground from a bullet wound to his back. For one night Thaweesak's body was left lying on a piece of rosewood. It was



LEFT BEHIND: Apparently the illegal loggers who felled this Siamese rosewood in Thap Lan park were surprised by patrolling forest rangers.

not until the evening of March 15 that the rangers were able to bring his body from the forest and a cremation ceremony was arranged.

ILLEGAL TRADE INTENSIFYING

Illegally logged Siamese rosewood is almost never purchased by Thais, but instead is smuggled out of the country. Many Thais regard rosewood as a sacred tree which should only be used to make religious furniture or edifices. In the past, Siamese rosewood grew in many areas of the country, but is now confined to four key forest zones in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries which sometimes border neighbouring countries. It takes at least 100 years for a seedling to grow into an adult tree. The scarcity and difficulties faced in growing the trees have made prices skyrocket, and the gangs are willing to risk getting caught, or to hire people who would be. One two-metre long piece of the rosewood can be sold for 40,000 baht or more.

Illegal logging reportedly intensified in the Northeast a few years ago in line with increased demand from China. Logging of Siamese rosewood is labour intensive because the trees are usually scattered about and not concentrated in groves.

Manopat Huamuangkaew, chief of the National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department, said Thaweesak's death is tragic proof that those involved in illegal logging, especially of rosewood, are becoming more brazen, violent and organised.

"It's not like in the past, when only a few people were involved. These people are well armed and dangerous," he said.

The Parks Department has come up with an initial report detailing how logging gangs fell the trees and get them out of the forest and the country. The report says there are four main groups responsible for the illegal logging. The first is made up of Lao and Vietnamese investors who deliver the rose-

wood to buyers in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The second is led by Thai investors who buy the logged rosewood from villagers in forest areas. The third comprises Cambodians who illegally cross the border into Thai territory to cut down the trees. Park officials say that this group in particular is known to be heavily armed.

Commonly 10 to 20 armed guards provide protection to the loggers. Thai villagers sometimes help them locate the wood.

The last group is made up of people from Laos who operate in a similar manner to the Cambodians but are not as heavily armed.

The report says the wood is smuggled out of the country by at least four different routes (see graphic, Page 3), with the final destination usually southern China. Sometimes the rosewood is taken out of the country via a seaport in eastern Thailand, or it may be smuggled across the Laos or Cambodian border, and then routed through Vietnam. The journey is often overland but the Mekong River also may be used to transport the heavy loads of woods over long distances. The rosewood is usually processed into furniture either in Vietnam or China. Quality rosewood furniture is prized in many places, including Hong Kong and Taiwan.

A SHIFT TO THE EAST

Parks Department statistics show that from 2006 to earlier this year, park officials made 2,481 arrests for illegal logging — 1,493 of those involving rosewood, with 23,283 pieces of rosewood seized. The Parks Department estimates that rosewood now grows in Thailand in an area of only about 360,000 rai. In the far Northeast, park officials have stepped up their suppression efforts by joining forces with military units. Several park officials told *Spectrum* it's widely suspected that the smugglers now are shifting their operations to forest areas in the eastern part of the country, particularly Thap Lan and Pang Sida national



IN REMEMBRANCE: Parks department chief Manopat Huamuangkaew is presented with a flag at the cremation.



MOURNERS' MARCH: Park staff and friends pay their last respects to Thaweesak at his cremation.



SURVIVING GIANT: An aged 'phayung', or Siamese rosewood stands tall in Pang Sida, for now.

PHOTOS: TAWATCHAI KEMGUMERD

parcs. Signs of organised illegal logging have also been found in nearby Khao Yai National Park and other forests which, along with the Thap Lan and Pang Sida parks, form the Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex, a world heritage site.

Taywin Meesap, chief of Thap Lan National Park, said that from a few cases of illegal rosewood logging in the national park in the past, park officials have made almost 100 arrests in the last two years.

"The problem has grown more complicated and serious. It's not just a few people going to the forest and cutting a tree; now there are organised crime gangs with sophisticated tactics," said Mr Taywin, echoing Parks Department chief Mr Manopat.

Mr Taywin said that the fact that the trees are larger in the eastern forests is probably one of the main reasons the gangs are moving their operations to Thap Lan and nearby parks.

He said that Parks Department investigations indicate some villagers living near forest boundaries have been playing key roles in the illegal logging activity, and some have become investors. Some villagers group together and form teams to supply logs ordered by investors. In some villages, park officials have learned, as many as 10 teams operate to illegally cut down rosewood trees. Once they are given an order, a team, which may include up to 20 members, goes into the forest to fill

it, with some of members acting as lookouts. After the logs are felled some members are assigned to transport the heavy logs through the forest while others act as guards.

Mr Taywin said the trend toward heavily armed gangs is very worrying. Park officials at Thap Lan have seized automatic rifles from gang members. Park officials also say some gang members are given drugs so that they can work around the clock.

Once the trees have been felled the logs are moved to various locations — from bushes behind villages to nearby reservoirs, and progressively further from the park. One park official admitted that once the wood is out of the park, it is beyond their authority to chase after the loggers and make arrests.

