

sunday feature

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Worrying. At least 10 babies have been grabbed by chimpanzees from their mothers and taken into the Bunyoro forests in the last four years.



Why chimpanzees are taking human babies

Chimp attack. Expert says incidents point to an overlap between the needs of human communities and those of chimpanzees.

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HOIMA. On Sunday June 3, Oliver Kemigisa decided to excuse herself from her routine gardening. After all it was the Martyrs Day when the country was celebrating the heroic sacrifice of the first African converts that were killed at Namugongo, near Kampala.

The housewife, who is a resident of Kyamajaaka Village in Muhorro Town Council in Kagadi District, did not anticipate that the events that would occur in her courtyard would attract national and international attention, and put the life of her little ones in grave danger.

She kept attending to her two babies as well as engaging in her domestic chores.

In the evening, she started preparing dinner as the babies rested on the veranda of her home.

While in her makeshift kitchen, which was about 15 metres away from where she left the babies, Kemigisa heard the babies crying out loudly.

Terrified and curious to know what was causing the babies to cry, Kemigisa ran out of the kitchen, heading to where she had left them.

"I saw a group of chimpanzees surrounding the babies. Two (chimpanzees) were holding my three months old baby while the three-year-old boy was also surrounded," Kemigisa says.

She shouted at the beasts but they were unmoved. With little hope of success, she decided to dare them.

"Instead of losing my babies, I decided to take a risk. I made a huge alarm as I charged towards them. By good luck, they ran away," Kemigisa says.

Unfortunately, they ran away with her three-month-old baby into a nearby bush.

She cried out aloud as she made an alarm calling for help from her neighbours, who rushed to her home.

A search and rescue mission was successful. The chimpanzees abandoned the baby in a bush and fled into a thicket. The baby was found unconscious and with minor bruises. He was rushed to Muhorro Health Centre III.

Chimp attacks

The incident is one of the several attacks of chimpanzees on children in

DID YOU KNOW?

Facts about chimpanzees

- Chimps share 98 per cent of genes with humans making them our closest living relative.
- Chimps give birth every four to five years and look after their infants for 10 to 12 years before they are old enough to survive on their own.
- Chimps live in communities that split up and join again later unlike gorillas who stay together.
- Chimps have cultural differences – communities have different life styles.
- Chimps can use tools. They use rocks to crack nuts, sticks to fish for termites, and make sponges from leaves to soak up water for drinking from hollows in trees.
- Chimps periodically organise hunts to catch monkeys or small antelopes for food.

Bunyoro Sub-region.

A three-year-old child was injured on May 25, 2018 in her village when she went to the well to collect water with her friends.

Upon reaching the well with her friends, they saw a male chimpanzee. Her older friends ran and left her behind.

"The chimpanzee carried her to the nearest forest patch and tried hiding her by covering her with grass as she cried," Rogers Kyomuhendo, a resident in the area, says.

An elderly man, who was heading to the well, heard the child crying in the forest and he reportedly saw the chimpanzee with the baby and made an alarm, which forced the chimpanzee to run away, leaving the child behind.

She sustained bruises on her body and she was rushed to St Florence Clinic where she received treatment.

On May 30, a 12-year-old child got injured in Karusigwa Village in Muhorro Town Council as he followed his friends to a rice garden.

According to eye witnesses, one chimpanzee got hold of him and he sustained a deep wound on his arm.

He was rushed to Kakibogo Medical Centre in Kagadi Town Council and his injuries were treated.

A one-year-old boy was injured between 10am and 11am on June 21, 2017 in Karusigwa East Village, Muhorro Town Council in Kagadi District after he was allegedly carried into the forest from a garden by a chimpanzee, which was being chased by residents.

The baby was taken from the garden where his mother, Gorretti Tumuramwe and other women were digging. When the women saw the chimp grab the baby and run into the forest, they made an alarm and the community members gathered to carry out a search and rescue mission.

"We found the baby dropped in the forest with a deep cut on his left thigh" Tumuramwe says.

A two-and-half-year-old girl died on May 19, 2017 in Kahyoro A Village, Muhorro Town Council, Kagadi District after she was carried into the forest by a chimpanzee that was being chased by the community.

The baby was carried from her parents' house into the forest and her body was found by her family and community with her stomach ripped open and her intestines outside, says the area district councilor, Mr Medard Ahumuza.

The victim's father, Mr John Kaijuka and mother, one Kenegra had just moved into the village from Kyenjojo District to work as casual labourers.

