Chimpanzees terrorise Mubende residents



As evening descends on Ssegenya, parents usher children indoors earlier than before. Farmers move in groups. Conservationists repeatedly return to a single question: who bears responsibility when wildlife arrives at the doorstep?

BY BARBRA NALWEYISO

In Ssegenya Village, West Division of Mubende Municipality, Mubende District, dusk no longer signals resting. It signals vigilance.

For weeks, residents have lived under the shadow of chimpanzees straying into homesteads and gardens, leaving behind fear, injury and renewed anger over what locals describe as institutional inaction.

The latest victim is a one-and-a-half-year-old boy, the son of Rose Asiimwe, now nursing injuries at Mubende Regional Referral Hospital, after he was attacked while in a garden with his mother.

What conservationists may interpret as ecological spillover for the people of Ssegenya is an existential threat to the community.

On the afternoon of the attack on April 22, she had gone to dig in a garden where she works as a casual labourer. As she tended to a garden of beans, she briefly placed her child on the ground beside her; she could not carry him on her back and dig at the same time. Moments later, she heard piercing cries.

"I didn't see where it came from," she says, seated beside her child's hospital bed. "I only heard him screaming. I tried to chase it away and raised an alarm. But it ran after me. I ran faster, asking for help. People came and chased it. That is how it abandoned my baby."

The child sustained injuries on his arm and deep wounds on his buttocks and private parts. He remains under medical care. Asiimwe says she has been asked to purchase prescribed medicines, but lacks the means to do so. She is appealing to Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) to meet her child's medical bills.

Residents attribute the recurring attacks to environmental degradation. They accuse the National Forestry Authority (NFA) of leasing out forestry land where chimpanzees previously lived. Indigenous trees, they say, were cleared and replaced with eucalyptus plantations — a specie that offers little to sustain primates. "Yesterday we were told chimpanzees spent the night in people's homes in Kyanasiki Village," Ronald Ssemuyumba, a resident of Ssegenya Village says.

The residents says UWA must immediately intervene. "We want these chimpanzees to be taken to a gazetted area, away from people. Does government value wild animals more than human beings? I don't even think that the woman will be compensated, because even another resident who was killed earlier was not compensated," says Mr Ssemuyumba.

His voice hardens as he says: "If they refuse to take away their chimpanzees, we will take matters into our own hands. We will defend ourselves."

This attack is not the first one. In 2024, residents recount, a two-year-old child, who was killed in a similar incident. That tragedy was followed by promises of intervention, but locals say no lasting solution materialised.

The recurrence of such attacks has reignited accusations that authorities have been reactive rather than preventive.

Environmental experts describe the phenomenon as habitat fragmentation — the breaking up of continuous forest cover into smaller, isolated patches. When natural food sources diminish, wildlife is compelled to venture into human settlements in search of sustenance. In such context, conflict ceases to be accidental; it becomes structurally embedded in patterns of land use and survival.

For families like Assimwe's, the crisis is compounded by economic vulnerability. The garden where she works is rented. Every missed day translates into lost income. Medical expenses, meanwhile, accumulate with unrelenting certainty.

In rural and peri-urban communities where subsistence agriculture predominates, the margin between survival and deprivation is narrow. An injured child or an unexpected hospital bill can destabilise an entire household.

Although Uganda's wildlife legislation provides for compensation of victims of wildlife-related harm, bureaucratic processes and evidentiary requirements often delay redress. Residents further claim that victims of previous attacks have not received compensation.

When contacted, Mr Bashir Hangi, the UWA spokesperson, he described the incident as unfortunate. "We are not happy to hear such cases. We request the community to promptly report these incidents so we can mobilise and rescue them from these animals, and also rescue the animals themselves" he said.

Mr Hangi cautioned the public against retaliatory attacks on wildlife. "Sometimes community members attempt to kill these animals, which should not happen. We do not want to see community members killed or injured by animals. Likewise, we do not want to see animals injured or killed by community members," he added.

Uganda's chimpanzees constitute both an ecological asset and a pillar of wildlife tourism. Protecting them is a statutory obligation and an economic imperative.

Yet conservation successes risk erosion when neighbouring communities perceive wildlife as a liability rather than a shared heritage.

Without habitat restoration, clear boundary demarcation, community sensitisation and where feasible, translocation, coexistence becomes precarious. Conservationists warn that harming chimpanzees would violate wildlife protection laws and undermine national conservation goals.

As evening descends on Ssegenya, parents usher children indoors earlier than before. Farmers move in groups. Conversationists repeatedly return to a single question: who bears responsibility when the forest recedes and wildlife arrives at the doorstep?

For Rose Asiimwe, the debate is neither ecological nor philosophical. It is measured in hospital prescriptions, interrupted sleep and the memory of her child's cries.

What they say...

Rescue mission. It is unfortunate that the child was injured. We are not happy to hear such news. We request the community to promptly report these incidents so we can mobilise and rescue them from wild animals, and also rescue the animals from people," Mr Bashir Hangi, UWA spokesperson.

Ronald Ssemuga, Nsegenya Village chairperson, checks on the injured boy at Mubende hospital. PHOTO BY BARBRA NALWEYISO