Mr Taywin conceded that illegal logging and the transport of the logs would not occur if the loggers didn't have cooperation from outsiders, possibly including "officials".

"The logged wood is illegal, so to get it through, they need to 'clear' the route," said Mr Taywin. He said he's even investigated his own staff for possible collusion. The park chief said the investigation hasn't been concluded, but that if any officials were found to be involved they would be punished.

In the meantime, he added, park officials have stepped up patrols and are trying to forge better relations with villagers around the forest. Those providing tips may be rewarded. Local participation and cooperation,



TWO-WHEELED TRANSPORTER: Left, logged wood is transported out of the forest on contraptions such as this. Above, intercepted rosewood is kept at sites in the parks.



TEMPORARY STORAGE: Logged rosewood is sometimes stashed at reservoirs until it can be moved further.

Mr Taywin said, is the best way to address the problem.

JOINT EFFORT NEEDED

Back at Pang Sida National Park, where ranger Thaweesak was slain, park chief Mr Nuwat agreed that the gangs are getting more organised and deadly. Mr Nuwat was Mr Taywin's assistant at Thap Lan before he was made the park chief at Pang Sida. He said there is not much rosewood at Pang Sida compared with other forests, but the fact that it is close to the Thai-Cambodian border probably encourages illegal logging. He speculated that Cambodians may have been involved in the incident that took Thaweesak's life because empty packages of Cambodian cigarettes were found at the scene.

He added that the gangs at Pang Sida operate in much the same way as they do in other forests — there is a division of labour between the loggers and the "protectors".

Mr Nuwat said that the park covers a very large area and officials do their best to protect it. He pointed out that the responsibility to end illegal logging does not end in the forest, as the logs still have to be moved out of the country, which falls under the purview of other state agencies.

"I want to stress that the illegal logging of rosewood is a serious problem," said Mr Nuwat. "The question is, how can these gangs continue their illegal acts despite the fact

that we have been working so hard to suppress them? We do need cooperation from other agencies; this is a challenge for all of us."

During the Cites meeting, Siamese rosewood was moved to Appendix II, meaning trade is regulated and therefore there should be better monitoring of the logged wood that is smuggled out of the country, as well as the processed wood in other countries.

Mr Nuwat said listing rosewood on the Cites list would help protect the trees but it is necessary to devise appropriate measures to ensure the listing is effective. He suggested moving Siamese rosewood to Appendix I, which would absolutely ban trade in the trees.

Mr Nuwat said that park officials are stepping up their patrols and have joined forces with military units, but to solve the problem over the long term a serious and progressive policy is needed. He said stiffer patrols, which are still limited by inadequate resources, are merely an attempt to solve the problem at the end point, while the origin — the demand for the wood — is neglected.

"I haven't seen any master plan to help us solve the problem, and in the meantime the gangs keep advancing in their capabilities.

"Progressive action, and education, are needed. Some villagers told me after being arrested that they didn't see any problem with cutting down the trees and asked, 'Why should we care about them?' I would say we are losing this war." ■

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THAT'S HYSTERICAL

The 'ghost' that spooked a group of Phuket girls
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DEAR EDITOR

Meet the letter writers we love to loathe and love
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PUBLIC SURVEY: 'CORRUPTION OK IF WE BENEFIT'

Tolerance of graft remains 'dangerous'

POST REPORTERS

» A "dangerous" trend in public opinion has been revealed by an opinion poll which shows the majority of people find government corruption acceptable if they benefit from it personally.

The Abac Poll, released yesterday, found 65% of respondents had no problem with corruption if they benefited financially from it, the agency's assistant director, Poontharee Issarangkul Na Ayutthaya, said.

The poll was conducted between Monday and Friday and questioned 2,107 people aged 18 and over in 17 provinces, including Bangkok.

Ms Poontharee said people's tolerance of corruption had not changed since the previous quarterly poll conducted in March. In that poll, 65.5% of respondents said they were fine with graft so long as they received a slice of the pie.

Ms Poontharee said the latest findings presented a "serious concern".

Separated by gender, 67.7% of males were okay with government graft, while 60.5% of females gave it the all-clear.

The age bracket most tolerant of corruption was 30-39 year olds, followed by 20-29 year olds.

Blue-collar workers and farmers proved the most tolerant with 78.9%, followed by school and university students (73.3%), private employees (67.1%), housewives and retirees (63.5%), traders and entrepreneurs (62.8%) and state officials (54%).

Chulalongkorn University political science lecturer Chaiyan Chaiyaporn said the results reflect "a dangerous public attitude". The attitude seems to have arisen because people had grown tired

at the failure to stamp out graft and were now simply accepting it on the condition that they benefit, he said.

"That thinking is wrong. What they don't realise is that corruption costs them through taxes. What they think they gain is actually a lie because what they have lost amounts to much more," Mr Chaiyan said.

The solution is that the public needs to be made aware of the damage graft causes not only to the country, but to its future generations, he said.

Narong Boonsuayfan, an assistant professor at Walailak University, decried the release of the poll results, saying it could encourage more people to condone corruption.

