

American-Assamese preparing white paper on one-horned rhino



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Nava Thakuria 23 May 2008 11422 views

Bloomington, USA: The non-resident Indians (Assamese) in USA, who remained concern on the increasing incidents of rhino poaching in Assam, has been preparing a 'White Paper' on the one horn rhinos in Assam, discloses Rajen Barua, the chief office bearer of the Friends of Assam & Seven Sisters (FASS) with its Head Quarter in Houston, Texas. Talking to this correspondent here, Mr Barua described that the initiative that would give an overall historical perspective of the animal and the present state of affairs on the sensitive issue of rhino poaching along with recommendations with an aim to save the endangered creature.

Emphasizing on adequate awareness among local populace and their co-operation to save the rhinos in the region, Barua asserted, "We think volumes have been written and spoken about the ineffectiveness of the present measures to protect the rhinos in Kaziranga National Park and other sites. Now it is time to act." The FASS was one of few organizations, who consistently raised voice for a credible and high level enquiry into the ongoing incidents of killings of rhinos, and take disciplinary actions against the officials and individuals responsible for the lack of protective actions.

The organization, in a statement issued from Houston during March insisted that 'since the Assam government had failed miserably in its duties, the administration of Kaziranga should immediately be placed under military rule for the time being with strict orders to treat the poachers as terrorists'. A citizen's vigilance committee was also advocated by them to monitor the situation on a regular basis in the national parks of the state,

Mentionable that, the state government, following the growing public outrages, had asked for a Central Bureau of Investigation probe into the killing of over 30 rhinos in different preserves of Assam since January 2007. The chief minister Tarun Gogoi on May 2 declared that his government favoured for a CBI enquiry into the matter.

Earlier the civil societies and the advocacy groups of the region rigorously raised voices against the slaughtering of rhinos by poachers since the early part of 2008. But the concerned authority and the state government preferred to overlook the public resentment. For more than three months, the wildlife lovers have strongly condemned the authority of Kaziranga, which had witnessed the loss of 26 rhinos to poachers since January 2007.

The last week of April witnessed the slaughtering of two more rhinos in Kaziranga. The forest guards discovered the bodies of the rhinos, one of them was a calf, inside the park, but the horns were already chopped off. Even the tigers feasted half of the bodies of the rhino calf, when the forest guards witnessed them. It has added the list of rhinos, fallen prey to poachers at KNP, up to six in this year.

Recognized as a safe heaven for the rhinos, Kaziranga gives shelter to almost two-thirds of the total population of one-horned rhinos on Earth. A 1984 census showed that Kaziranga, which was declared a National Park in 1974, had 1,080 rhinos. The toll increased during 1975 to 1990, nearly 25 per year. The statistics showed that rhino population was found 1069 in another census during 1991. The census in 1999 provided more optimistic result as the number of rhinos soared to 1,552. The last census in 2006 revealed the number of rhinos in the park at 1,855.

The rhino horn enjoys great demand in international market as it is considered to contain aphrodisiac qualities. The heavy animal enjoys great sexual power, as its mating time is not less than 45 minutes (quite higher than any other animal). Many people believe that one can achieve the sexual power with the help of rhino horns. They consider the rhino horns as another kind of traditional viagra. The horns are also believed to have medicinal values. The traditional Chinese medicine demands rhino horns, which is believed to cure fever and stomach ailments fast. China, Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea and the Middle East are known to be huge markets for illegal trading of rhino horns. It fetches a few thousand US dollars per kilogram of horn in the international market.

The park director Suren Buragohain remained clueless at the increasing incidents of poaching of rhinos and only parroted his earlier version, "The poachers are equipped with sophisticated weapons. But our forest guards lack the proper arms to counter them." However, Mr. Buragohain has earned brickbats from wildlife advocates as the recent increase in rhino poaching has occurred during his tenure. Statistics reveal that during his term of around a year, Kaziranga lost the highest number of rhinos in a decade.

If the director was oblivious to the grave threats to rhino poaching in Kaziranga, the Assam forest minister showed equally insensitive and callous approach to the issue. All the time, the young minister in Tarun Gogoi's state cabinet, preferred to ignore the matter. It finally compelled the students union, environmental activists, journalists' organizations and political leaders to adopt the path of demonstration against the minister.

The public resentment against the government for its failure to protect the rhinos was led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU), which carried out demonstrations throughout Assam on February 2. Later the AASU activists organized a citizens' meet at Kohora in Kaziranga locality to continue hammering on the authority. The daylong meet on February 24, which was attended by various pressure groups, resolved to emphasize on a CBI probe to catch the real perpetrators behind rhino poaching.

The concern for the rhinos remained visible in Assam media through their editorials and the letters to the editor columns. Concerned ordinary citizens and the opposition political parties, journalists bodies also expressed their deep anguish against the continued poaching of rhinos in Assam, particularly in Kaziranga.

The demand for a CBI probe into the killings of rhinos was also highlighted during a Nagorik Sobha (citizens' meet), which was organized by a local journalist group. The Journalists' Forum, Assam, during its meeting on February 13 urged the state chief minister 'to break his silence on the issue and let the people know his government's stand and the steps he has taken, if any, to stop the menace'. In one of its resolutions, the meeting asserted that the incumbent forest minister had miserably failed to protect the rhinos and prevent their poaching and hence no longer he remained 'fit for the job'.

Earlier, the Nature's Beckon, an active environment NGO of the region, staged a protest rally on October 1 last against the forest department of Assam. The director of Nature's Beckon, Soumyadeep Datta soon came out with shocking revelation that the forest department of Assam was itself involved in the illegal trade of rhino horns.

"We have authentic information that the forest department sold more than 300 rhino horns even after India adopted the wildlife protection act in 1972. And we are ready to provide all relevant information to CBI once it starts investigating. The statistics of the sold rhino horns can be placed year by year as 29 (during 1971-72), 13 (1972-73), 19 (1973-74), 40 (1974-75), 18 (1975-76), 27 (1976-78), 42 (1977-78), 63 (1978-79), 63 (1978-79), 61 (1979-80)," Datta claimed.

In India, poaching is a punishable offence with up to seven years' imprisonment. India has been a member to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species since 1976 and hence, in principle at least, is bound by all its efforts to eliminate International trade in wildlife and wildlife parts, he added.

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