

Rwanda is expanding Volcanoes National Park to give its growing mountain gorilla population more space while seeking to ensure communities affected by the expansion benefit from conservation, Prime Minister Justin Nsengiyumva said Friday.

Speaking at the 21st Kwita Izina gorilla naming ceremony in Kinigi, Musanze District, Nsengiyumva said Rwanda's conservation success had created a new responsibility to protect the animals while improving the livelihoods of people living around their habitat.



"In the early 1980s, there were only about 250 mountain gorillas left in the Virunga Massif. Poaching, habitat losses, and social conflicts had pushed the species towards extinction," Nsengiyumva said.

More than 1,000 mountain gorillas are now estimated to live in the wild across the Virunga Massif and the Bwindi ecosystem, including more than 600 in the Virunga Massif.

Rwanda plans to expand Volcanoes National Park by about 3,740 hectares, or nearly a quarter of its current size. The expansion is expected to provide additional habitat and support a 15% to 20% increase in the gorilla population, while reducing infant mortality by about half, according to the environment ministry.

Jean Guy Afrika, chief executive of the Rwanda Development Board, said the same principle underpins the park expansion.

"The expansion will provide more habitats for growing mountain gorilla families," Afrika said. "At the same time, it will support neighboring communities through better housing, infrastructure, services, and new economic opportunities."

The government also plans to establish about 6,620 hectares of buffer zones expected to benefit more than 17,000 people.

Last week, authorities launched construction of the Smart Green Village in Kinigi, a more than \$49 million project intended to support 547 households affected by the park expansion with housing, essential services and livelihood opportunities.

Rwanda also channels 10% of national park tourism revenues to communities

through its Tourism Revenue Sharing Programme.

Maurice Mugabowagahunde, governor of Northern Province, said 740 projects had received Rwf8.6 billion in communities bordering Volcanoes National Park in Musanze, Nyabihu, Burera and Rubavu districts.



Nationwide, more than Rwf23 billion has supported nearly 1,300 community projects, including schools, health centres, water infrastructure and livelihood programmes.

An additional Rwf2 billion will be provided this year for projects aimed at improving livelihoods, Mugabowagahunde said.

Nsengiyumva said the economic benefits from gorilla tourism had helped strengthen communities around the park by creating jobs, supporting local businesses and attracting investment.

The government says the park expansion is intended to provide more habitat for the gorillas while ensuring that communities living around Volcanoes National Park benefit from conservation and tourism.