The results may suggest it was alright to accept acts that are unprincipled and unethical, he said.

Ms Poontharee said the harmful attitude to graft remains prevalent, which would make combating corruption in state projects difficult.

Ms Poontharee said the government should have a clear and accountable auditing system for state budgets, and information must be disclosed in detail on how the money is spent.

The government must also protect whistle-blowers rather than investigate them, particularly if they are state officials.

Commerce Minister Niwatthamrong Bunsongphaisan said his priority was to plug loopholes that create the opportunity for graft in ministerial policies.

Mr Niwatthamrong replaced Boonsong Teriyapirom as commerce minister in last week's reshuffle after the former minister came under fire over claims of widespread irregularities and heavy financial losses in the rice-pledging scheme.

'Jet-setter' monk accused of sex with under-age girl

KING-OUA LAOHONG

» Embattled monk Luang Pu Nen Kham Chattiko could face 20 years in jail after being accused of having sex with an underage girl, according to the Department of Special Investigation.

He is likely to be defrocked in absentia as the DSI had found clear evidence of his intimate relationship with one of eight women.

The DSI will today conclude its probe into the alleged intimate relationship between the monk and a woman who claims the monk had fathered her child, said the agency's Security Crime Bureau chief Pong-in Intarakhao.

The woman, who lives in Si Sa Ket, told the DSI she was approached by the monk, who is also known as Phra Wirapol Sukphol, when she was studying in Mathayom 2 (Grade 8) and only 14 years old, said Pol Lt Col Pong-in. She was living with her grandmother at the time.

The woman alleged that Phra Wirapol had offered to give her valuable items if she agreed to be his girlfriend. She and the monk later had sexual relations.

After she fell pregnant, the monk took her to stay in Warin Chamrap district of Ubon Ratchathani where he rented a house for her. The monk had asked her

grandmother to stay with her to take care of her baby boy. The child is now 11 years old.

Pol Col Pong-in said the DSI would speed up its interrogation of seven witnesses who had learned about the monk's intimate affairs with the woman. The witnesses include a kamnan and local administration officials.

The DSI would forward the findings to the Si Sa Ket provincial chief monk and the Ubon Ratchathani chief monk for them to defrock Phra Wirapol.

The DSI will seek the extradition of the controversial monk, who is currently visiting France, if he fails to return to Thailand by July 31.

DSI chief Tarit Pengdith said the monk's alleged affair with the woman when she was 14 was a serious crime and she would be placed under witness protection.

He will present the details to a DSI meeting by month's end.

Mr Tarit wants the case treated as a special investigation as it affected the religion and the public's faith.

Phra Wirapol came to media attention after a video clip of him on a private jet began circulating last month.

Into turbulence, **Spectrum**, Pages 3-5 »



CALMING CAIRO: Protesters cheer security forces as they arrive to calm clashes between ousted president Mohamed Morsi's supporters and anti-Morsi groups near Cairo's Tahrir Square on Friday. Gunfire erupted during the clashes and dozens have been killed. PHOTO: AFP

Story, Page 7 »

PARK RANGERS TRAIN SIGHTS ON LOGGING-GANG TARGETS

After the shooting murder of a young comrade during a patrol in March, national park officers seek to rebuild confidence through an intensive one-week weapons-handling programme **By Piyaporn Wongruang**

Senior park ranger Chatchai Larkrathok successfully finished his shooting training course yesterday — most of his bullets, however, failed to hit their paper target 10m away.

Mr Chatchai, 39, was among 50 rangers to attend a patrol tactics training course at Pang Sida National Park. He now knows the necessary steps to fire the rifle. But, more importantly, given his poor aim, he was taught not to point his rifle recklessly and threaten his colleagues' lives when engaging in raids against forest encroachers and loggers.

"I was just a security guard who knew only how to use a baton and had never had any military training. I never had weapon use skills and when I received one-on-one training from my peers here, I just thought I already knew it all," said Mr Chatchai, who

has been working at the park for nine years.

Since last Sunday, Mr Chatchai and other park rangers from Khao Yai, Thap Lan and Pang Sida national parks have attended a week-long training programme designed to help them improve ability to use weapons when confronting organised logging gangs.

The training was set up following a tragic incident at Pang Sida, part of Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex. On March 14, Thaweesak Chomyong, a newly recruited park ranger was on patrol deep in the forest. When his patrol encountered a band of Siamese rosewood (*phayung*) loggers, gunfire was exchanged and Thaweesak was killed.

Several officials believe logging gangs have shifted their operations from the Northeast, where the National Parks Department had been aggressively

cracking down on their operations, to the eastern forests, including the parks in the forest complex. The gangs have become more organised, heavily armed and have proven to be ruthless.

Pang Sida chief Nuwat Leelapata said the murder has had a devastating effect on the park rangers' morale. They were terrified of gunshots and could not perform their duties.

Mr Nuwat tried to find ways to lift their spirits. He wrote a proposal asking for funding from the Rapid Response Facility, a grant programme which offers assistance to counter major threats to wildlife conservation, primarily in Unesco-designated natural world heritage sites.

