Beat: News

Increasing violence in Mali threatens endangered elephants

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USPA News - The ongoing violence in Mali between government forces and Tuareg rebels is putting a critically endangered population of African elephants at risk, according to a two-year study by Canadian and British researchers. The Gourma elephants, which are arguably the world`s toughest elephants as they frequently endure sand storms, water shortages, and temperatures over 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit), are already facing extinction due to hunting, drought and climate changes.

It is estimated approximately 350 Gourma elephants are still alive. The Gourma elephants live in the deserts of Mali`s northern region, but the increasingly violent conflict between government forces and Tuareg rebels is threatening their survival, according to University of British Columbia and Oxford University researchers who will publish their results in the January edition of the Biological Conservation journal. "In recent years, the Mali elephants have largely managed to maintain their numbers in extreme natural conditions of heat and drought," said lead researcher Jake Wall of the University of British Columbia. "The uprising occurring in northern Mali puts them at greater risk, as does increasing human settlement in their traditional territory and the growing risk of ivory poaching." The study showed Gourma elephants have been largely spared from devastating ivory poaching which is threatening elephant populations across Africa. Only three Gourma elephants are known to have been killed by poachers so far this year, but there is increasing concern poachers may take advantage of the conflict in Mali and set their sights on the Gourma elephants. Profits from the illegal ivory trade are believed to fuel terrorist groups such as al-Shabaab, Janjaweed and the Lord`s Resistance Army. Malaysia`s Customs Department announced earlier this week that it recently seized a record 1,500 elephant tusks which originated from the West African nation of Togo. Gourma elephants are believed to be the northernmost population of elephants in the world, and they have historically enjoyed relatively peaceful coexistence with the local Tuareg, Fuhlani and Dogon peoples. But conflict between humans and elephants over space and resources are increasing as local peoples shift from pastoralism to agriculture settlements. The study, in which Gourma elephants were tracked with Global Positioning System (GPS) collars, also revealed the elephants travel more than 32,000 square kilometers (12,355 square miles) annually in search of food and water - the largest area ever recorded for any elephant species. It shows the movement of Gourma elephants is spread out over an area 150 percent larger than those reported in Namibia, and 29 percent larger than elephants in Botswana. The researchers believe their epic migration is due to the scarcity of food and water in the region, and suggest they may be forced to expand further as resources become scarcer.

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