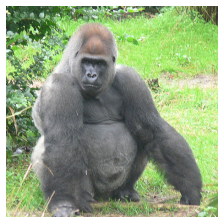


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By: Tudor Vieru, Science Editor



Forest gorillas are highly endangered, so all existing populations must be protected at all costs
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[Congolese Forest Gorillas Are Safe Again](#)

The rebels and the government of Congo agreed to keep them alive

The recent fighting that broke out in Congo and displaced hundreds of thousands also took its toll on the Virunga Park natural reservation, one of the few habitats in the world where forest gorillas can be seen today. It is estimated that no more than 700 members of this species are alive today, and that around 170 of them are located in this region, on the slopes of the Mikeno volcano, in central Africa.

Confrontation between President Joseph Kabila's forces and the rebel army, led by Tutsi leader Nkunda, raged on in and around this precious reservation over the past few months, with some reports even placing powerful explosions - probably from mortars and grenades - right in the middle of the reservation. Congolese Wildlife Authority representatives were chased away by the rebels about 15 months ago, when Nkunda seized complete control of the area.

Since then, there has been no word of the safety of the gorilla population, and ecologists feared the worst. Their fears were amplified by the fact that the last reports they received before the reservation was deserted by those faithful to the central regime said that at least 10 gorillas had been killed in the reservation. But reporters for AP, who stepped into the park last week, met guardians appointed by the rebels, who said that the animals were fine, and that 7 new babies were born during the last 15 months.

International observers say that the compromise achieved by authorities and the rebels will place the Wildlife Authority in a very delicate position, as the government-backed organization will basically become an autonomous entity, operating deep in enemy territory. The central leadership will have no saying in the way the science group will conduct its investigation. Their only connection to the outside world will be through rebels and UN researchers, who already declared Virunga a World Heritage Site.

"It's imperative that these rangers get back into the park. There is war, poaching, snares, disease. It's imperative that people have a clue what is going on, that the gorillas are properly looked after," added Samantha Newport, a spokeswoman for the park.