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Elephants with hearts and flowers painted on their bodies sprayed water at revelers celebrating Thailand's traditional new year Thursday, in an annual event which has animal protection groups crying foul over animal cruelty. In Thailand's former capital Ayutthaya, a tourist hotspot famed for its ancient temple ruins, more than a dozen elephants walked along the streets with their handlers on their backs, splashing and spraying water at locals and foreigners under a blistering sun. The soaking by the pachyderms kicks off a weekend of festivities for Songkran, the traditional Buddhist new year celebration which officially begins on April 13.

Revelers "can come to pay respects to Buddha and offer alms to monks in the morning and in the afternoon play water with the elephants," said Laithongren Meehan, owner of the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp. "(Using their trunks to spray water) is the elephants' natural way of playing," he added. Traditionally marked by paying respects to elders and sprinkling water over Buddha figures at local temples, the Songkran holiday has largely evolved into a raucous water fight. Locals and for-

eigners armed with water guns and protective goggles engage in soggy street parties, bringing much of the country to a standstill. "In other provinces, they have foam parties. But in Ayutthaya, you can celebrate Songkran with the elephants," Laithongren told AFP.

Their handlers, known as mahouts, have trained the giant mammals to do tricks like lifting their front foot in greeting or gyrating their bodies to music as if they were dancing—much to the delight of revelers. Such practices are "cruel," said Tom Taylor of Wildlife Friend Foundation Thailand, which rescues and rehabilitates domesticated elephants. "Forcing the elephants to perform unnatural behaviors is normally done through fear using a sharp tool called a bull hook," Taylor told AFP. His organization allows 24 rescued elephants to roam, bathe and forage freely, while tourists can learn about how the mammals should be treated with respect—"not chained up, beaten or ridden", he said. Thailand has one of the highest populations of captive elephants in the world, and—as the country's national animal—they are predominantly used in tourism, where customers are eager to feed them or ride on their backs for a price. — AFP