The chief won the grant and, with 100,000 baht, plus some funds from the park, he and his counterpart at Thap Lan, Taywin Meesap, designed a training regimen — a seven-day,

seven-night intensive programme on weapon use and tactics when confronting encroachers.

"I even tasked my men to arrest loggers at night, but because they feared them, those people were let go and just simply walked away," he said.

"So, I thought if they had a chance to use them [weapons] properly, get used to gun sounds, and be trained on how to deal with engagements, they may become more confident and their morale will be raised.

"Sometimes I still think if that young ranger had been trained like this, we may not have lost him."

Mr Nuwat said park rangers are generally locals who have no knowledge about weapons. These men are not required to have received training before being recruited.

Continued, Page 4 »



FIRING SQUAD: Pang Sida chief Nuwat Leelapata observes his men during the training.



GUN CONTROL: A military trainer demonstrates proper form when shooting a weapon.

PHOTOS: PIYAPORN WONGRUANG

HOPES RAISED FOR EASE IN VIOLENCE DURING RAMADAN HOLY MONTH

Aziz calls for 'sensitivity' in South

POST REPORTERS

>> The country's top Muslim spiritual leader is urging security officers in the deep South to take a more sensitive approach during the holy month of Ramadan.

Deputy prime minister in charge of national security Pracha Promnok relayed the message yesterday after meeting Aziz Phitakkumpon, the Chularatchamontri Muslim spiritual leader, in Bangkok to discuss the southern unrest.

Pol Maj Gen Pracha quoted the Muslim leader as calling for a more sensitive approach to enforcing law and order in the region during the upcoming holy fasting month.

The beginning of Ramadan will be announced by Mr Aziz early next week.

The Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) separatist group earlier issued seven demands to the government in exchange for curbing violence during Ramadan.

Security authorities widely dismissed the demands as impossible.

Pol Maj Gen Pracha insisted the government was still on the right track in its peace talks with the BRN and other separatist groups.

Pol Maj Gen Pracha was appointed to take charge of national security in last week's cabinet reshuffle. He also took the helm of a panel directing the government's strategies on southern border issues, a task he conceded was proving challenging.

Arhama Mina, the imam of Khok Pho district mosque in Pattani, said he was confident Ramadan would be more peaceful in the deep South this year.

More stringent security measures and additional forces had been put in place in every area of the violence-plagued South ahead of Ramadan, he said.

Internal Security Operations Command Region 4, meanwhile, is running a series of activities to encourage anti-



LET'S TALK ABOUT PEACE: Deputy Prime Minister Pracha Promnok greets the Chularatchamontri, spiritual leader Aziz Phitakkumpon, at a meeting at the National Administration Centre for Islamic Affairs Chalerm Phrakiat in Nong Chok district yesterday.

drug youth networks in the South to help fight against drug problems and violence during Ramadan.

About 500 members of an anti-narcotics youth network yesterday

marched from Yala's Muang district to Sirinthon military camp in Yarang district of neighbouring Pattani province and held activities to welcome the month of Ramadan.

Pol Maj Gen Pracha said his southern border panel was also looking to deal with the issue of stateless Rohingya migrants being held in Thailand. The government is currently holding

more than 2,000 Rohingya at crowded shelters across the country, he said.

Five Rohingya migrants recently died after falling sick as a result of the cramped living condition at the shelters, he said.

Chaturon orders full review of Obec's school van scheme

LAMPHAI INTATHEP

>> The Education Ministry's controversial school van purchase scheme requires a thorough review, newly-appointed Education Minister Chaturon Chaisaeng says.

At the budget bill debate for the 2014 fiscal year, the ministry proposed the purchase of 1,000 vans at a cost of 1.23 billion baht. The 12-seater vans would accommodate students from small schools who were transferred to study at larger ones under the ministry's school merger policy.

Mr Chaturon said that as chairman of a budget-screening subcommittee, he was previously told the vans would be purchased to serve students from merged small schools. However, he later found out some would also be provided to provincial educational zones.

"As the chairman of the budget-screening subcommittee, I asked the Office of the Basic Education Commission (Obec) to reconsider the van purchase scheme. Now as the education minister, I ask it to reconsider the scheme again," he said, after a meeting with ministerial authorities.

"It [Obec] has to reconsider the necessity of the van purchases, methods to manage small schools rather than having them merged or closed, and which provincial educational zones still want to use the vans," he said. "It must reconsider by looking at the plans again from the beginning, not just reducing the number of vans to be purchased."

Obec has asked permission to submit its revised plan to the ministry next Monday before submitting it to the Bureau of Budget for further consideration.

Mr Chaturon said the ministry's budget amendment should have been submitted to the bureau on Friday, but the minister will ask for a postponement due to the cabinet reshuffle.

STUDENT WEEKLY



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And when they get formal training supported by the department, it is often mostly about smart patrolling using technology such as GPS navigation devices to guide their patrols. They rarely receive proper training in weapon use due to budget constraints.

At Pang Sida, for instance, park rangers mostly get one-on-one training from their peers who don't generally know much about weapons. The chief tried to invite military officers to help train his men but because of budget shortages, he managed to run only a short weapon-use course.

