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83 tigers poached during 1999-2004

NEW DELHI, May 2 - A total of 83 tigers were poached during 1999-2004 as forest guards in various reserves were ill-equipped and untrained to fight wildlife smugglers, a Parliamentary panel has said.

An audit examination revealed that nine tiger reserves — Manas, Peiyar, Tdoba-Andhari, Pench (Maharashtra), Melghat, Kanha, Pench (Madhya Pradesh), Bandhavgarh and Panna — did not provide training to their staff on regular or periodic basis, it said.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) headed by BJP MP Gopinath Munde which tabled its report "Conservation and Protection of Tigers" in Parliament recently, has highlighted the pathetic state

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of affairs in conservation of the big cats in the country.

It noted that forest guards were not equipped with enough arms and ammunition required to combat poaching and illicit trade in 12 tiger reserves — Namdapha, Indravati, Bandipur, Melaghat, Tadoba-Andhari, Ranthambore, Sariska, Simlipal, Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Manas and Sunderbans.

"While arms were insufficient in some reserves, in others discrepancies or shortages in ammunition were noticed," the panel said.

Though the National Wildlife Action Plan (2002-2016) "envisages that states should adequately train personnel to man all positions right from Park Director down to forest guards," the actual situation was not upto the mark, it said.

For instance, in Manas Tiger Reserve, the training imparted to staff was inadequate as it did not cover the areas of field craft, obstacles crossing and unarmed combat.

"The weapon training was limited to .315 rifles only. In Periyar Tiger Reserve, the system of pre-service training was not prevalent and only 27 forest guards out of 86 were imparted training during 2000-2005," the report said.

During the audit scrutiny, the panel found that in case of Corbett, Kanha and Bandipur tiger reserves, only 125, 172 and 31 patrolling 'chowkis' existed for which only 106, 148 and 47 forest guards were posted, respectively.

The patrolling camps in Kanha and Pench (Madhya Pradesh) were operated by unskilled labourers.

When asked, the Environment Ministry had admitted in March 2006 that the protection measures in the tiger re-

serves were adversely affected due to shortage of manpower and the situation has not improved despite addressing the states at various levels, the report said.

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), which is entrusted with tiger protection in the country, too admitted that seven to eight reserves including Simlipal and Indravati were facing Left-wing extremism and have been out of bounds for the last seven years.

A total of 173 tiger deaths were reported during 1999-2004, the panel said and criticised the NTCA and the state governments for failing to take adequate measures for preservation of the striped animal.

"The remaining deaths were due to various reasons like natural causes (60), electrocution (13) and poisoning (7). The independent survey further reported that an annual average poaching figure of 22 tiger deaths over a period of six years was alarming," the panel noted.