News Briefs

Compiled by the Editor

1. Rehabilitation centres

New Delhi Press Trust of India
20 July 22 2008

The government has decided to set up six rehabilitation and recuperating centres for ailing and destitute pachyderms -- both domesticated and in the wild. The centres, to be set up for the first time in the country, will come up in Haryana, Orissa, Kerala and Karnataka. "These centres will start functioning by early next year. In Haryana, the forest department has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with an wildlife NGO to establish one such rehabilitation centre," Project Elephant Director A N Prasad told PTI. These centres would be manned by trained forest department personnel and 'mahouts'.

The Government under its ambitious Project Elephant plan launched on the lines of the Project Tiger will help the state governments in setting up these centres as it will impart technical guidelines and manpower skills to respective states. "The Elephants that will be brought in these centres will include domesticated and destitute ones including those with various temple trusts in the country," Prasad said. There have been numerous cases when the giant Indian beauty has been left to fend for itself after it was rendered incapacitated from circuses and private owners.

2. Domesticated elephants poached for ivory, Sayaboury province Lao PDR (Laos)

Ingrid Suter, ElefantAsia
September 10, 2008

Alarming reports as Laos' endangered elephants are being poached for the illegal ivory trade. News of elephant poaching has been reported from Laos' north-west province Sayaboury. In two separate incidences a total of five elephants were found dead with bullets to their head and feet. Occurring in May and August of 2008 both cases are believed to be linked. All five of the dead elephants were male and had their tusks extracted from their heads by the poachers. Some of the elephants were found to have also had their tails removed. Three of the deceased elephants were privately owned and two were from wild populations. Alarmingly this is the first time domesticated elephants have been reported as being poached for the ivory trade in Laos. District and provincial authorities are taking the matter very seriously.

With less than 1000 wild and 560 domesticated elephants remaining in Laos, poaching is a very serious threat to the entire elephant population. The interrelationship between wild and domestic elephants is still very strong in Laos, with poaching directly affecting the survival of both populations.

ElefantAsia is a non-profit organisation based in the Lao PDR. Much of ElefantAsia's elephant veterinary work is undertaken in the province where the poaching occurred. "These deaths are alarming for both wild and domesticated elephants" says Mr Gilles Maurer, Cofounder of ElefantAsia. "With elephant populations rapidly declining, Laos cannot afford to lose its remaining elephant populations to ivory poachers. More needs to be done to protect wild elephants and promote breeding among the domesticated elephants".

Of particular concern is the fact that poachers are now targeting domesticated elephants and not just wild populations. "Elephants are valuable livestock and many families rely on the income gained from the work of a single elephant. Poaching of domesticated elephants is a huge loss for Lao communities as well as the Asian elephant population" says Mr Maurer. "With only two births occurring for every ten deaths, elephant populations must be given the chance to reproduce so they can be enjoyed by Lao communities for years to come".

ElefantAsia intend to reverse declining elephant numbers through their national breeding strategy. This strategy aims at giving mahouts incentives to breed their domesticated elephants, thereby increasing the number of elephants living in Laos. "Can you imagine Laos without elephants? Unfortunately this is the reality if more elephants are not born" said Mr Maurer. "Poaching is just one threat to the elephant population and we really need to encourage mahouts to breed their elephants for future generations to enjoy. Laos must become a safe haven for elephants rather than a nation where the last few remaining elephants are killed for their ivory. That would be a cultural tragedy". Authorities in Sayaboury and Paklay are investigating the elephant deaths and are anticipating an arrest of the poachers.

