

Rampaging elephants force Myanmar villagers to tree-top refuge

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Residents stand near a tree house in the Kyauk Ye village on the outskirts of Yangon on January 14, 2016

Pushed from their forest home by encroaching farm land, wild elephants are driving fearful villagers in a Myanmar township to seek refuge in tree houses while the animals storm their rice paddies looking for food.

The elephants have trampled crops, destroyed homes and even, villagers

say, killed people in their path—forcing families in Kyat Chuang to build new shelters made of wood and bamboo on higher ground.

"We have had to move our huts into the trees, so we are safe," explained San Lwin, who dashes several metres up a tree to his thatch-roofed shelter when the elephants are near.

Villagers in Kyat Chaung, a farming community 100 kilometres north of Yangon, told AFP they yearned for the days before the elephant rampages started three years ago.

Now they scamper up home-made bamboo ladders to their elevated huts whenever they hear the thundering sound of elephant feet, which is usually several times a week.

"We want them to be taken away ... so we can live peacefully," said Than Shin, a 57-year-old farmer.

Spurred by the loss of their forest habitats, the elephants, and villagers they have been terrorising, are some of the casualties of Myanmar's alarming rate of deforestation, one of the fastest in the region.

The country lost almost 20 percent of its forest cover between 1990 and 2010, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.



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Experts say the chief drivers of forest loss are logging and large-scale land concessions for commercial agriculture handed out under decades of opaque junta rule.

Myanmar's population of wild Asian [elephants](#) is thought to be one of the largest in the region, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

But the endangered species is increasingly threatened by habitat loss, a thirst for ivory, and traffickers who smuggle the animals into Thailand for the tourist industry.

The newly-elected National League for Democracy (NLD)—the pro-democracy party of Aung San Suu Kyi that swept to a thumping majority

in landmark elections in November—said Thursday it would address Myanmar's medley of environmental issues after assuming office later this year.

"We will try to restore the environment in Myanmar that has been ruined for many decades," Soe Nyunt, vice chairman of the NLD's Environmental Conservation Committee told AFP.

"It will not be easy," he added.

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