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World leaders meet at tiger summit in Russia, pledge protection and cooperation

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A tiger sleeps inside an enclosure at the zoo in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2010. Bangladesh has approved a law that sets jail terms of up to 12 years for deliberately killing tigers and other endangered wild animals, according to news reports. (AP Photo/Pavel Rahman) (Pavel Rahman - AP)

ST. PETERSBURG - For three days, forestry officials from Nepal and Burma, wildlife officials from Laos and Malaysia, and environmentalists from Bangladesh and Thailand roamed the gilt halls of czarist-era palaces here, talking of tigers and searching for the political will to save them.

That resolve was pronounced found Tuesday by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who shared a dais at the International Tiger Forum with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and World Bank President Robert B. Zoellick, among others.

"We have put the tiger on the agenda of the international community," Putin said, adding that when heads of government take the time to meet on behalf of a big cat, they are serious indeed.

At a news conference convened as the delegates set off for a concert where Naomi Campbell and [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) were the major attractions, no questions were taken. The final words came from Nepalese Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal.

"The world is looking at us to act boldly," he said. "We need less conversation and more conservation."

Tigers are in desperate straits. Their numbers have dwindled to 3,200 from about 100,000 a century ago, and they are expected to become extinct unless there is a concerted effort to stop poaching of the cats and their prey and to protect the wide landscapes they inhabit.

The summit of 13 tiger-range countries - which also include Vietnam, [India](#), Indonesia, Cambodia and [North Korea](#) - was convened to endorse the Global Tiger Recovery Program. Under the plan, the delegates committed to doubling the number of tigers by 2022 by developing conservation programs and cooperating across national boundaries to stop poaching and illegal trade in tiger parts.

An additional \$350 million is needed over the next five years to pay for the program, which was initiated two years ago when a World Bank employee told Zoellick that tigers were about to disappear.

"When you hear that, you're shocked," Zoellick said in an interview Tuesday before the day's meetings at the Konstantinovsky Palace in Strelna, on the gray, frigid shores of the Gulf of Finland outside the city.

From that moment, the tiger became a World Bank cause. The bank has a presence in all the tiger countries, Zoellick pointed out, and knows not only the officials at the top but the government workers who run things. The bank knows donors, too.

"I saw an opportunity to be a catalyst," he said, adding that tigers wander across borders, making transborder protections necessary. "Dealing with trafficking is beyond any one country's capability," he said.

The bank is fine-tuning the way it operates and will not finance infrastructure in core tiger areas. It will also try to develop new means of sustainable financing for tiger habitats.

Zoellick said the bank hopes to provide \$100 million in financing to help prevent illegal trade in tiger parts and poaching in Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and possibly India. Other commitments came from the World Wildlife Fund, for at least \$50 million; the United States, for \$9.2 million to fight poaching and trafficking; [Germany](#), for \$17.2 million for landscape conservation; the Wildlife Conservation Society, for \$85 million; and the Global Environment Facility, for \$12 million.

And there was \$1 million from DiCaprio, a WWF board member who was late for the summit because Monday he was on a [Russia-bound plane that blew an engine leaving New York](#), circled to dump fuel, then landed safely to a large audience of firetrucks.

Training and equipping wildlife rangers is a priority. Vivek Menon, South Asia director for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, said Indian rangers are often sent out with just three bullets.

If they get into a gunbattle and miss the first shot, the heavily armed poachers mow them down with Kalashnikov assault rifles. "We lose 50 rangers a year," he said.

Menon hopes the summit will be a turning point, and Zoellick says it must be. "Time is short," he said.

Was the summit a success? Joe Walston, the Wildlife Conservation Society's Asia director, considered the question.

"We'll know in 12 years," he said.