3. Indonesians threaten to poison elephants

Agence France Presse
August 5, 2008

Indonesian villagers threatened Tuesday to poison rare wild elephants that are destroying their palmoil plantations in search of food. "The residents are so angry and have said they will put poison around the plantation areas to kill the elephants unless officials take quick action," said Jambo Dalem village chief Teungku Baili. He said he had warned officials in Trumon Timur district of Sumatra's Aceh province, but nothing had been done to protect the plantations. A herd of eight elephants grazed through the villagers' plantations twice last week, apparently lured to the rows of palm fruit after their natural habitat was wiped out to make way for the lucrative crop. "I'm afraid that another attack on their plantations will push villagers to launch their plan" to poison the animals, the village chief told AFP by telephone. "People here eagerly planted palmoil as it brings more profits, but it's all been easily destroyed by elephants." The elephants have been destroying plantations since 2000 but the problem has become worse over the past two months, he said.

Conflicts between wild animals and humans have long been on the rise in Sumatra, where tropical jungles have been almost completely wiped out except on mountain slopes. Experts say palm oil plantations offer the pachyderms a more attractive source of food than can be found in the forest. The population of Sumatran elephants was estimated at between 2400 and 2800 last year, a decrease of 35 percent from 1992, according to the World Wide Fund for Nature.

4. Central farmers lose crops to elephants (Vietnam)

Thanh Nien News
August 4, 2008

Seven members of Y Ngo's family in the central province of Dak Lak depend on one hectare of farmland. But their farm is all but destroyed, damaged by severe drought and wild elephants. "The area they trample destroys 10 times more than what they eat and there is no way rice can survive being stepped on by elephants," said Ngo, a farmer in Ba Na Village of Ia J'loi Commune in the province's Ea Sup District.

For the past two weeks the 82 households of seven ethnic minority groups in Ba Na Village have been disturbed, usually at night, by wild elephants from a nearby forest that come and trample their farmland. The farmers can only make noise – from a safe distance – to try to shoo the elephants away. But this tactic stopped working after only a few days. "I want to save my rice so much but if I go any closer the elephants could kill me," Huu said.

Chu Van Binh, whose rice field is near Ngo's, said the elephants had crushed his watch-tower about 10 days ago. Luckily, no one was in the hut at the time. The elephants returned to his rice field two days ago, leaving footprints everywhere, he said. Le Van Huu, deputy head of Ba Na Village, said the wild elephants had destroyed more than five hectares of local rice fields. Ba Na fields cultivated by people from nearby villages had also attracted the interest of the elephants, Huu said. He said now the villagers had to build watch-towers every hundred meters along the border between their farmland and the forest.

Three to five people in each tower take turns to

watch for elephants, Huu said. The village had more than 10 hectares of corn that was almost ready for harvest. But all the farmers' hard work would amount to nothing if the elephants got past the fence, the village deputy head said. "Sometimes the elephants come every night and no one dares to sleep soundly." The farmers were all dead tired because they had to work all day in their fields but could not sleep at night, he said. Although the elephants are regular visitors, villagers still don't know how many there are because they can't see clearly from far away.

Meanwhile, Ia J'loi Commune administration does not seem to be making much of an effort to support the farmers. They are still looking for food relief for locals who lost 300 hectares of rice to a recent drought. "The provincial administration is far away and the commune is so poor it cannot help all the farmers in difficulties," a commune official said.

5. Killer elephant to be killed in Nepal

Bernama
September 29, 2008

Local administration in southeastern Nepal has directed the district forest office to kill a wild elephant that has killed 13 people and destroyed property of locals, China's Xinhua news agency reported Monday. According to forest officer Jeeban Kumar Thakur of the local administration of Lahan, Siraha district, some 130 km southeast of Nepali capital Kathmandu, issued the direction during a meeting held at the forest office on Sunday by using the authority under the Local Administration Act.

The administration asked the forest officials to try to chase the elephant at first and kill it if posed threat to public security. The elephant has killed 13 persons in Siraha and Saptari districts so far, destroyed 100 houses and damaged crops. A six-member team led by Dr. Thakur Prasad Gaire from Chitwan National Park, at the direction of Ministry for Forest and Soil Conservation, has already arrived in Siraha to kill the beast.