The girl's body was reportedly taken for burial at her ancestral home in Kyen-



Cousin. A male chimpanzee. Wild apes are our closest relatives. STOCK PHOTO

jojo District.

Conservationists explain

Mr Nebert Kasozi Atuhura, a conservation programme officer at the Chimpanzee Trust, a non-governmental organisation that promotes conservation of chimps, argues that the incidents point to an overlap between the needs of the community and those of chimpanzees.

"The chimpanzees and residents are struggling for water and food in the same location," Atuhura says.

He adds that the degradation of gombe Forest Reserve, which provides food and habitat for chimpanzees, has caused chimps to search for food in the surrounding communities in search of food habitat.

Without available food in their habitat, the chimpanzees will look for foods in the neighbouring community, Atuhura argues.

While explaining cases of kidnapping babies in the forest, Atuhura says chimpanzees are very curious animals.



200,000

The number of chimpanzees left in the world



CAUTION. The wildlife conservation agency has also advised community members to refrain from going with sugar cane, bananas and other fruits to water points near forests that have chimp populations.

If they see a mother cuddling a baby, the chimps would wish to emulate that and also carry the baby, he says.

The injuries sustained by babies, he says are a result of shrubs and trees scratching the victims but not deliberate injuries afflicted by chimps.

He adds that chimps are naturally shy animals unless they are provoked or habituated.

Dr Patrick Byakagaba, a lecturer at Makerere University's School of Forestry, says the more their habitats get degraded, the more chimps get exposed to humans.

The chimps reluctantly go to human habitats to search for food because their preferred foods are wild fruits, which are usually in forests.

There is need to conserve forests and protect chimp habitats, Byakagaba advises.

On the attacks on babies and other community members by chimps, Dr Byakagaba says such incidents will cause a negative attitude towards chimps in the affected communities.

He proposes that government and conservation agencies set up a community resilience fund that gives incentives to communities that neighbour chimpanzees and other wild animals.

"Such a fund would motivate communities to protect the wild animals" he suggests.

UWA interventions

Mr Wilson Kagoro, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) warden in charge of community conservation at Kibaale National Park, also agrees that recent incidents of chimps attacking babies are because they have lost their habitat, which prompts them to stray into areas where humans have settled in search of food and habitats.

Chimpanzees are territorial animals, Kagoro says. "They usually want to defend their territories" he adds.

Asked if there is a possibility of translocating the chimpanzees from Muhorro Town Council as demanded by some affected communities, Kagoro says it is difficult.

When you do that, the females may survive but the males will not be embraced in any other chimp population, Kagoro says.

The translocated chimps will either kill the chimps they find in a new place or the chimps found in a place would kill the new arrivals.

UWA plans to meet the medical



Victim, Teddy Kaahwa with her daughter, who was injured by a chimp in June, 2012.



Recovered, Rosemary Nyangoma with her son, who was injured by a chimp in Hoima in September 2014.

bill of the families of the babies that were injured by chimps in Kagadi District, Kagoro says.

"Much as the law does not require us to compensate them, we shall meet the bills on humanitarian grounds" he says.

As a precautionary measure, UWA has advised communities living adjacent to chimp populations to avoid sending children for firewood in the forest.

The wildlife conservation agency has also advised community members to refrain from going with sugar cane, bananas and other fruits to water points near forests that have chimp populations.

The hungry chimps attack such people to grab the fruits from them, Kagoro says.

Communities have also been advised to avoid taking dogs into forests that host chimps.

"Dogs provoke chimps," Atuhura says, "We are teaching communities on dos and don'ts that will help them to co-exist with wildlife."

Living with chimps

Mr Julius Kwamya Nyakoojo, a cocoa farmer in Kiseke Village, Kitoba Sub-county in Hoima District, says for more than 20 years, he has struggled to co-exist with chimpanzees.

"I tried to guard and chase them away from my cocoa plantation but they would hide and encroach on areas which were unguarded," Kwamya

ATTACKS

June 3, 2018: A three-month-old baby was kidnapped by chimps at its parents' home in Kyamajaaka Village in Muhorro Town Council in Kagadi District. The baby was later rescued by residents. He sustained minor bruises.

May 25, 2018: A three-year-old child was grabbed and dragged in the bush by a chimp. She was rescued by residents. She sustained bruises.

May 30, 2018: A 12-year-old child assaulted by a chimp in Karusigwa Village in Muhorro Town Council. He sustained injuries.

June 21, 2017: A one-year-old boy was carried into the forest by a chimpanzee in Karusigwa East Village, Muhorro Town Council in Kagadi District. He was rescued by residents. He sustained injuries.

