

Pressure mounts for countries to save tigers

HUAI KHA KHEANG WILDLIFE SANCTUARY: After trudging through the wilds of western Thailand for several hours, the forest rangers thought they were finally onto something: the distant sound of crunching leaves.

Automatic weapons drawn, the five Thais crept forward, hoping to catch a tiger poacher. It turned out to be a banteng, a wild cow, which disappeared into the woods.

But all in all, the absence of illegal hunters was good news, said ranger Sakchai Tessri. "When we passed before, we would always run into poachers." Now he felt their room for manoeuvre was narrowing as poachers now "come in, shoot, grab and go quickly".

The 6,400-square-kilometer Huai Kha Kheang and Thung Yai Wildlife Sanctuaries on the Myanmar border represent a rare success in the struggle to save the world's dwindling tiger population.

Funded by the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, the increased patrols, armed with the



Strong bond: A Buddhist monk attending to a tiger at the Wat Pa Luangta Bua Yannasampanno Forest Monastery in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, last Wednesday. The monastery has become a wildlife sanctuary for tigers. — AP

latest technology, have scared off poachers and helped stabilise the tiger population of more than 100, along with animals such as the banteng which they prey on.

Now hopes are rising that 2010 will see a turning point.

Ministers from the 13 countries with tiger populations will hold a first-ever meeting on Wednesday through Friday in Hua Hin, Thailand to write an action plan for a tiger summit in September in Russia, where Prime Minister Vladimir

Putin has been championing the survival of the tiger.

The purpose of this week's meeting is to elicit promises of more money for conservation and to persuade countries to set tiger population targets. — AP