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HEALTH

Orphaned, disabled elephants find home

By RAHUL SHARMA

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (Reuter) Every morning for the past five months Wijay Pal Ranbanda has been talking to a blind elephant, trying to tame the wild tusker.

This huge animal, having lost its sight to old age, terrorized north Sri Lankan villages, trampling huts and crops in its confusion, before being captured and put into Ranbanda's care at Sri Lanka's only elephant sanctuary.

It now recognizes Ranbanda's voice and even consents to be fed by trained elephant drivers known as mahouts.

Ranbanda is the curator of the Pinnawela sanctuary near Colombo, where nearly 60 elephants ranging from 2-month-old babies to 50-year-old tuskers are cared for in a bid to save the animal from extinction in Sri Lanka.

Where once 20,000 wild elephants roamed in the 1950s, only about 3,000 survive as a growing human population takes over the jungles and drives the elephants from their natural habitat.

Hungry animals attack crops, forcing farmers to shoot or entrap them. Poachers, though few in number now, still hunt tuskers for their ivory.

The sanctuary, launched in 1975 with six baby elephants, employs 26 people, including Ranbanda and 16 mahouts who tend the elephants. Some of the animals have been bred in captivity and others caught in the wild.

It does not aim to return or introduce elephants into the wild. Instead, it is a breeding sanctuary for animals that are injured or abandoned by wild herds.

"We have nine new babies now. There are six she-elephants who can breed. One of them is pregnant and is ex-



BABY ELEPHANT (bottom right) is one of several at the world's only elephant refuge at Pinnawela in Sri Lanka, where some 60 orphaned and handicapped elephants are being cared for. REUTER PHOTO

pected to deliver early in 1995," said Ranbanda.

The sanctuary, part of the Colombo zoo, has a drugstore and veterinarians on call if elephants fall ill. "I am a vet myself and there are others available on phone with advice if they are needed," Ranbanda said.

He said the babies were fed milk five times a day and bathed each morning at a nearby river. Baby elephants roll in water and try to climb onto their mothers, who soak themselves to beat the heat.

Baby elephants are fed on milk till they are 4 years old, when they need 250 kg of grass and branches to satisfy their huge appetites. It's an expensive undertaking. Each

baby drinks milk worth 10,000 rupees (\$200) a day.

Ranbanda said most of the sanctuary's financial needs were met through ticket sales to the many tourists who come to see impatient baby elephants drink gallons of milk from bottles and frolic in water with their mothers.

Tourists feed baby elephants and many of them also sit on the riverside to watch the elephants bathe.

"It's not always you see so many baby elephants walking down the road and having a bath together. It's a great place," said Laura Middleton, a tourist from Washington.

But tourists looking forward to an elephant ride at the sanctuary will be disap-

pointed.

Rides were planned some time ago and enclosures built for tourists to mount the animals, but the mahouts refused to allow tourists onto their charges, saying the sanctuary was not an amusement park.

Ranbanda, who has worked at the sanctuary for the past 12 years, said the mahouts agreed only to tourists touching the animals.

Elephants from the sanctuary are not sold but are sometimes given away to temples to be used in religious ceremonies or as gifts by the government.

In 1984, President Junius Richard Jayawardene gave a Pinnawela baby to then U.S. President Ronald Reagan.