

## CONGO LOOKS TO INSECT FARMING IN FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER

**KINSHASA:** There is no shortage of protein in Kinshasa's Gambela Market, from cows to antelope and snakes. But it is the blue and silver bowls brimming with twitching crickets, termites and slithering mealworms that do the brisk trade.

Experts hope that the love of edible insects in Democratic Republic of Congo may hold the key to tackling widespread hunger among its roughly 65 million people by scaling up a millennia-old consumption habit.

Six-and-a-half million people live in food insecurity in the giant central African country, according to the World Food Programme (WFP), largely due to low agricultural productivity and persistent violence in its volatile east.

Edible insects, which are just starting to win acceptance in the West, have long been one of Congo's most popular dishes. Often served as bar food or on special occasions, they are grilled and commonly served with hot pepper, lemon and

onions. "This is the main food of Congolese," said Marie-Colette Bena, who sells clothing at the market, "I'm proud to eat that food."

The average household in the capital Kinshasa consumes about 300 grams of caterpillar a week, according to a UN study but insect supplies can be seasonal and are generally more expensive than other types of food.

In Kinshasa a kilogramme of crickets costs about \$50, more than twice the price of beef. Congo's environment ministry and the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) hope to capitalize on Congo's affinity for the crunchy fare with a new programme to promote insect cultivation, a plan that could make them more widely available and bring down prices.

The project, due to begin in October, will train two hundred people - most of them women - in western Congo to cultivate caterpillars and crickets. Laurent Kikeba, who oversees the project for the

FAO, said it would be the first of its kind in the world. A national centre to promote insect harvesting will be launched and the FAO will work with the government to craft legal norms to regulate the sector.

### Ideal food

Though the FAO estimates that Congolese consume 14,000 tonnes of insects each year, Kikeba said there are no farms specifically dedicated to raising them. Instead, they are collected by hacking down trees or digging deep into the soil.

Kikeba said that year-round farming could dramatically increase production, currently limited by seasonal variations in the availability of different species.

"For the fight against malnutrition, this is an ideal food," said Paul Monzambe, a professor of agronomy at the National Pedagogic University (UPN) in Kinshasa, who is collaborating on the project. "The

crisis is such that we must think now of all possible approaches." In a 2013 report, the FAO hailed insect cultivation as a practical and environmentally-friendly tool to boost food production as supply struggles to keep pace with global population growth.

The report notes insects are bountiful, widely consumed and contain high levels of protein, fat, vitamins, fibre and minerals. They tend to require less feed and yield more meat per kilogramme than traditional protein sources.

Insects can also be raised in confined spaces with little capital investment, lowering barriers to entry for women, who struggle to access land and credit, the report said. Increased production should start to drive down prices, allowing Congolese to consume more of their preferred delicacies. That's music to Monzambe's ears.

"I am a huge consumer," he laughs. "I can't go a week without eating them!" — Reuters

## RESCUE SAVES RARE PHILIPPINE TURTLES FROM 'EXTINCTION'

**MANILA:** Thousands of critically endangered turtles have been saved from possible extinction after being rescued from terrible conditions in the Philippines, conservationists said yesterday.

More than 4,000 live freshwater turtles and 90 dead ones were found in a dry concrete pond in a remote warehouse on the western island of Palawan four weeks ago in one of the country's biggest wildlife rescues. They included 3,831 Palawan forest turtles, a critically endangered species found only in the north of the large island, as well as 160 Asian leaf turtles and 25 Southeast Asian box turtles.

"The turtles were in terrible conditions," said Sabine Schoppe, director of the Philippine Freshwater Turtle Conservation Programme.

The reptiles had apparently been without food or water for about six months, destined for the pet and food markets in Hong Kong and China, Schoppe said in a statement.

Veterinarians worked round the clock over the next few weeks to save the animals and prevent a potential species die-off.

"This number equaled the estimated remaining population of Palawan forest turtle in the wild, hence bringing the species to the brink of extinction," the statement said.

Many of the turtles were in "shocking, sickening" condition, suffering from eye ulcers, dehydration and other health problems, according to the Turtle Survival Alliance, an international conservation group that helped treat the reptiles.

Some 360 of those rescued had since died, according to Schoppe. About 230 are still being treated, while the rest were released back into the wild, she added. The owner of the building where the turtles were kept could not be found after the June 17 raid, according to Jennifer Lyn Yap, of the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development.

The Palawan forest turtle, which weighs as much as 3.5 kilogrammes (7.7 pounds) is an "aggressive" species that cannot be kept in groups, Schoppe said.

The turtles were transferred by truck to a rescue centre for critically endangered Philippine crocodiles in the provincial capital Puerto Princesa, the only location on the island capable of housing such large numbers of rescued animals.

Trapping or trading in the species is punishable by jail terms and fines. However, the Palawan provincial government has struggled to prevent poaching in one of the country's most biologically diverse areas.

Wildlife authorities suspect northern Palawan poachers had sold the turtles to a trader who transported them to the other end of the island.