May 19, 2017: A two-and-half-year-old girl died in Kahyoro A Village, Muhorro Town Council, Kagadi District after she was carried into the forest by a chimpanzee. Her body was found in the forest, with her stomach ripped open.

says. He is currently working with conservation officials to lay a strategy of preventing the human-wildlife conflict in his village.

Hoima District has chimpanzees in various forest fragments in areas of Bulindi, Rwebiteera Hill in Bugame Sub-county, Nyabuhere and Ijumangabo villages near Wambabya Forest in Buseruka Sub-county.

Chimps are also found in Itohya Forest and in forest patches in Kichompyo Village in Kiziranfumbi Sub-county in Hoima District.

Conservationists have also located chimp populations in Kiryangobe, Kiseke, Kyampuro in Kitoba Sub-county.

Chimpanzees are endangered species because they are rare and declining rapidly across Africa. International laws protect chimpanzees because they are threatened by extinction.

Dangers and features of chimps

Conservationists say chimpanzees are illegally hunted for meat in some parts of Uganda.

In some incidents, chimpanzees are killed or maimed by wire traps set for antelopes and baboons in the forests.

The UWA says chimpanzees are the second most popular primate among tourists who visit Uganda, after the mountain gorillas.

Chimpanzees are man's closest cousins and exhibit so many human behaviours such as living in communities, being very protective of their territories, showing jealous tendencies and being omnivorous (eating both meat and vegetables).

Chimpanzees also play a role during ecological research, especially when scientists need to investigate the ecological status of a forest.

Previous chimp attacks

In September 2014, a two months old baby boy was injured by a chimpanzee in Kikinga Village, Nyarugabo Parish, Bugambe Sub-county Hoima district.

According to the victim's mother, Ms Rosemary Nyangoma, the beast carried her baby, who was sleeping in the garden at about mid-day.

Nyangoma, who had covered the baby with a baby shawl in the garden as she dug, was stunned when she went to check on the baby and did not find him where she had left him.

"I began looking around, searching for the baby until I heard him crying in the forest that was adjacent to my garden," Kasiime says.

She sounded an alarm which attracted other residents to join her in searching for the baby.

"We saw the chimp carrying the baby. When we continued making alarms and moving towards where it was, it threw the baby and ran away" Nyangoma says.

The terrified baby, who was wailing, was found with multiple injuries. The baby's left leg was fractured and his head and private parts were also injured.

The victim's father, Mr Nyansio Byaruhanga, says his son, who was treated at Hoima Regional Referral Hospital, has since recovered.

"Whenever he sees any wild animal, he gets scared and cries out for help," Byaruhanga, a farmer says. His family did not get any compensation from government as he had anticipated.

In December 2013, a six-month-old baby girl was attacked by a stray ape at her parents' home in Bubaale Village, Bujumbura Division in Hoima Municipality.

The animal reportedly carried her about 50 metres away and abandoned her when the child's father, Mr Yusuf Kato, chased it.

In July 2014, a two-year-old baby boy was reportedly killed by chimpanzees in Muhoro Town Council in Kibaale District. The deceased was a son of Zaboroni Semata, a resident of Shoro Town Council.

Semata says his son was kidnapped by chimpanzees and died hours after being abandoned deep in the forest.

In 2015, a son of Olivius Niwamanya, a resident of Bugonda Village, Kasambya Sub-county in the present day Kakumiro District, was attacked and injured by a chimpanzee at about 8am. The one-and-a-half-year-old boy was injured in the private parts and his toes.

In the same year, a chimpanzee grabbed a baby who was asleep under a tree in the garden as its family members cultivated crops near Nyabiku forest. Ms Maureen Kanshabe, a caretaker of the child who witnessed the incident, says the chimp grabbed the baby and ran with it into a nearby thicket.

"We made an alarm which attracted residents who chased the chimp until it dropped the child," Kanshabe says.

According to eyewitnesses, the beast kept running from one tree to another with the child for about two hours.

The chimp latter dropped the child, who sustained multiple injuries on the chest, private parts and toes. The baby was rushed to Kakumiro Health Centre IV for treatment.

Irate residents reportedly attempted to kill the chimp after it dropped the child but it fled and hid further in the thicket.

The acting Kakumiro District health officer, Mr Robert Senteza, who was the officer-in-charge of Kakumiro Health Centre IV at the time, says the baby was brought bleeding profusely.



MUHORRO
Area where the latest incident happened