Mr Nuwat said it is necessary for park rangers to be well equipped and have adequate provisions.

There should be a regulation requiring proper training for newly recruited park rangers. However, they also need good quality weapons and, more importantly, they need social security to cover costs in the event of illness and injuries, something which is still missing from their scant benefit package.

"Many of them are temporarily hired, but they are valuable human resources as they help protect our forests," Mr Nuwat said. "They deserve to be treated better than they are now."

Tim Redford, Surviving Together programme director at the Freeland Foundation, which helped design the course, said the weapons and engagement training was essential as there had been an escalation in threats to

the park rangers' safety. He said loggers have become more dangerous and organised in their operations as the value of rosewood has increased dramatically.

The threat the rangers face every day has increased significantly since demand for rosewood over the past two years skyrocketed.

"I suspect that as this timber becomes scarcer the price will increase even more and criminals will be willing to take even bigger risks," Mr Redford said.



ROOKIE RANGER: New recruit Phitak Fonglom, 32, during the intensive training course.

"As they make more profit they will arm themselves more and be willing to engage the rangers more often."

With this training course, Mr Redford said course graduates will have the ability to patrol in a safer manner, be more organised and able to operate as a team.

"I do feel this training course will help them, as these rangers had mostly never been trained," he said. "Training is not a one-off activity and patrol rangers need continual training on new skills and on refresher training courses."

Irrigation dept offers firm floodway study

APINYA WIPATAYOTIN

>> The Royal Irrigation Department has offered to let the company that won the bid to build a floodway on the western side of the Chao Phraya to use its environmental impact assessment report.

The report is a key requirement that Korea Water resources Cooperation (K-Water) must fulfil before construction of the floodway can begin.

The floodway is one of nine modules under the government's 350 billion baht water management scheme.

K-Water won the bid for construction of the floodway last month, but the Administrative Court ruled that potentially harmful projects under the water management scheme must be subject to public hearings and environmental and health impact assessments before work begins.

Department spokesman Thanar Suwatana said the department started its assessment for the 280km floodway last year

before bidding commenced in anticipation of the requirement.

The company could conduct and submit its own report, but Mr Thanar said the department was also offering its findings.

He said the assessment has already involved several public hearings in areas that would be affected by the project.

The report is expected to be completed in October, when it will be forwarded to the Water Management and Flood Prevention Commission.

Mr Thanar said K-Water could submit the department's study to the government or it could choose to add to or amend the report.

However, a new impact report would be required if the company makes any major changes to the existing plan.

Mr Thanar said the floodway would require about 43,000 rai of land in 20 provinces to be reclaimed. The company must take responsibility for the cost of

reclaiming the land, while the government will oversee the legal issues involved.

Mr Thanar said the floodway will start in Khanu Worakabsaburi district in Kamphaeng Phet and end at the Mae Klong River in Tha Muang district of Kanchanaburi.

The floodway is aimed at speeding up the flow of water through the Mae Klong River to the Gulf of Thailand.

Mr Thanar said the capacity of the Mae Klong River would increase from 800 cubic metres per second to 1,000 cu/m.

Thai-Water Partnership chairman Han-narong Yaowalers said the company should carry out its own impact assessment, as the project was being carried out by the private firm, not a state agency.

He said he worried that the department's study would not be precise enough and there would be a good chance that it would be rejected by the committee vetting the assessment report.



BURNING BRIGHT: This tiger once roamed Thung Yai-Naresuan and Huay Kha Kheng sanctuaries but was later seen dead in a picture with a Mong poacher.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY AND SAYAN CHENJINDONSAVAJ

A different killer lurking in the forest

Yoo-ae, 18, could not decide whether or not to leave the cemetery. The Karen girl's mother and friends were urging her to go, but she replied, "No, I want to stay a little longer," her eyes filling with tears.

Yoo-ae was pregnant and due to give birth at the end of this month.

Outside the cemetery hall was the body of her husband, Anthonng Ngamyng, 22, undergoing cremation following a Buddhist funeral ceremony.

Yoo-ae kept staring at his remains and sobbing. "I don't know what to do with my life now," she said softly after regaining her composure.

A few weeks earlier, Yoo-ae was in a happy mood when she and her young husband received the good news from a doctor in Umphang that their baby would be delivered on Sept 30.

But on the night of Sept 12, forest ranger Anthonng died after two bullets from an AK-47 tore through his chest during a clash with a gang of tiger poachers in Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, on the Myanmar border in Tak province.

POACHERS' NEW PREY

This was not the first violent clash with tiger poachers. Over the past few years, tiger poach-

ing has become more common in the 18,000 square kilometre Western Forest Complex (Wefcom), and four forest rangers have been killed, and six injured by poachers.

The area is home to 11 national parks and six wildlife sanctuaries, including Thailand's first Natural World Heritage site, the 6,400 sq km Thung Yai-Naresuan and Huay Kha Kheng sanctuaries that form the heart of the Wefcom.

The chief of the eastern side of the sanctuary, Superintendent Sompong Thongsikhem has taken a personal interest in cases of poaching.

