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**Letter to Editor**

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### **VVIPs involvement in poaching**

The latest revelation by the Inspector General of Police (IGP) that VVIPs are involved in the illegal wildlife trade and poaching is indeed cause for concern. Stopping poaching requires action against these wealthy and influential bosses of often extremely well connected organised crime gangs.

It is not just about catching and jailing poachers because there's an endless supply of them. Going after small time poachers or traffickers may not be the solution, but the aim should be toward the big players in the poaching network, and corrupt government officials. Among wildlife traffickers, these VVIPs – the scourge in our society – are typically big businesspeople who cover up for their evil actions by exploiting their status to benefit themselves, those close to them, or their organisations.

They are into legitimate businesses acting as a front for their illegal activities. Their involvement may be into logistics-type businesses such as trading or shipping companies, or in commodity-based ones, which makes it easier for them to move things around. These individuals, often with honorifics to their names, have powerful connections with government officials, politicians, the well-heeled, and the elite. Criminal groups dealing in wildlife tend to include multinational players which further complicates investigations. Governments often do not share information or effectively collaborate across borders.

The spike in poaching, with animals slaughtered inside national parks or conservation areas, shows that poachers have little fear of tough new laws designed to end the killing. They have no respect for borders; if one nation toughens its laws, they will move to a neighbouring country. If protection is given to an endangered wildlife population, they will target another species.

Corruption is another factor among government officials, agencies, and rangers, that has far more profound effects on the extent of poaching and wildlife trafficking. Corruption plays an important role facilitating wildlife crimes and thus undermining efforts to enforce laws against such crime. Local communities, too, are often willing participants in the illegal wildlife trade.

Poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking are reaching unprecedented levels. Most people are shocked when they learn iconic species such as rhinos, tigers and elephants are doomed to extinction, yet are feeling helpless to act.

The problem with the illegal wildlife trade is that it is so often seen as something in the purview of conservationists, biologists or ecologists. Tackling the illegal wildlife trade is nearly impossible because even when the so-called kingpins are arrested, they are easily replaced by their colleagues.

Experts say it's time to treat this billion-dollar enterprise in the same way as other serious organised crimes, by adopting tools commonly used in fighting drug lords and other crime kingpins: anti-money laundering techniques, and financial investigation. There is virtually nothing done in terms of investigation into the financial crime side of things.

The job of tackling wildlife crime needs the involvement of criminal experts, including money-laundering experts. Corruption and weak regulatory frameworks may offer several opportunities to criminal organisations to launder the proceeds of crime. A one-size-fits-all approach in tackling wildlife trafficking is unlikely to be effective and individual case-dependent solutions must be developed if wildlife targeted by trafficking are to be saved.

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