

Thailand returns rescued orangutans to Indonesia

November 12 2015



Orangutans caged at the Khao Pra Thab Chang Conservation Centre in Ratchaburi, Thailand, on November 11, 2015 as 14 of the apes are being prepared repatriated to Indonesia after being smuggled

A group of smuggled orangutans arrived in Indonesia from Thailand on Thursday, following years of diplomatic wrangling over who will care for them after the majority were discovered abandoned on a roadside.

Previous Thai governments sought compensation from Indonesia for the cost of housing and treating the 14 apes but the junta government in Bangkok recently waived those demands and pushed ahead with the repatriation.

Indonesia sent a C130 aircraft to collect the animals, who were loaded in metal crates onto the plane before taking off from a military airport on the northern outskirts of Bangkok earlier Thursday.

They arrived in Jakarta at around 4:00 pm (0900 GMT), with one container holding an orangutan carried out and displayed to waiting journalists before the animals were transported to a safari park outside the capital.

The ape inside banged loudly on the crate after enduring the hours-long journey, and only calmed down when he was fed peanuts through a grate.

At ceremony to welcome them at the airport, Indonesian Environment Minister Siti Nurbaya Bakar thanked all those involved in the operation "for the return of our lost children, these 14 orangutans that meant so much to us".

Illegal trafficking of rare species is rampant in Indonesia, which is home to many endangered animals, and Bakar acknowledged that "we have a big problem when it comes to poaching, looting and trading of rare wildlife".



Endangered orangutans are falling victim to a devastating haze crisis that has left them sick, malnourished and severely traumatised as fires rage through Indonesia's forests, reducing their habitat to a charred wasteland

Orangutans are native to the rainforests of Borneo and Sumatra but they are often illegally smuggled throughout Southeast Asia, either for private zoos or as pets.

'Quite fierce'

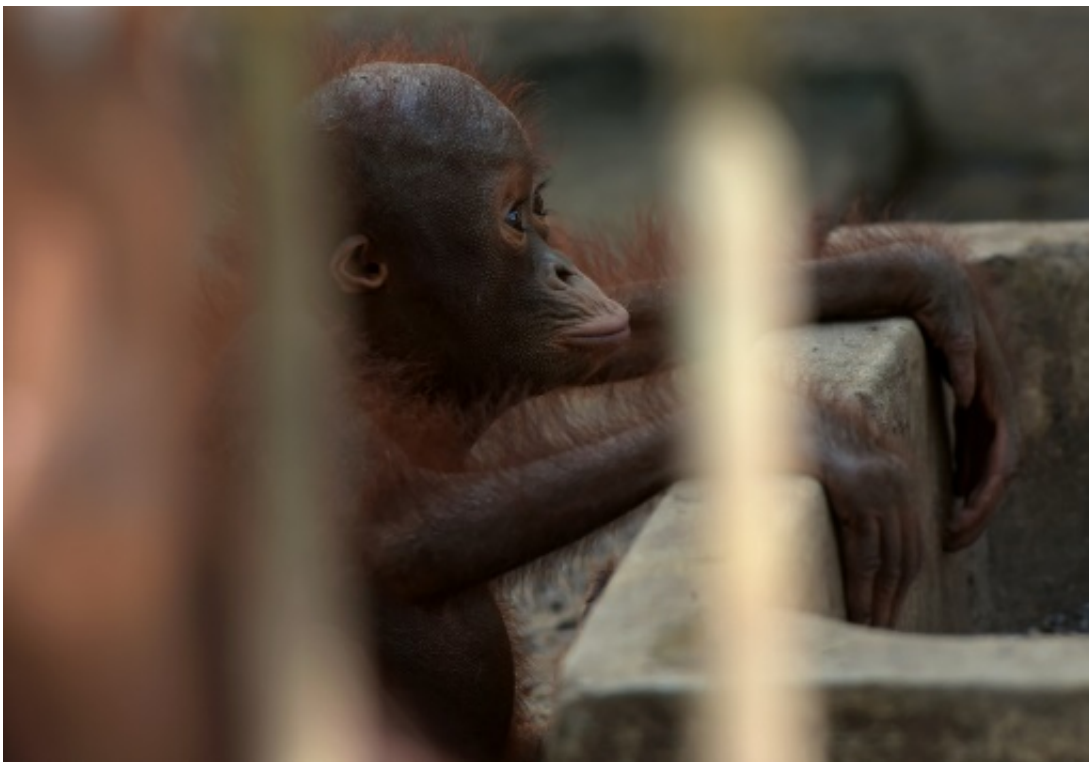
The 14 apes, who travelled to Indonesia with their Thai keeper, will undergo checks at the safari park before being reintroduced to the wild, said Bakar.

Thirteen of them are Borneo orangutans while one is Sumatran, with

nine male and five female, she said.

Despite their reputation as gentle animals, orangutans are not suitable pets. One Thai man lost a finger when one of the rescued apes bit it off.

"It happened (a) long time ago, not during the preparation of this repatriation," a wildlife official told AFP.



An orangutan looks on at the Khao Pra Thab Chang Conservation Centre in Ratchaburi, Thailand, on November 11, 2015 after being smuggled into the country from Indonesia

"It was a male orangutan who is quite fierce," he added. "They are six times stronger than human beings."

Of the 14 orangutans, 11 were found abandoned in Phuket in 2010. One was rescued elsewhere while two were born in captivity to the rescued parents.

In recent months, many apes in Indonesia have fled their forest homes after illegal fires set to cheaply clear land for plantations.



Indonesian Environment and Forestry Minister Siti Nurbaya Bakar in Jakarta inspects a container holding an orangutan sent back from Thailand after being smuggled on November 12, 2015

The fires and resulting region-wide haze occurs to varying degrees each year during the dry season, although in recent days persistent rains have doused many blazes and cleared the air across vast stretches of Southeast Asia.

Earlier this week, an animal rights group said it had released back into the wild an orangutan and her baby who were attacked by angry villagers in West Kalimantan province after straying out of their forest home to escape the fires.

Some locals view the [apes](#) as pests and there has been an increase in human-animal conflict in the area.

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