



This picture shows volunteer from Mehmankhana, a non-profit organization, preparing food for pandemic affected people during a lockdown to contain the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, at Lalmatia area. — AFP photos

No animal left behind: Kenya holds first national wildlife census

The flimsy planes tethered to metal drums to prevent them from accidentally becoming airborne are unlikely weapons in Kenya's fight to protect threatened species as it conducts its first national wildlife census. Decades of unbridled poaching, expanding human settlements and climate change have taken a heavy toll on the global wildlife population—and central Kenya is no exception. African savanna elephants have been particularly hard-hit, with their numbers plunging by at least 60 percent during the last half-century, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

So the pilots preparing their aircraft at the tiny airport at Isiolo know they are on the frontlines of a battle with far-reaching consequences. "Elephants are the key animals, but when you are able to locate (any) endangered species, you feel like the census is on the right track," pilot Chris Cheruiyot tells AFP as he fastens the safety belt of his passenger, Julius Kabete. A camera and audio recorder dangling from his neck, Kabete will spend the next few hours counting Somali giraffes, Grevy's zebras, oryxes and other animals as the pair cruise the windy skies and refuel their two-seater Aviat Husky aircraft at specially set up stations in the forest.



The ambitious exercise, which kicked off in May, covers major species in more than 50 of Kenya's national parks and reserves as well as private and community conservancies, and includes marine life. Much of the existing data on the country's wildlife population are gathered individually by local advocacy groups or international conservationists, contributing to a scattershot approach to animal protection. Furthermore, training spotters is often both time-consuming and expensive. —AFP

Bangladesh street kitchens battle to keep free food on the menu

Mohammad Masud braves Dhaka's sweltering summer heat to pedal across the Bangladeshi capital in his rickshaw and queue at one of the last charities still feeding those left destitute by the pandemic. Nearby are hundreds of out-of-work or struggling security guards, transport workers, domestic servants and homeless children finishing their plates of rice and lentils at Mehmankhana, or the "dining place for guests". "I have been hungry all day," 28-year-old Masud told AFP. "I did not make enough to buy food." When Bangladesh shut down for more than two months last year during its first COVID outbreak, hundreds of charities, civic groups and political parties gave out food, cash, masks and sanitizer to those who had lost their jobs.

But coronavirus fatigue has set in and people have become less willing to finance the goodwill as the pandemic drags on. A new lockdown started in July, but only a handful of charities are on the streets. "Last year we got a lot of cash donations," said Jashim Uddin Khan of the Shonge Achi Foundation, a group helping feed needy people, stray dogs and even monkeys in Dhaka. "This year we haven't had many donations. There is a major fatigue for charity work." Official figures say more than 20,000 Bangladeshis have died of coronavirus, though experts say the toll is at least four times higher.

2020, which helped bring down the poverty rate to 20 percent. The SANEM research foundation says the rate has shot back up to 40 percent during the pandemic as businesses, schools and government offices have shut down. While the government has allowed some garment factories to reopen and spent \$15 billion on stimulus packages, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs. Groups like Mehmankhana have stepped up operations but more and more people are suffering hunger.



Pandemic affected people eating food distributed by Mehmankhana.

"There are days when I only have one meal," said Johra Begum, a 27-year-old mother of four in the Mehmankhana queue, who lost her job as a domestic servant. Asma Akhter Liza, a 36-year-old actress, and her cousin launched Mehmankhana in March last year after the start of the first nationwide lockdown in Bangladesh. They say they feed more than 2,500 people a day and are proud to tell patrons that they can "eat as much as you like". Liza said she resolved to start the charity after seeing children trying to break into a food store while she was out feeding street dogs. "I thought stray dogs would be the hardest hit during the lockdown," she said.

"But then I saw this break-in and I realized many thousands of people, including many who had decent jobs before the lockdown, are going hungry." At first she borrowed money to fund the kitchen, but now gets private donations from across the country. Liza said many middle-class people now come to the street kitchen in the evening "when they can enjoy some kind of anonymity". Around 10,000 people ate there for the recent Eid Al-Adha Muslim festival, she said. One of her patrons is Selim Ahmed, a 45-year-old trader who said his daily income had shrunk to less than 100 taka (\$1.20). "Many people would have gone hungry if Mehmankhana wasn't here," he said. — AFP

Economic toll

Bangladesh recorded economic growth averaging seven percent in the decade to