

First for Bangladesh as circled tiger is immobilised before being released back into wild

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Dhaka, Feb 22 (UNB) – In a first for Bangladesh, a stray tiger was saved from a cruel fate at the hands of villagers by being immobilised, before being released into the forest by a Forest Department and Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh (WTB) team on Sunday night.

The incident occurred in Harinagar village of Shyamnagar Upazila in Satkhira district.

The villagers saw the tiger swimming across the canal towards their village on Saturday. They immediately called the Village Tiger Response Team (VTRT, formed and trained earlier by the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh) and Hafiz of Kadomtala VTRT gathered his team.

Hafiz then called Osman Goni of the Forest Tiger Response Team (FTRT), who then called Alam Hawlader and others of the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh.

Meanwhile the news of the distressed tiger spread quickly among the villagers, and by 9:30 pm the crowd had surrounded the tiger.

The tiger was hit with a stick on its head. One of its eyes was injured. Three people were also injured. It was only when more Forest Department staff, Border Guards (BGB) and police arrived at the spot that the crowd came under control.

Fortunately the Kadamtola Station was equipped with the necessary equipment for immobilizing tigers, provided by the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh last year.

Hearing the news, Abu Naser Hossain, Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF), immediately obtained verbal permission from the authorities to immobilize the tiger.

The ACF and Forest Department field staff with assistance from the Village Tiger Response Teams (VTRTs) and other WTB members successfully immobilized the tiger and released it into the forest.

Abu Naser M Hossain and Towfiqul Islam, ACFs of the Forest Department; and Dr Adam Barlow, Christina Greenwood, Mary Greenwood, Mijanur Rahman, Alam Hawlader, Osman Goni and Tanvir Kha of the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh, and the Zoological Society of London, were among others who led the whole exercise.

It was an old tigress weighing about 80 kg, aged around 12 years. Two of her canine teeth were badly broken and the rest were worn with age.

The Village Tiger Response Team (VTRT) succeeded in controlling the crowd. The Forest Department and WTB team immobilized the tigress at about 1:40 am on the 20th, and instantly carried it to the boat. They then went down to the Dubeki Guard Post, 2 hours drive from the spot, south of the Sundarbans.

She recovered on the WTB's wooden boat, although there was sufficient room for her to move freely inside the cabin. The temperature on the night was quite cool, and she recovered slowly from the effects of the anaesthetic. Her temperature, breathing, etc were continuously monitored by Dr Adam Barlow and others on the boat to make sure that she was in a stable state.

She woke up the next day, ate four full chickens, and drank lots of water as she recovered her full strength. When she was feeling sufficiently strong, and the tide was at a safe level, the team released her into her natural habitat by opening the cabin door. She then jumped from the boat on to the muddy bank, and disappeared back into her natural habitat. This was around 10.25pm on February 20.

Remarking on the importance of immobilisation, Abu Naser, the ACF said: "We overcame a dangerous situation with great teamwork. By using these modern wildlife management techniques, we can save more people and tigers in the future".

Dr M Anwarul Islam, Professor of Zoology at Dhaka University and CEO of WTB, said, "Immobilising a stray tiger and releasing it into the forest has happened for the first time in Bangladesh. This incident has also built the trust of the Forest Department in people; they will now know that killing a tiger is not the only solution. Saving tigers required a joint initiative between the community, the government and NGOs".

Last year, WTB had also provided immobilisation training to 30 field level staff of the Forest Department by inviting Dr John Lewis of the Wildlife Vets International to conduct the programme. The training covered methods of capturing and immobilising wildlife.

In addition, the Forest Department and WTB had earlier launched a project to build and train local community teams to tackle issues of human-tiger conflicts. These teams are made up of brave local villagers who stepped forward as volunteers to provide this service to their community.

A total of 29 Village Tiger Response Teams have been formed in the most tiger-prone villages adjacent to the Sundarbans.

The main tasks of the VTRTs include patrolling and responding to villagers' needs if there are any reports of tiger-sightings, and- crucially- controlling the crowd that forms when a tiger strays into a village, until the Forest Department arrives with more help and equipment.

Besides this, the Forest Department and WTB also have a boat-based Forest Tiger Response Team (FTRT) that patrols the Sundarbans and attends emergency tiger attack situations. This team operates round-the-clock and has a hotline number that can be reached by the public from wherever their phones can access network in the forest.