"The problems with poachers have become much worse recently," he said when *Spectrum* visited him in his office deep in the Thung Yai-Naresuan, the sanctuary furthest to the east.

"But we've been working hard to protect wildlife in the area," he said, recalling the first time tiger poachers were found to be operating in the area, especially in Thung Yai-Naresuan and Huay Kha Kheng.

It was just three years ago that news arrived that tiger poachers were in the area. In early 2010, Supt Sompong and his team learned that at least three tigers had been killed in Huay Kha Kheng, only 10km from the ranger's office in Thung Yai-Naresuan.

The three killed were two cubs and their mother. What shocked the forest >>



FALLEN COMRADE: Forest rangers from Wefcom carry the body of Anthonng Ngamyng at his royally sponsored cremation ceremony last Sunday.



EVER VIGILANT: Above, Supt Sompong and his forest rangers search for evidence left by poachers.

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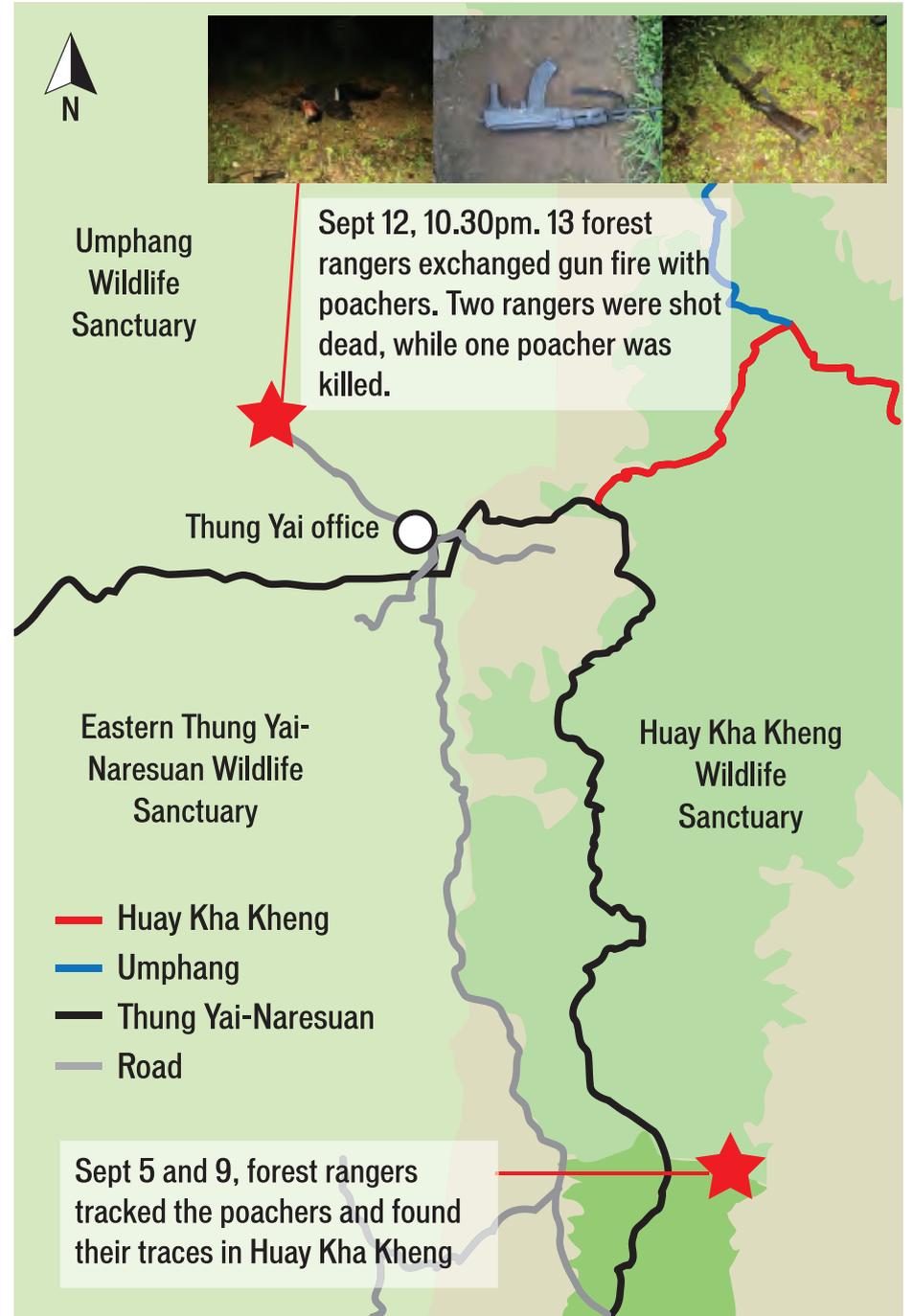
By coming to check on us first, this incident showed me that they were well-prepared for the hunt. It made me to believe that we were encountering an organised poaching gang

**SUPT SOMPONG THONGSIKHEM
EASTERN PARK CHIEF OF
THUNG YAI-NARESUAN**

MORE EVIDENCE: Forest rangers find a temporary shelter and drug paraphernalia in Thung Yai-Naresuan forest.



