



PRESS RELEASE

U.S. and Thailand Prosecute Ivory Traffickers While Investigators Nab More Suspects

FREELAND Applauds International Cooperative Effort

(BANGKOK, January 20, 2010) – Authorities in the United States today charged the key suspect in an international ivory trafficking operation, who was arrested in Bangkok on November 16, 2009. Samart Chokechoyma, 36, a Thai national, was charged with violating U.S. federal smuggling statutes by the U.S. Attorney's office for the Southern District of California, while Thai authorities are prosecuting him for violating Thailand's Wild Animal Reservation and Preservation Act B.E.2535, section 20, 23, and 24, and Customs Act B.E.2469, section 27 by the Royal Thai Police. Chokchoyma was the target of a joint US-Thailand investigation, supported by the FREELAND Foundation and the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN).

When police surmised that Chokchoyma was not a kingpin, they continued their investigations, which led to a raid this week on ivory shops and the arrest of two ivory dealers in Nakhon Sawan Province, Thailand. The Natural Resources and Environmental Crime Suppression Division, Royal Thai Police, (also known as "Nature Crime Police"), with technical support from FREELAND Foundation, recovered six whole, raw endangered African elephant tusks. The tusks weighed 32 kilograms and were valued at more than THB1 million (USD \$30,222). Undercover investigators were led to believe that additional and much larger stocks were available.

More than 10 metric tons of African elephant ivory have been seized in Southeast Asia during 2009 alone. However, until this case, there had not been any arrests of ivory traffickers in the region. Thai Police acted on evidence gathered on both sides of the Pacific to arrest Chokchoyma. His arrest led Thai Police to investigate a web of higher level traders illegally funneling ivory from Africa to Thailand to be carved and sold to consumers in Thailand and around the world. Undercover buys and seizures netted more than 100 pieces of carved African elephant ivory during the year-long cooperative Thai-U.S. investigation



facilitated through ASEAN-WEN and assisted by FREELAND Foundation, which are supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

“This groundbreaking cooperative effort to uncover and shut down an international ivory trafficking operation must be commended,” FREELAND Executive Director Steve Galster said. “Higher-level organizers, above poachers and couriers, are rarely arrested or charged for trafficking of protected flora and fauna in this region. We hope authorities keep working up the chain to put the king-pins of this destructive multi-billion dollar trade behind bars before the world is permanently robbed of elephants and other endangered species. We also appeal to consumers to think twice about that ivory they are considering to buy -- it may come from an elephant that was killed recently just for its tusks.”

Chokchoyma faces a maximum of four years in prison and fines of up to THB 40,000 (USD \$1,200) under Thailand’s Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act that protects species listed on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), and up to THB 100,000 (USD \$3,025) under the Customs Act for the import and export of illegal goods. If prosecuted in the United States, he faces penalties of up to 20 years in prison and up to USD \$250,000 (THB 8.27 million) fine for each count of smuggling.

Thailand’s Nature Crime Police and Office of the Attorney General, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the U.S. Department of Justice are cooperating on this ongoing law enforcement action, with additional support from FREELAND Foundation and ASEAN-WEN.

Illegal international ivory trade is considered the primary reason for the continuing decline of Africa’s elephant populations. CITES signatories agreed to an international ban on the international trade of elephant ivory in 1989. However, with demand for ivory remaining high, effective international wildlife law enforcement is crucial to implementing this ban.

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Note to Editors:

FREELAND is an international organization dedicated to ending the illegal wildlife trade, conserving natural habitats and protecting human rights. FREELAND works throughout Asia, raising public awareness and building local capacity to protect critical ecosystems, wildlife and human rights.

FREELAND is the lead implementing partner of the U.S. Support Program for the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN), a program that provides investigative assistance, training and other capacity building support to Southeast Asian authorities tasked with stopping illegal wildlife trade – a major threat to biodiversity.

For more information visit www.freeland.org

ASEAN-WEN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network. It involves environmental, law enforcement and Customs agencies in all 10 ASEAN countries and facilitates cross-border collaboration in the fight against illegal wildlife trade in the region.

ASEAN-WEN receives assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). U.S. support is helping to build wildlife law enforcement capacity in Southeast Asia and international cooperation to stop illegal trade.

For more information visit www.asean-wen.org

USAID is the United States Agency for International Development. It has been the principal U.S. agency extending assistance worldwide since 1961. USAID's Regional Development Mission for Asia, based in Bangkok, supports programs addressing problems that cross national boundaries, such as human and wildlife trafficking, HIV/AIDS, natural resources conservation, trade, and political and economic conflict.

For more information visit www.usaid.gov/rdma/