"Our assumption is they would have ended in the Chinese markets, where they are sought after as food or pets," Yap said. — AFP

## RUSSIAN VILLAGE FEARS FUTURE AS HEALTH CUTS HIT POOREST

RUSSIA HAS 83,000 VILLAGES WITH LESS THAN 100 RESIDENTS

**SHESHURINO:** More than 70 years after Gennady Vinogradov was born in the small village of Sheshurino, northwest of Moscow, he just asks for one thing: to be able to die there in dignity.

But news that the authorities will be closing the village's clinic—the only one for miles around—has driven him and his neighbours to breaking point.

"If they close this clinic, it will be a catastrophe. We pay our (compulsory) insurance fees and have a right to healthcare," the 76-year-old said, surrounded by two dozen of his neighbours.

It seems as if the government "wants to kill us," he said.

While the consequences of Russia's economic downturn are less visible in the capital, remote rural communities like Sheshurino have been left to fend for themselves as the remnants of state support disappear.

Experts say recent attempts to reform Russia's healthcare system with a reduced budget have led death rates to rise from 13.5 per 1,000 in the first quarter of 2014 to 14 this year.

President Vladimir Putin last month ordered his government to take immediate measures against the "significant rise in mortality."

### 'Skype' doctors

In Sheshurino, residents had just one request for Putin: to keep their clinic open and pay a local health worker to treat residents.

The clinic has been demoted to a convalescent home for elderly patients but it remains the only place where locals can get medical care, whether for chronic conditions or emergencies.

Its head, Galina Lebedeva, gets no money to treat them and does so at her own risk.

"People come to me for help and I help them even though I'm



**SHESHURINO:** A picture taken on July 2, 2015 shows nurses speaking with an elderly man at the clinic in the village of Sheshurino, some 400 kilometres northwest of Moscow. While Russia's economic downturn is less visible in the capital, remote rural communities like Sheshurino have been left to fend for themselves as the remnants of state support disappear completely. Observers say that recent attempts to reform Russia's healthcare system with a diminished budget are causing death rates to rise — from 13.5 to 14 per 1000 people in the first quarter, compared to last year. — AFP

not supposed to," the energetic 41-year-old said.

"My boss calls me Mother Teresa," she said, referring to the Albanian-born nun, whose work among the poorest of the poor in the Indian city of Kolkata earned her the sobriquet "Saint of the Gutters."

Lebedeva was recently told "there is no more money" to keep her and her staff of 15, including nurses and care assistants, working in the village.

She expects the facility to close by the end of this year. That means a loss of income for 15

families depending on salaries ranging from under \$100 to \$200 a month.

Sheshurino, which lies 400 kilometres (250 miles) northwest of Moscow, is quintessential Russia with its scattering of log houses along the edge of a picturesque lake looking much like it did in the tsarist era.

Alexei Kuropatkin, a local son and Russia's war minister under the last Tsar Nicholas II, built the clinic in 1908. The facility survived wars, the 1917 Revolution and the collapse of Communism.

Russia has 83,000 villages with

less than 100 residents, making it difficult to retain doctors there, Health Minister Veronika Skvortsova said in June.

Instead, people could use Skype to consult health professionals, she said. Such a suggestion brings nothing but anger in Sheshurino, where promises to install a fibre-optic cable seem far-fetched.

"We don't have cellphone coverage here and landline phones only work every couple of days—if the weather is good," Vinogradov fumed.

The nearest hospital is at least

two hours away by car, and when a local resident suffered a stroke recently, the ambulance took five hours to come.

The only bus runs twice a week, while a taxi to the hospital costs more than \$50.

The clinic used to have a horse and cart for transport, but the horse was sold for meat last year on orders of regional authorities, who claimed it was too expensive.

### Poor Russians left out

In a Bloomberg ranking of healthcare based on life expectancy and costs, Russia was put in last place in a list of 51 countries. It spends 3.7 percent of the GDP on healthcare, and that budget is set to shrink during recession.

There have been attempts to make the system efficient, modernise hospitals and reduce inpatient treatment.

But while some urban hospitals benefit from better equipment, poor Russians in the countryside are ending up with no care at all.

The country lost 90,000 health workers last year while medicines became more expensive, Russia's audit chamber said last month.

A report by the Committee of Civic Initiatives, a group headed by former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, concluded recently that misguided reforms were the reason for the rise in mortality.

"Small villages have the highest mortality for middle-aged and elderly populations," the report said, with central Russia the worst-hit.

In Sheshurino, people are seeing their already hard lives becoming impossible due to the new policies, said Lebedeva.

"The people who came up with them have never seen rural life, they don't know the reality of how people live, how they struggle to survive." — AFP

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Dr. Fahad Al-Mukhaizeem  
فهد علي المخيزيم

استشاري أطفال  
M.B. Bch. FRCPC. FAAP. PEM



Al-Jabriya - Block 1A - St. 1 - Mazaya Building - 15th Floor - Clinic B - Tel.: 22269369 - Fax: 22269368