PHOTOS: SAVAN CHUENINDO/SANJAD



>> rangers was that they had been poisoned, apparently at random, and the poachers took everything from the mother, leaving only the carcass.

Following an investigation, the rangers learned more about the suspects. It was believed that some hilltribe people living near the forest may have been responsible. No arrests have been made.

Following that incident, forest rangers found more evidence of the use of poison. Some wild animals, including muntjac deer, were found poisoned and used as bait — a method that recalled an incident that occurred more than 15 years ago, when a flock of vultures was found dead after feeding on carrion, leading forest officials to believe the dead animals had been poisoned.

Around the end of 2010, two adult elephants were killed and poisoned, presumed to have been killed to be used as tiger bait. Forest rangers from three wildlife sanctuaries — Thung Yai-Naresuan, Huay Kha Kheng and Umphang — teamed up to investigate the case, and in mid-2011, they encountered a gang of tiger poachers.

On June 6, 2011, a group of six or seven members of the Mong hilltribe travelled to Thung Yai-Naresuan to check on the deployment and number of rangers at a local checkpoint. The next day, one returned, but the rest were not with him. On June 24, Huay Kha Kheng rangers reported a clash with a group of poachers, and the hunt for them began.

The forest rangers tracked them and were finally able to arrest one Mong injured by gunshot and a Vietnamese national in a resort in Umphang district.

What shocked the forest rangers was a picture of the Mong poacher posing with a dead tiger. The forest rangers compared the tiger's markings with those on their database and learned it was a tiger that had been spotted in Huay Kha Kheng and Thung Yai-Naresuan, not a tiger in Myanmar as claimed by the suspects.

"By coming to check on us first, this incident showed me that they were well-prepared for the hunt. It made me to believe that we were encountering an organised poaching gang," said Supt Sompong.

"But these were only the poachers we managed to detect. We have no idea whether there are more in the forest."

After the arrest and eventual conviction of the two suspects — they received jail terms of five and four years — the forest rangers stepped up their efforts to detect poachers.

One of the tactics they employ is the "smart patrol", a group of forest rangers equipped with GPS and other technology that enables them to detect and report anything unusual they come across in the forest quickly and accurately.

Supt Sompong noted that the forest rangers' new tactics seemed to be working, and that poaching seemed to have been eradicated for around 18 months. That is, until his men encountered the gang of Mong poachers earlier this month.

On Sept 5, Huay Kha Kheng forest rangers reported an encounter with a gang of Mong poachers. They called in reinforcements to help track them down. They later found bait ranging from muntjac, bears, wild pig and gibbon on the forest floor in Huay Kha Kheng.

The forest rangers tracked the poachers until learning that they had sneaked into eastern Thung Yai-Naresuan. Thirteen forest rangers tracked the poachers when they entered Umphang.

On night of Sept 12, they couldn't see that the poachers were armed. Suddenly, as the team prepared to make arrests, the poachers opened fire, spraying them with bullets from an AK-47.

As a result, Anthon and fellow forest ranger Boonsin Inthapanyawere, 51, were shot and killed. Two other forest rangers were badly injured. One poacher was killed.

The forest rangers tracked the rest of the gang and a few days later managed to arrest another two. Unbelievably, one of them was a friend of Anthon's father, an ex-comrade whom he had fought alongside against the government during the communist insurgency nearly 40 years ago.

"Anthon's father insisted on seeing him. When they met, he kept asking his former comrade, 'Why did you kill my son?'" said Chief Sompong.

So far, Umphang police have helped the forest rangers to track a further two poachers.

According to Pol Col Wirat Pong-in, police chief at Umphang Police Station, the police have been tracking them and according to their informants, the two have likely escaped and hidden in a Mong village on the other side of the border.

The police have contacted Myanmar police and asked for their help. They have provided them with photos of the two, and hopefully they will find them and arrest them soon.

A few days ago, while awaiting the poachers' capture, another forest ranger in Huay Kha Kheng was shot in the neck, and is in critical condition in Sirirat Hospital, after encountering a gang of poachers. Evidence of poisoning was found, including 10 dead gibbons, likely to be used as bait.

GOING BY THE NUMBERS

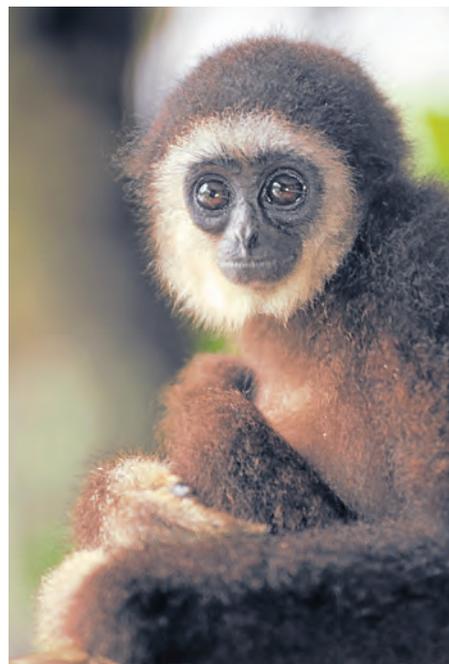
In Wefcom, especially in its heart, the Thung



Thung Yai-Naresuan sanctuary is increasingly threatened by poachers.