6. Rings made of elephant hair flood central highland souvenir shops (Vietnam)

Thu Huong, Vietnam News Agency
August 31, 2008

To ethnic minority groups living in the central highland province of Dac Lac, a ring made of hair taken from an elephant's tail is far more than an ordinary ornament. Because most people consider it to be an amulet that is expected to bring them luck in love, local couples often use elephant hair as a pawn in the game of love.

Although no one has ever been able to prove the reliability of such a rumor, rings plaited with elephant hairs are now appearing in many souvenir shops. But the consequences of such beliefs in the significance of the elephant rings are leaving a tale of cruelty – thieves are often the ones who cut off the tails of the massive beasts. The elephant's hair tail is worth VND200,000-300, 000 (US$12-18), depending on its length and a ring woven with elephant's hair costs around VND500,000 ($30). Any ring inlaid with white elephant hair can be sold at double the price because it is considered rare.

Love-birds find that the exotic flavour is another attraction of the unique ring. This new trend has fuelled tourists' quests for rings inlaid with elephant hair but at the same time has spawned a trade that involves gratuitous cruelty. Y K'Tuk, an elderly resident of Buon Don, the province's most famous tourism village, couldn't hide his anger while recalling how his elephant lost his tail. "They sneak in at night when my family are sleeping. After his tail was cut off, my elephant was in so much pain that he couldn't eat for days. I can't bear witness to his suffering."

Most local ethnic minority groups like Ede or M'nong have a tradition of imposing stiff punishment on people who steal elephant's tail hairs. The stolen hairs should be burnt as an apology made to the "elephant god". However, a blind rush for high profits has blighted people's eyes to the danger and suffering they are causing.

7. Elephant kicks heroin habit with China island rehab

Beijing
September 4, 2008

An elephant has kicked his heroin habit after a three-year stint on an island rehab in southern China, an official and state media said Thursday. The four-year-old Asian elephant, called Xiguang, has now being transported to a wildlife reserve in southwest China after being cured of his addiction with some clean living on Hainan island, Xinhua said.

Xiguang became hooked on the narcotic after animal smugglers captured him and other elephants by luring them with bananas laced with heroin in 2005, the official news agency said. "The four elephants are arriving here from Hainan tomorrow," wildlife park official Mr Xu, who refused to give his full name, told AFP on Thursday.

Police caught the smugglers in May 2005 on the border between China and Myanmar, and noticed that Xiguang was acting strangely, the Beijing News website reported. His eyes kept streaming, he made continuous trumpeting noises, and was finally diagnosed with withdrawal symptoms from the drug, the report said.

Xiguang was sent to a wild animal protection centre in Hainan, where rehabilitation experts and vets gave him injections of methadone -- five times the dose needed for a human being -- for a year, Xinhua said. After a year, he had started to recover, and the dose of medicine was progressively reduced. The animal is now being transported 1,500 kilometres (930 miles) across southern China to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province.

The Asian elephant is an endangered species, with only 25,600 to 32,750 left in the wild, according to the World Wildlife Fund. The animals are victims of conflict with humans, as they destroy plantations and fields in their quest for food, leading to retaliatory killings. They also fall prey to poachers for their ivory, the fund says.

8. Wildlife keepers warn against elephants tendency to move sanctuary (Myanmar)

Xinhua
September 26, 2008

Wildlife keepers in Myanmar have warned against tendency of move of sanctuary of wild elephants from deep mountain range in western Rakhine state to agricultural field as elephant feed is running short there this year, the local Biweekly Eleven News reported Friday. Such wild elephants are being found shifting from the May Yu mountain range bordering Bangladesh to agricultural farms with crop plantations of local farmers and destroying the plantations for the sake of feed, the report said, calling on the farmers to take measures to prevent the crop plantations from being spoiled out of the wildlife's move. The report attributed the tendency of the elephants to the extinction of bamboo plantation in the Rakhine Yoma natural bamboo forest during this year which the elephants depend on for their feed.

