

Health and Environmental Concerns as Ugandans Start to Eat Primates



Figure 1 Lily Ajarova, director of Ngamba Island Chimpanzee Sanctuary, is warning Ugandans of the dangers of eating primates, November 8, 2012. (H. Heuler/VOA)

From VOA Learning English, this is the Health Report in Special English.

The flow of Congolese refugees into western Uganda is raising concerns not only about food security, but also the risk of Ebola virus. Eating primates is a Congolese custom, but the monkeys, chimpanzees and other animals can carry the deadly infection.

Disease experts are calling attention to the danger. So are environmental groups, because chimps are endangered. Lily Ajarova is the director of a chimp refuge in Uganda. She says eating primates is not a traditional custom in Uganda but it is in other countries in Africa.

"Especially Central and Western African countries, there's a lot of eating of chimpanzees, and it's the biggest threat to the survival of primates in Africa. To Uganda that has not been the case, but it's an emerging issue that we are very keen to dig into right now."

She says she and her team have not yet found chimpanzees being eaten in

Uganda, but they have seen other primates being eaten.

"We have encountered local Ugandans actually hunting primates and being in possession of them, and them saying by themselves that 'Yes, we are going to eat them.'"

She points out that in traditional Ugandan culture, primates are protected as totem animals, or animals representing a clan.

Over the past year, tens of thousands more refugees have crossed into Uganda, fleeing war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Daniel Molla of the United Nations World Food Program says most of these refugees live in organized settlements. But he says cuts in food aid have increased pressure on local communities as refugees buy food from the same markets as Ugandans.

But Dr. Monday Busuulwa with the African Field Epidemiology Network says even just handling the meat of infected primates can spread Ebola.

"In the 2007 Bundibugyo outbreak, they confirmed to us that they eat these primates. People who have slaughtered sick chimpanzees or gorillas which are infected with Ebola, and they have butchered them for food, they have ended up getting infected with Ebola. There is a very high likelihood that communities where people eat these non-human primates -- the monkeys, the chimpanzees -- are likely to get Ebola."

Over the past year alone, Uganda has suffered from three deadly outbreaks of the virus. Most of the recent outbreaks have happened in the west.

Environmental groups in Uganda are trying to teach people about protecting primates and about the dangers of eating them. But more and more Congolese refugees are arriving every day. As a result, the World Food Program warns that food insecurity in western Uganda is only likely to get worse.