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Indonesia Forest Fires, Attacks Kill 1,000 Orangutans

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INDONESIA: November 7, 2007

JAKARTA - About 1,000 orangutans are estimated to have died in Indonesia during the dry season this year in which raging forest fires have produced thick smoke across huge areas of Southeast Asia, a conservationist said on Monday.

The fires in the Indonesian part of Borneo have deprived orangutans of food and forced them to encroach on human settlements, where they are often attacked for damaging crops, the Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation said.

"Orangutans are starving. They are sick and many of those we are treating were injured after being attacked by machetes," Willie Smits, an ecologist at the foundation told Reuters, adding that many also suffered from respiratory problems.

He said 120 sick orangutans had been treated in three conservation centres over the past three months, and 10 to 15 of them had died.

He estimated that in all 1,000 orangutans had died over this year's dry season.

Orangutans live on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra, but encroachment on their habitats by humans and massive destruction of forests is threatening their existence.

In 2002, it was estimated there were 56,000 orangutans in the wild but the population has dwindled at a rate of 6,000 a year, conservationists say.

Heavy rain brought a respite to fires in Borneo's Kota Waringin Barat where about 6,000 orangutans live at the Tanjung Puting national park, the park's director Bambang Darmaji said.

"The weather here is all clear," he told Reuters.

But the airport in Palangkaraya, the capital of Central Kalimantan province, remained closed due to poor

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visibility, its director Jamaluddin Hasibuan said.

Most of the annual dry season fires are deliberately lit by farmers or at the behest of timber and oil palm plantation companies.

Indonesia's neighbours, Singapore and Malaysia have grown increasingly frustrated by the fires which triggered fears of a repeat of the choking situation that hit the region in 1997-98.

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