

Malaysia seeks more tests for dead pygmy elephants (Update)

February 8 2013

An initial chemical analysis on 14 Borneo pygmy elephants that died mysteriously could not conclusively determine if they were poisoned, and more tests will be conducted abroad, an official said Friday.

The endangered elephants were found dead last month in a protected forest in Sabah state on Borneo. Sabah is home to most of the remaining 1,200 Borneo pygmy elephants that exist worldwide. The elephants are feared to have been poisoned because they encroached on Malaysian plantations.

Sabah Environment Minister Masidi Manjun said the state's wildlife department would send samples to forensic testing facilities in Thailand and Australia for more comprehensive tests to determine the cause of the elephants' deaths.

"To ensure greater transparency of the entire issue, my ministry will be seeking a second opinion from other laboratories," he said in a statement.

Samples will be sent immediately to the Ramathibodi Poison Center at Thailand's Mahidol University and the chemistry lab of the Queensland Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry in Australia, he said.

Masidi said he had also directed the state's chemistry department to expand its scope of tests on more possible chemical contaminants. Department veterinarians have said the elephants suffered severe

bleeding and gastrointestinal ulcers.

The wildlife group WWF said last week that the dead elephants were found in areas being converted for plantations within permanent forest reserves, raising the prospect that they were deliberately killed by humans taking over their habitat.

Sabah, one of two Malaysian states on Borneo island, is home to endangered animals including the pygmy elephant, Sumatran rhinoceros and orangutan. Wildlife activists say their numbers have dwindled in recent decades because of illegal poaching and the loss of jungles cut down for timber and development.

Some 60 percent of Sabah is currently under forest cover, but activists say the deforestation rate is rising, with large forest areas slated for conversion to farmland or timber concession.

Masidi said police were in the midst of a very thorough investigation, including probing plantations and logging companies within the vicinity where the dead elephants were found. Two palm oil plantations and a logging company operate in the area.

"I hope people would refrain from jumping to conclusions at this point of time and wait until the case is fully investigated to avoid innocent parties being unfairly implicated," he said.

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