UNCARING: A picture found in a mobile phone shows a Mong poacher sitting on the corpse of a tiger.



SURVIVOR: A baby gibbon was found in a bag carried by a dead Mong poacher shot by forest rangers.

Yai-Naresuan and Huay Kha Kheng wildlife sanctuaries and the adjacent Umphang sanctuary, tigers and other big animals have been used as indicators to help target protection and conservation measures in the area.

This is because these animals, especially tigers, are a flagship species categorised as a protection dependent species, meaning they need protection in order to survive.

And their survival is vital to the success of forest protection and conservation as a whole. Tigers are at the top of food chain. Their survival and existence means the survival and existence of other species, and therefore the survival of the forest.

Anak Pattanavibool, the country programme director of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and a lecturer at Kasetsart University's Forestry Faculty said the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, has been working with the WCS and WWF to study tigers in order to create a database to help better manage conservation efforts.

Led by its prime researcher Saksit Simcharoen, who has more than 20 years experience tracking tiger populations, the department has learned that around 100-120 tigers roam the forests. There are around 60-65 in the three main sanctuaries — Thung Yai-Naresuan (east and west) and Huay Kha Kheng — and the rest are in Mea Wong park, Klong Lan park and other nearby reserves. Such a population, Mr Anak said, makes it the best in Southeast Asia.

The researchers understood the danger that poaching posed to the tiger population, so, in mid-2000, they developed early threat detection via the implementation of smart patrols. In eastern Thung Yai-Naresuan, for

each man is responsible for more than 15 sq km.

Mr Anak said the smart patrol system is still the best way to deal with the problem of poaching, but it needs to be strengthened by the provision of adequate resources and manpower.

While acknowledging that poaching may be linked with criminal networks the sanctuaries, Mr Anak believes that if the forest rangers can protect their areas, then they can effectively deal with the threat.

Mr Anak said the sizes of the forest areas are outpacing the available human resources. With each forest ranger having to take care of an average of 15 sq km of forest, this, he said, is far behind manpower levels in countries such as India.

At Kaziranga National Park in Assam State, for example, up to 600 rangers protect an area of less than 1,000 sq km. This means each ranger has much area to cover than those in Wefcom, and that is part of the reason why the around 100 tigers there are better protected.

In Nepal's Chitwan National Park, Mr Anak added, military officers are recruited to help protect the forest. Around 1,000 of them patrol about 1,000 sq km, and because of that around 100 tigers live safely there.

"If we had the resources, we would not be so concerned by the situation, but the fact is we don't, and we are stretched thin because of the area we have to cover," said Mr Anak. "This is part of the reason why we cannot say definitely that we are being successful in protecting the areas via the patrols."

Mr Anak suggests the department prioritise tasks in order to manage its limited resources better. For instance, he said, the pristine areas of the World Heritage sites should be a priority, and should be given adequate resources.

Even if poachers do sneak into these areas, with intensive and blanket patrols they will be detected early and arrested.

But forest rangers need to be trained and equipped in order to perform at their best. Currently, their weapons are outdated and often cannot fire because they are old and broken.

"I would like to say that we have a system in place, and that we are getting what we need," said Mr Anak. "The areas that have tigers tell us that they are well protected, so it is not acceptable that forest officials are punished every time tigers are killed in their areas."

"Scientific monitoring via smart patrols and transparent reporting, rather than punishment, will help this. We need this because wildlife conservation is something scientific and it needs transparency for effective management."

Theerapat Prayurasiddhi, deputy park chief, agrees with Mr Anak that forest rangers need more support. He said the department is planning to discuss the issue with the Budget Bureau in order to ask it for more financial support.

Mr Theerapat said tigers are crucial to the ecosystem of Wefcom and the department has been trying every way it can to protect the species.

In addition to bolstering the management of the sanctuaries, the department will try to explore an action plan and set goals for tiger conservation up to 2022 and stress support for forest rangers' work as well as education among nearby communities.

Mr Theerapat also believes that poaching here links to networks across the border, and the department has been trying to work bilaterally with other states in order to have the criminal gangs suppressed.

"But in the long term, it's really about public awareness. If they care about wildlife and the forest, they will not go poaching," said Mr Theerapat. ■



If we had the resources, we would not be so concerned by the situation, but the fact is we don't, and we are stretched thin because of the area we have to cover

**ANAK PATTANAVIBOOL
WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
SOCIETY**

example, nine forest ranger teams are assigned to patrol the forest.

But there are limitations on what can be done. Wefcom has rough terrain that is not easy to access, and there are only a limited number of forest rangers. In addition, some sanctuaries and parks have communities either next to them, or within them, and poaching can be a temptation to an accomplished hunter.

For eastern Thung Yai-Naresuan, which covers around 1,520 sq km, Supt Sompong has only around 100 forest rangers, meaning