Meanwhile, Myanmar has taken measures for elephant conservation by restricting the catching of such animal in the country's Bago Yoma mountain range in the central part where most of the elephants take sanctuary, other local report said. In order to prevent elephant from extinction in the country, the Myanmar forestry authorities allowed catching of the wild elephants in the mountain range's Hlegu area only once in three years, prescribing the ratio of the elephants caught to be handed over to the authorities, according to the report.

Similarly, in the wake of tiger extinction threat, Myanmar wildlife police and forest rangers have also planned to step up combating wildlife trade and crimes in the tiger reserve and special training programs have been introduced jointly by the Myanmar forest ministry and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). With only 150 tigers reportedly remained alive in Myanmar's tiger reserve, tiger conservation is being undertaken in Hukaung Valley, the geographical condition of which creates a suitable place for survival of the tigers. The Hukuang Tiger Reserve

in Myanmar's northernmost Kachin state, which was established in 2004, covers an area of about 22, 000 km^2, and is claimed the largest of its kind in the world.

9. Burma takes measures for wildlife conservation

Xinhua (New China News Agency)
September 23, 2008

Myanmar [Burma] has taken measures for wildlife conservation by restricting the catching of elephant in the country's Bago Yoma mountain range where most of the animals take sanctuary, the local Weekly Eleven journal reported Tuesday. In order to prevent elephant from extinction in the country, the Myanmar forestry authorities allowed catching of the wild elephants in the mountain range's Hlegu area only once in three years, prescribing the ratio of the elephants caught to be handed over to the authorities.

Meanwhile, the authorities also called on the country's people to participate in the task for conservation of rare birds and wildlife to stabilize the ecosystem which faces collapse as in the world, singling out that there are only nine endangered species out of 144 in the world can be found in Myanmar. Golden deer, one of the nine species in existence in Myanmar, are being protected in Chatthin Sanctuary in northwestern Sagaing division, the authorities said, adding that "though three kinds of species of the golden deer are found in South East Asia, there are now only Myanmar golden deer left".

Noting that the population of tigers worldwide gradually declines with tiger species being available in 13 countries only, the authorities said Myanmar is cooperating with seven other Asian nations in an effort to establish a tiger protection corridor which extends as 5,000 miles (8,000 kilometres) for endangered ones. Disclosing that there are only 100 tigers left in Myanmar, the authorities said, in cooperation with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), tiger conservation is being undertaken in Hukaung Valley, the geographical condition of which creates a suitable place for survival of the tigers.

The authorities stressed the need also to conserve the environment, saying that too much extraction of wildlife, plants and fish, establishment of plantation after clearing, the natural forests and pollution endanger the existence of biodiversity in the long run. The authorities also called for systematic control of indiscriminate cutting down of trees, hunting and trading of wildlife products. According to the authorities, only about 150 tigers remain alive in Myanmar's tiger reserve. The tiger data collection of the forestry ministry was jointly carried out with the cooperation of the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) since 1998 with the use of camera trap as well as modern scientific method.

The Hukuang Tiger Reserve in Myanmar's northernmost Kachin state, which was established in 2004, covers an area of about 22, 000 square kilometres, and is claimed the largest of its kind in the world. In the wake of tiger extinction threat, Myanmar wildlife police and forest rangers have planned to step up combating wildlife trade and crimes in the tiger reserve and special training programmes have been introduced jointly by the Myanmar forest ministry and the WCS. The authorities have called for creating a balance between the needs of local communities and the wildlife, which constitutes one of the major challenges for them. Tigers are also facing extinction all over the world due mainly to the international trade in body parts destined for the Asian traditional medicine market, wildlife biologists said.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar authorities have warned traditional medicine practitioners in the country to avoid using tiger bones in producing their medicinal products to help conserve endangered animal species. As tiger has been prescribed as "completely protected" under the Protection of Wildlife and Conservation of Natural Areas Law since 1994, the ministry urged the practitioners to keep away from such practice, otherwise such species would vanish in the country.

Myanmar was estimated to have over 3,000 Bengal and Indochina tigers by 1980, the second in Asia after India, according to experts.