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Aerial view of camels inside a corral next to a household in the outskirts of the city of Hargeisa, Somaliland. — AFP photos



A camel, belonging to the herd of Ali Abdi Elmi, walks in the outskirts of the city of Hargeisa.



Ali Abdi Elmi milks one of his camels.

Milk, meat and might: In Somalia, 'the camel is king'

The nomad was thirsty, and the journey into the Somali desert would be long and taxing. Turning to one of his beloved camels, Ali Abdi Elmi squeezed fresh milk into a wooden urn, and took a deep drink. "I have five children, and we all depend on camel milk to survive," said Elmi, passing the pot to one of his sons, who took a swig of the rich brew. For many Somalis, the camel is a gift from the gods: a source of milk and meat, a beast of burden in the desert and-as climate change spurs extreme weather in the Horn of Africa-insurance in times of crisis.

An animal of haughty and cantankerous repute, in Somalia the camel is celebrated in songs and folklore, a symbol of status and prosperity, and exchanged in marriages or to settle feuds. In this overwhelmingly rural society of 15 million, the rearing of camels and other livestock underpins an economy devastated by war and natural disaster that ranks among the world's very poorest. The livestock industry is the main contributor to economic growth in Somalia and in normal years accounts for 80 percent of exports, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Camels are far outnumbered by sheep and goats, which wander Hargeisa in



Camels, belonging to the herd of Ali Abdi Elmi, feed themselves in the outskirts of the city of Hargeisa.

northern Somalia with their owner's phone numbers scrawled on their sides, should they get lost and need returning. But at seven million beasts, there are more camels in Somalia than almost anywhere else, and they don't just confer respect on their owners-they fetch much higher prices. "We don't have crude oil in this country. Camels are our crude oil," said Abdi Rashid, a trader clad in aviator sunglasses

and tan safari suit at Hargeisa's biggest livestock market.

Cultural icon

An impressive specimen can carry a \$1,000 (860 euros) price tag, said Khosar Abdi Hussein, who oversees the market where camel milk is sold fresh and even camel urine-believed to have health benefits-is bottled. A sale is made by locking hands under the checkered shawls carried by herders. The number of knuckles tapped and fingers grasped determines the price-a tradition to ensure negotiations are kept private. The transaction is completed by a mobile money transfer, a modern touch to an ancient way of doing business.

"Camels are important to Somali culture because one is always considered wealthy, or can rise in social status, by the number of camels they have," said Hussein, who stressed that he had nine of his own. But in Somalia, where nearly seven out of 10 live in poverty according to the World Bank, few can afford one camel, let alone many. Elmi is among the two-thirds of Somalis dependent on livestock, and though he isn't making lucrative deals at the city market, his camels are a godsend in other ways. Camels still produce milk during drought, sating nomads who can go



Ali Abdi Elmi drinks from a cup filled with camel milk.

a month in the dry lands consuming nothing else. "The milk is good for us, because camels graze from trees with medicinal properties that help combat diseases," said Elmi, a wiry 40-year-old with skin leathery by the sun.

In lean times, he can still buy essentials for his family by selling milk to vendors in Hargeisa, where fresh bottles are available daily on the streets. In a real pinch, a camel can be slaughtered and its meat sold in town, where it is a local delicacy.

Harsh life

The pastoral life is a difficult one, made more so by increasingly erratic rainfall over the Horn of Africa, a region US scientists

say is drying faster now than at any other time in the past 2,000 years. Nomads are being forced to travel greater distances to find water and grazing land for their prized beasts, whose reputation as 'ships of the desert' is being sorely tested by a changing climate. Thousands of camels and other livestock drowned when Cyclone Gati-the strongest tropical storm to ever make land-fall in Somalia-turned deserts into seas in late 2020.

Two years earlier, a prolonged drought thinned herds in some parts of the country by 60 percent, the FAO said. The loss of livestock invariably spells hunger in Somalia, and destitute herders have fled to cities by the millions in recent years as life on the land has become unsustainable. In the northern region of Somaliland, local authorities want to resettle people along its Gulf of Aden coastline-an inconceivable prospect for some hardy desert folk. "I don't see our way of life changing anytime soon," said Khosar Farrah, a grizzled 68-year-old who has been herding camels for half a century. Hussein, too, couldn't picture nomads taking up fishing in a hurry. "Here, the camel is king," he said, chuckling. — AFP



Ali Abdi Elmi walks with his herd of camels in the outskirts of the city of Hargeisa.

Sumatran baby elephant dies after trunk snared in poacher trap

A critically endangered Sumatran baby elephant has died after losing half of its trunk in a poacher's trap, Indonesian conservation officials said. The one-year-old calf succumbed to a severe infection, two days after it was found by villagers in Aceh Jaya and despite subsequent efforts to save its life by amputating the rest of its injured trunk. "We couldn't save it because the injury was severe and infected," Agus Arianto, head of the Aceh Natural Resources Conservation Agency, said Tuesday. "We did our best to help it." Rampant deforestation has reduced the elephants' habitat and brought them into increasing conflict with humans, while their tusks are prized in the illegal wildlife trade. There have been several incidents involving pachyderm deaths over the past few years, including one in July when a Sumatran elephant was found decapitated with its tusks ripped off. — AFP



Give the dog a phone: Device could ease pain for lonely mutts

Does your chihuahua crave a chinwag or the Yorkie want to yak, the greyhound needs to gossip and the corgi loves a chat? Lonely dogs could soon be able to call their absent owners using a new device invented by animal-tech scientists in Britain and Finland, they said yesterday. The DogPhone works when the pet shakes a ball fitted with an accelerometer, which triggers a nearby laptop to make a video call to the owner's device. It was invented by the University of Glasgow's Ilyena Hirskyj-Douglas, with help from her Labrador Zack, and colleagues from Aalto University in Finland.

After Hirskyj-Douglas showed "lab assistant" Zack how to make a call using the ball, he was given the toy to play with for 16 days. Despite being hounded with some accidental calls, Zack used the prototype device to contact his owner and show off his toys. Hirskyj-Douglas, a specialist in animal-computer interaction, responded by showing the pet her office, a restaurant and a street busker, causing Zack to approach the screen.

"Of course, we can't know for sure that Zack was aware of the causal link between picking up the ball and making a call, or even that some of the interactions which seemed accidental were actually unintended on his part," she said. "However, it's clear that on some occasions he was definitely interested in what he was seeing, and that he displayed some of the same behaviors he shows when we are physically together." The team hopes the DogPhone, which is undergoing further testing, could help ease separation anxiety suffered by "pandemic puppies" who became used to constant human contact during lockdowns. — AFP