African elephant populations continue to be under severe threat as the illegal trade in ivory grows - with double the numbers of elephants killed and triple the amounts of ivory seized over the last decade, a new report by the by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network (TRAFFIC) shows.

According to the report *"Elephants in the Dust – The African Elephant Crisis",* increasing poaching levels, as well as loss of habitat are threatening the survival of African elephant populations in Central Africa as well as previously secure populations in West, Southern and Eastern Africa.

The report says that systematic monitoring of large-scale seizures of ivory destined for Asia is indicative of the involvement of criminal networks, which are increasingly active and entrenched in the trafficking of ivory between Africa and Asia.

At sites monitored through the CITES-led Monitoring Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) programme alone, which hold approximately 40 per cent of the total elephant population in Africa, an estimated 17,000 elephants were illegally killed in 2011. Initial 2012 data shows that the situation did not improve that year. However, overall figures may be much higher.

These threats compound the most important long-term threat to the species' survival – increasing loss of habitat as a result of rapid human population growth and large-scale land conversion for agriculture, providing for international markets.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said, "CITES must re-engage on illegal wildlife crime with a renewed sense of purpose, commitment, creativity, cooperation and energy involving range states and transit countries to consuming nations of

products such as ivory."

"The surge in the killing of elephants in Africa and the illegal taking of other listed species globally threatens not only wildlife populations but the livelihoods of millions who depend on tourism for a living and the lives of those wardens and wildlife staff who are attempting to stem the illegal tide," he added.

John Scanlon, Secretary-General of CITES “This report provides clear evidence that adequate human and financial resources, the sharing of know-how, raising public awareness in consumer countries, and strong law enforcement must all be in place if we are to curb the disturbing rise in poaching and illegal trade.”

The report recommends critical actions, including improved law-enforcement across the entire illegal ivory supply chain and strengthened national legislative frameworks. Training of enforcement officers in the use of tracking, intelligence networks and innovative techniques, such as forensic analysis, is urgently needed.

“Urgent action is needed to address the growing challenges elephant populations are facing, but it will only happen if there is adequate political will to do so,” said Dr Holly Dublin, Chair of the IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group.

Better international collaboration across range states, transit countries and consumer markets - through the UN Office for Drugs and Crime, CITES, INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, the World Bank and other international actors – is needed in order to enhance law enforcement - from the field to the judiciary - to deter criminal activities and combat illegal trade.

These efforts include the need to fight collusive corruption, identifying syndicates and reducing demand.

“Organized criminal networks are cashing in on the elephant poaching crisis, trafficking ivory in unprecedented volumes and operating with relative impunity and with little fear of prosecution,”

said Tom Milliken, TRAFFIC's ivory trade expert.

Elephants are also threatened by the increasing loss of habitat in around 29 per cent of their range as a result of rapid human population growth and agricultural expansions.

Currently, some models suggest this figure may increase to 63 per cent by 2050, a major additional threat to the survival of the elephant in the long-term.

The report - released in Bangkok, at the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CITES convention - combines information from sources including the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) African Elephant Specialist Group, MIKE and the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), managed by TRAFFIC on behalf of CITES.