

Sumatran elephant dies in Indonesia of suspected poisoning

By Edna Tarigan
The Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia — A pregnant Sumatran elephant was found dead of suspected poisoning near a palm plantation in Indonesia’s Riau province on the island of Sumatra, according to officials.

Sumatran elephants are a critically endangered species and fewer than 700 remain on the island. The animal is protected under an Indonesian law on the conservation of biological natural resources and their ecosystems.

Local authorities are investigating the cause of death of the elephant, which was discovered in a joint patrol by local conservation groups. But they strongly suspect it was poisoned.

“From the sign of changes in the shape of its internal organs, such as the lung, it looks like it is burning, black, and oozing from the blood,” said Zulhusni Syukri, program director of Rimba Satwa Foundation, one of the groups that found the elephant.

The animal had blood coming out of its mouth and anus, according to Fifin Arfiana Jogasara, the acting head of Riau Natural Resources Conservation, another group on the patrol that found the animal.

The authorities also discovered pineapple in the elephant’s stomach, even though pineapples are not grown in that area, further leading them to suspect poisoning, Syukri said.

The population of Sumatran elephants on the island shrank from 1,300 in 2014 to 693 last year, down nearly 50% in seven years, Indonesian forestry and environment ministry data show. The decline has occurred amid a loss of more than 69% of the animal’s potential habitat in the last 25 years — the equivalent of one generation.

The expansion of palm plantations in Sumatra has led to conflicts between humans and animals over space and resources.

“The palm plantation workers near the elephants’ roaming paths often have conflicts with the elephants because they eat the palm fruit,” Syukri said.

At least seven Sumatran elephants have died in Riau province in the last three years, he added.

The pregnant elephant that was found was estimated to be about 25 years old. During the necropsy, it was discovered that the elephant was pregnant and would soon give birth. The authorities buried the elephant’s carcass at the site after taking samples of its liver, intestinal wall, lungs, and feces for laboratory testing.

Sumatran elephants are a subspecies of the Asian elephant, one of two species of the large mammal in the world.

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South Korea Blue House opens to public for first time in 74 years

By Jung Yoon Kim
The Associated Press

SEOUL — For many South Koreans, the former presidential palace in Seoul was a little-visited, heavily secured mountainside landmark. That’s now changed as thousands have been allowed a look inside for the first time in 74 years.

As one of his first acts, the new South Korean leader has moved the presidential offices from the Blue House, named after its distinctive blue roof tiles, and opened its gates to the public, allowing a maximum of 39,000 people a day to visit.

The normally serious compound has been transformed into something like a fair, with excited crowds looking around and standing in long queues.

“I feel grateful that the Blue House has opened to the public,” 61-year-old office worker Lee Sang Woon said recently during a tour with his family. “I am really happy to be here.”

The Blue House has gone through multiple transformations over the years. Once the site of a royal garden, the Japanese built the official residence for their governors-general there during Tokyo’s colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula. After Korea was liberated from Japan in 1945, the U.S. military commander occupied the place until it became South Korea’s official presidential office and residence upon the country’s foundation in 1948.

The Blue House opening is part of new South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol’s pledge to abandon the palace and establish his offices at the Defense Ministry compound in the Yongsan district, about 3 miles away.

Yoon said he chose the Defense Ministry compound because it’s already equipped with security-related command facilities. He said he aims to build something similar to the White House in Washington that would let citizens have a closer look at the building over a fence. Yoon said the new



MOUNTAINSIDE LANDMARK. People take photos at the Blue House, the former presidential palace, in Seoul, South Korea, on May 12, 2022. For many South Koreans, the former presidential palace in Seoul was as shrouded in mystery as the buildings in their secretive rival North Korea. That’s now changed as thousands have been allowed a look inside for the first time in 74 years. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

offices will allow for better communication with the public.

