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Monkeys Terrorize India Workers, Tourists

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By ANDREW WANG Associated Press Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) - In a capital city where cows roam the streets and elephants plod along in the bus lanes, it's no surprise to find government buildings overrun with monkeys.

But the officials who work there are fed up. They've been bitten, robbed and otherwise tormented by monkeys that ransack files, bring down power lines, screech at visitors and bang on office windows.

The Supreme Court has stepped in, decreeing that New Delhi should be a monkey-free city after citizens filed a lawsuit demanding protection from the animals.

Easier said than done. A past initiative to scare off the army of Rhesus macaques with ultrahigh frequency loudspeakers didn't work. A plan to deport them to distant regions has stalled because local governments refused to have them.

There's an ape patrol of fierce-looking primates called langurs, led about on leashes by keepers. But whenever a langur looms, the pink-faced, two-foot-tall hooligans simply move elsewhere on government grounds.

"Please do not feed the monkeys," implores a sign at Raisina Hill, the complex of colonnaded buildings that includes the president's residence, Parliament, and Cabinet offices.

To no avail. Hindus believe that monkeys are manifestations of the monkey god, Hanuman, and worshippers come to Raisina Hill every Tuesday handing out bananas.

Last year the monkeys made their presence felt by hanging from window ledges and screeching at reporters arriving for a news conference with visiting U.S. Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld.

"It's a big problem, especially in the evening," says Defense Ministry spokesman Amitabha Chakrabarti. Monkeys break into offices at night and paw through the files looking for food, he said. "Those who work late hours have to be careful when it is dark."

The city estimates at least 1,500 of New Delhi's more than 5,000 macaques live on Raisina Hill.

In the latest effort, a monkey relocation initiative, 400 monkeys have been caught at Raisina Hill in the past year and moved to a holding area on the outskirts of New Delhi to await their return to forests in neighboring states, said Madan Thapliyal, a municipality spokesman.

But governments of those states have so far refused to take the furry exiles, saying they have more than enough of their own.

Maneka Gandhi, daughter-in-law of the late Indian leader Indira Gandhi and member of the governing party in the lower house of India's Parliament, believes the monkeys should be left in peace.

Gandhi, an animal rights advocate, has already managed to halt a New Delhi program to spay and neuter stray dogs, saying it was cruel.

She claims that captured macaques, despite their holiness to Hindus, have been given to laboratories for experimentation or have died in their holding area cages. They were "relocated to monkey heaven," she

said.

The government says more than 200 monkeys have been relocated to Gandhi's parliamentary district about 125 miles east of New Delhi. Gandhi denies it. "It's all rubbish," she said. "Not one monkey has been relocated to my constituency."

Atul K. Gupta, of the Wildlife Institute of India, says macaques belong in forests, but deforestation and human settlement are driving them into cities in search of food.

Macaques are crafty pickpockets, know how to open refrigerators, and brazenly snatch lunch pails from government workers, he said. "They have learned the tricks of finding food in an urban environment."

The answer, he said, is to save the forests. Otherwise, he says, "the problem will get worse."

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