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On September 18th, 523 African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) were bound for Singapore with forged CITES paperwork when they were confiscated by authorities at the Kavumu airport in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in central Africa.

TWO HOURS LATER the birds arrived at Lwiro Primate Sanctuary in terrible condition. Lwiro is a rescue centre which houses over 100 orphaned chimpanzees and monkeys, with no existing facilities for birds. The arrival of the parrots was a serious strain on staff and reserves, necessitating an urgent appeal for help. “We didn’t have much warning,” said Carmen Vidal, manager of Lwiro Sanctuary. “We were told the parrots were coming and then they were here.”

The confiscation came too late for twenty-nine birds that were dead on arrival or died shortly afterward. Some of the nearly 500 remaining birds were found to be tied to one another by one wing. They also had no food or water for an unknown period of time. Their situation required immediate stabilization.

In response, the World Parrot Trust (WPT) immediately publicised the appeal and received

an outstanding level of support which went immediately to help the birds and their caregivers. This type of need is precisely the reason the FlyFree programme was initiated one year ago. It is also a perfect example of what FlyFree is about: quick and purposeful action where it is most needed to get birds back out into the wild.

THE CONGO 500 EFFORT AT A GLANCE:

- Over 220 WPT supporters from around the world answered our emergency appeal.
- Columbus Zoo, Disney Rapid Response Fund and Natural Encounters Conservation Fund all made major contributions (see p19).
- Within days, WPT sent funds for immediate food and housing costs.
- Nutritional and medical advice and flight cage plans were provided.
- Additional funds were sent to cover the construction of 8 large flight cages.
- Three veterinarians travelled to Lwiro to provide specialised medical assistance.



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Upon arrival, 523 African Grey Parrots crowded in 6 small crates were released into Lwiro’s education classroom. A temporary indoor enclosure was swiftly adapted for their use (top) while 8 large outdoor flights could be constructed.



Food preparation is on a huge scale with 10kg (22lbs) served twice daily. The birds are enjoying their diet of cooked beans and rice, corn, pineapple, bananas, palm nuts and oil along with a variety of supplements.

Dr. Davide De Guz, Dr. Gino Conzo (both from Italy) and Dr. Noel Arienteireho (Uganda Wildlife Education Center) arrived at Lwiro on October 21st. They brought with them a much-needed anaesthesia machine (with the help of Dr. Collarile) and 4kg (9lb) of supplements and medications donated to Lwiro by GEAVET.

The vets are working under difficult conditions due to on-going political unrest in this area. The nature of the conditions and the seriousness of the work to be done truly accentuate the dedication of those working to help these birds regain their freedom. Lwiro itself is very remote and operates with only the necessities. Basic services can be hard to find after many years of war in the DRC. Locating supplies such as an oxygen tank can be very challenging.

Initial examination revealed that most of the Greys were suffering from parasites, principally tapeworms. The infestation was very serious and was the cause of the initial deaths. The remaining birds were individually treated with great success, needing a second dose after 15 days.

Now, a month after their arrival, 460 birds have survived. Most are eating well, are banded and ready for release. Several birds are ill and are being treated and monitored in separate cages. A third group have feather damage but are otherwise healthy and will be released when their feathers re-grow.

THIS IS THE FIRST CONFISCATION OF ITS KIND in the DRC but similar illegal shipments have been confiscated several times in recent years in west Africa. In a three-year period over 2,700 Grey Parrots have been confiscated, rehabilitated and released, when possible, in Cameroon. Grey Parrot shipments have also been seized in Kenya and Bulgaria.

It is worth mentioning that these huge illegal shipments are not being transported underground. They are moving openly using forged permits, confirming that it is the on-going legal wildlife trade that is facilitating these repeated tragic situations.

IUCN figures provided by Birdlife indicate that almost one-quarter of existing Grey Parrot populations are being trapped each year – making them one of the most heavily traded parrot species on the international market. Adding urgency is the belief that by using established trade routes, dealers in other species, such as great apes, can quite easily cross over to parrots and visa-versa. It is our hope that this confiscation in the DRC is just one more step towards ending of the trade of wild caught Greys altogether.

Watch for updates in *PsittaScene* and at www.parrots.org/flyfree



Veterinarians from Italy and Uganda spent 10 days at Lwiro to help assess and treat all 500 of the bird's individual medical needs. Dedicated parrot keepers were hired to provide daily care.