His relocation plans, however, have faced complaints that they were rushed and unrealistic. Critics say a hasty movement of top government offices could undermine national security by concentrating too much power in one place, cost too much, and violate the property rights of people living in the area.

His predecessor, Moon Jae-in, also expressed worries that Yoon made his decision before hearing enough public opinion.

When Moon took office in 2017, he also pledged to move out in a bid to distance himself from his disgraced, jailed predecessor, Park Geun-hye, who grew up there as the daughter of a dictator. Moon eventually abandoned his plan, and Park was pardoned late last year.

Yoon, however, started his first day as president in Yongsan in May, and the ex-presidential office was opened to the public that same day.

Choi Jun Chae, 60, who runs a mill at a traditional market near the Blue House,

was sorry to see the presidential office leave his neighborhood but also hopeful that the relocation would boost local businesses by bringing in more tourists.

“Under the (former President) Lee Myung-bak administration, there were lots of protests ... so it was really hard to commute to this area. Cars couldn’t move, so I had to walk,” Choi said.

Thousands of people have gathered near the Blue House in the past for mass rallies and marches. Nearby residents said they suffered from noise and traffic congestion.

“I hope that protests decrease and more people visit the area,” Yoo Sung-jong, head of a popular bakery in the neighborhood, said. “But (the president) was here for a long time, so it is a bit sad too.”

While some people in the new presidential neighborhood expect an improvement because of the new offices, there are also worries.

“As for traffic issues, I can already see more people visiting here. It will be very crowded and complicated at first, but I think it will gradually get better,” said Kim Jung-taek, a gallery owner near the new presidential offices.

South Asia’s intense heat wave a “sign of things to come”

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India that depleted coal reserves, resulting in acute power shortages affecting millions.

Then there is the impact on human health. At least 90 people have died in the two nations, but the region’s insufficient death registration means that this is likely an undercount. South Asia is the most affected by heat stress, according to an analysis by The Associated Press of a dataset published by Columbia University’s climate school. India alone is home to more than a third of the world’s population that lives in areas where extreme heat is rising.

Experts agree the heat wave underscores the need for the world to not just combat climate change by cutting down greenhouse-gas emissions, but to also

adapt to its harmful impacts as quickly as possible. Children and the elderly are most at risk from heat stress, but its impact is also inordinately bigger for the poor who may not have access to cooling or water and often live in crowded slums that are hotter than leafier, wealthier neighborhoods.

Rahman Ali, 42, a ragpicker in an eastern suburb of the Indian capital New Delhi earns less than \$3 a day by collecting waste from people’s homes and sorting it to salvage whatever can be sold. It’s backbreaking work and his tin-roofed home in the crowded slum offers little respite from the heat.

“What can we do? If I don’t work ... we won’t eat,” said the father of two.

Some Indian cities have tried to find solutions. The western city of Ahmedabad was the first in South Asia to design a heat wave plan for its population of over 8.4 million, all the way back in 2013. The plan

includes an early warning system that tells health workers and residents to prepare for heat waves, empowers administrations to keep parks open so that people can shade, and provides information to schools so they’re able to tweak their schedules.

The city has also been trying to “cool” roofs by experimenting with various materials that absorb heat differently. Their aim is to build roofs that’ll reflect the sun and bring down indoor temperatures by using white, reflective paint or cheaper materials like dried grass, said Dr. Dileep Mavalankar, who heads the Indian Institute of Public Health in the western Indian city of Gandhinagar and helped design the 2013 plan.

Most Indian cities are less prepared and India’s federal government is now working with 130 cities in 23 heatwave-prone states for them to develop similar plans. The federal government also asked states to sensitize health workers on managing heat-related illnesses and ensure that ice packs, oral rehydration salts, and cooling appliances in hospitals were available.

But Mavalankar, who wasn’t part of the study, pointed to the lack of government warnings in newspapers or TV for most Indian cities and said that local administrations had just not “woken up to the heat.”

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content. Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receives support from several private foundations.

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