

Pachyderm Patrols Fend Off Elephants Rioting in Sumatra

'Flying Squad' Beats Back Herds That Kill People And Devastate Plantations

By TOM WRIGHT

TESSO NILO, Indonesia—If you're trying to keep the peace between man and beast, it helps to have the elephant "Flying Squad" on your side.

On the Indonesian island of Sumatra, deadly clashes between rare Asian elephants and human be-



ings have become common as plantations of oil palm and coffee have pushed deeper into once-pristine forests. Since 2002, 100 elephants and 42 people have died as a result, including a three-year-old girl and her mother who were trampled in June. Villagers and plantation owners have poisoned and shot elephants to protect their homes and crops.

Into this volatile mix, the World Wildlife Fund, the conservation group in Geneva, thought it would be a good idea to introduce more elephants, but on the farmers' side. Three years ago, it set up what it calls the Flying Squad of four trained elephants. Using techniques dating to ancient battles, Indonesian mahouts, or elephant keepers, ride atop their trained elephants against wild herds in order to force them away from plantations and back to the jungle.

The effort has been so successful at reducing crop damage in one area on

Please turn to page A15

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

FROM PAGE ONE

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Continued from Page One

the border of the Tesso Nilo National Park in Sumatra's Riau Province—home to about 90 elephants and to rare Sumatran tigers—that a number of large palm-oil plantations in the area are now setting up their own elephant police teams with the WWF's help. Nobody—neither man nor elephant—has been killed in conflicts around the park since the project began.

"Before the Flying Squad, local people were saying they wanted to kill the elephants," says Dani Rahadian, a campaign officer at the WWF's Riau office. "But they are not angry anymore, as the Flying Squad is helping to protect their palm-oil plantations."

Last month, PT Peputra Supra Jaya, a company that runs a 20,000-acre palm-oil plantation near Tesso Nilo, asked the local government to help after a herd of wild elephants began eating its crops. The cash-strapped government turned to the Flying Squad, which trucked in two male elephants—Indro and Rahman—from their base about two hours away. Indro derives from the Madagascan word for woodsman. Rahman is an Arabic name meaning compassionate. Scouting the palm-oil plantation in four-wheel-drive vehicles, the mahouts looked for signs of the wild elephants, such as footprints and broken foliage. Then, near dusk, a radio call came in from a plantation manager: Three elephants had just attacked a group of farmers before crashing back into the forest.

Atop the Flying Squad elephants, the mahouts quickly picked up the trail, hacking a path through the dense jungle foliage with short knives. As usual, the mahouts avoid direct confrontation by combining their trained elephants with scare tactics.

When the wild elephants were within earshot, Joni Saptajaya, a 28-year-old mahout, readied a mix of calcium carbide and water, which, when ignited, makes a loud noise. Using an improvised cannon made from plastic tubes, he let off a volley from the top of Rahman. The wild herd, startled by the noise, stampeded deeper into the jungle, averting a trunk-to-trunk encounter.

Often these meetings are more bruising. Rahman, 22 years old, and Indro, 20, had been trained to fight in mock battles in which their tusks were wrapped in cloth to keep them from hurting each other. Last year, the pair made use of their training in forcing a much larger male elephant away from a village, with Rahman leading the charge.

Mr. Saptajaya, like the seven other mahouts on the team, is paid about \$100 a month to ride the elephants on missions. That is about twice what he was paid to train elephants to do tricks for foreign tourists in a government-run camp in Lampung Province on the southern tip of Sumatra. "I prefer this job," says Mr. Saptajaya, who works in long pants, a T-shirt and rubber boots.

Not everyone is happy with the squad's work. Samson Siregar, operations manager for Peputra, says the wild animals may be gone for now but they will come back looking for food. "It's better to put the elephants in a camp," he says. But with the state elephant camp in Riau already overcrowded, and many of the inhabitants underfed, the government is refusing to do that.

"By setting up plantations so near Tesso Nilo, companies have to anticipate elephants coming in," says Syamsuardi, who has run the Flying Squad for the WWF since it was created in 2004. In the wild, ele-



The 'Flying Squad' uses trained elephants against wild herds to force them away from plantations.

phants can be among nature's fiercest creatures. African tuskers are able to crush lions and even rhinoceroses. Before gunpowder, they were often deployed by generals to destroy enemy infantry lines and to trample prisoners to death. In the third century B.C., Hannibal, Carthage's renowned military commander, famously drove African elephants across Spain and over the Alps to attack the Romans.

In the Flying Squad, by learning to act together, the elephants have often been able to scare off herds of as many as 20 animals without violence.

The WWF acknowledges its little team of four elephants is too small to patrol every conflict and is urging companies to set up their own pachyderm police squads. A company owned by Raja Garuda Mas, a Singapore company with palm-oil plantations in the area, this year began its first patrols. But the available squads still fall far short of what is needed, especially in the most impoverished and remote parts of Sumatra.

In Ulu Semong village, located in the western highlands of Lampung Province, the coffee farmers say they won't venture into their fields after the death of the girl and her mother this past summer. Darwin, a coffee trader who is head of the village, shows grisly photos of what he says are the victims' remains. Foraging elephants trampled the pair as they slept in a hut on the edge of a plantation. "I never saw elephants coming into human areas like this," he says.

The district in which Ulu Semong is located is the center of the worst recent hu-

man-elephant conflict on Sumatra, with 10 people dying in the past two years. Many elephants have died, too. Just four wild elephants are left there, down from 22 in 2001, the WWF says. During a recent visit, the surviving herd was seen taking shelter in a tiny swath of natural forest, hemmed in between coffee plantations and small roads. At the approach of people, the herd charged forward aggressively but stopped short of making an attack.

Unlike Tesso Nilo, where the Singapore company Raja Garuda Mas has built a broad access road, Ulu Semong is remote and served by a muddy track that is impassable in the rainy season. And the area is so overrun by coffee plantations that there isn't much forest left as a natural home for the elephants.

The village wants the government to move the four remaining wild elephants to a camp, but so far the state has done nothing. So, villagers have taken them into their own hands. In July, an elephant was found dead. An autopsy carried out by the WWF found food laced with poison in the beast's stomach.

Mr. Darwin says Ulu Semong's residents hate the elephants, but he denies that people there were responsible for the killing. He blames it on a neighboring village.

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Joni Saptajaya