

Tokyo battles rats as iconic market shuts

The operation must be ruthless, thorough and silent. Without alerting the watchful enemy, a unit of highly trained Japanese agents will throw up a ring of steel to block any escape from the vast battleground.

Despite being vastly outnumbered, the unit's chief commander is confident of total victory against the enemy army — tens of thousands of rats expected to scurry loose when the world-famous Tsukiji fish market closes next month, AFP wrote.

The 23-hectare (57-acre) market near Tokyo's swanky Ginza District is home to 'not thousands but tens of thousands' of rats, attracted by fish offcuts and the market's maze of sewers, according to Tatsuo Yabe, a rat expert.

After a fabled 83-year history, the world's biggest fish market, which is also a huge tourist magnet for its pre-dawn tuna auctions, will move to a brand-new facility in Toyosu, about 2.3 kilometers (1.4 miles) away on the waterfront.

The moving operation is unprecedented. Some 900 businesses handling 480 kinds of seafood worth \$14 million daily — as well as 270 types of fruits and vegetables — will relocate over a period of five days.

Thousands of trucks and forklifts will take part in the move, with tons of waste produced in the process.

Manna from heaven for the furry denizens of the sewers. "They will likely start moving en masse once they notice something unusual... The week after the market closes on October 10 will be the major battle," a Tokyo government official who commands the Tsukiji anti-rat operation told AFP.

To prevent a mass exodus from Tsukiji, Tokyo officials — helped by veteran rat exterminators — are busy

blocking pipe and sewer exits and plugging holes in fences with corrugated sheets.

Before the market is torn down, they will erect an impenetrable three-meter (10-foot) steel wall around the site and slowly move in through the



KAZUHIRO NOGI/AFP

perimeter to 'corner and catch' the rodents, said the operation's commander, who asked not to be named.

In addition, they will install 40,000 sticky sheets to catch rodents, along with traps and use 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of rat poison.

'It's frightening'

Restaurants and bar managers in the area surrounding the market are on red alert for a possible influx of unwelcome rodent visitors.

"It's frightening," said the owner of one restaurant in Ginza, one of Tokyo's most fancy dining and dining districts just a stone's throw from the market.

"We heard rats scurrying around when an old theatre building was

torn down in this neighborhood," said the 56-year-old restaurateur, who wished to remain anonymous.

"Some of our neighbors are even feeding stray cats now. That's how defensive we are getting."

The Ginza Street Association,

which brings together local businesses, even created a special anti-rat taskforce last year.

Tokyo exterminator GP Corporation is telling clients in the area to keep their eyes peeled.

"We are calling on them to stay vigilant and not even keep the doors open because sewer rats may come right in once the moving starts," said Kazuya Takahashi of the company.

Hardly any food poisoning

Hiroyasu Ito, a veteran fish trader as old as the Tsukiji market itself, has known Tsukiji since the days when buyers and sellers communicated via telegram.

Now chairman of the Seafood Wholesalers' Association, Ito is aware of the venerable market's

issues.

"We have many problems. Birds fly in, and many things like rats come in and out freely," he said about the open-air facility.

But he stresses that the market has an impressive food hygiene record. In recent decades, market players have made the utmost sanitary efforts, with special inspectors in white jackets checking on food safety every day.

"We've hardly had any food poisoning incidents in this market. We are proud of it," Ito told AFP.

Nevertheless, he has high expectations for the new Toyosu facility, equipped with state-of-art refrigeration. The gigantic complex stands on reclaimed land nearly twice as large as Tsukiji, and it is fully air-conditioned and prepared to welcome its new tenants.

"The biggest difference is that Toyosu is an enclosed market, so all buying and selling will be done in this building," said Masataka Miyake, a Tokyo official preparing for the new facility.

Originally planned in 2016, Tsukiji's relocation has been postponed several times, held up by revelations of heavy soil contamination at Toyosu, a former gas plant.

"I hope the new Toyosu brand will soon become a global household name," Miyake said, describing Tsukiji as "very popular and lively".

Doors and shutters at the new facility are sensor-controlled, and when they are open, air is blasted down from the ceiling — like an invisible screen.

"The air curtain prevents the cool air from escaping outside," said Miyake, as well as fending off unwanted intruders like dust and bugs — and rats.

Hope in despair

The number of cancer cases has continued to rise across Europe, however mortality rates from the disease have fallen, according to the World Health Organization's 'European Health Report', published Wednesday.

For India's poorest, ID card can be difference between life and death

Prem Malhar said his 50-year-old father died of hunger a few months ago because he did not have the Indian government's Aadhaar identity card that would have given him access to subsidized food.

At least 14 people have died of starvation in Jharkhand, the eastern Indian state where the Malhars live, activists said, Reuters reported.

They said the deaths have occurred since authorities canceled old handwritten government ration cards last year and replaced them with the biometric Aadhaar card to weed out bogus beneficiaries.

Taramani Sahu, an activist with the Right to Food Campaign, blamed the Jharkhand government for delays in issuing the Aadhaar cards after one million old cards were canceled. For some who depended on the rations for subsistence, the results were fatal, he said.

In July, three sisters under the age of 10 died of hunger in New Delhi, the capital, sparking accusations of government apathy.

The deaths were not linked to possession of the Aadhaar card, but there has been widespread outrage that people are dying of hunger in a country where, according to government and industry data, grains and produce worth 580 billion rupees (\$8 billion), or 40 percent of total output, go to waste every year.

Opposition parties have seized on the issue ahead of three big state elections this year and the national election in 2019, whittling into support for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Modi's office did not respond to requests for comment on the starvation deaths.

Nishikant Dubey, a BJP lawmaker and a member of a parliamentary panel on the Aadhaar policy, said linking the card to welfare programs was the best way to check siphoning off funds meant for the poor.

On the deaths, he said, "The opposition is being irresponsible by blowing it out of proportion for political mileage."

SAUMYA KHANDELWAL/REUTERS
A woman goes through the process of finger scanning for the Unique Identification Database (UID) system, also known as Aadhaar, at a registration center in New Delhi, India, on January 17, 2018.

Malhar, who lives in a hut made of twigs, leaves and mud in a hamlet near the town of Ramgarh, said he and his brother now have the Aadhaar cards, but are still not eligible for subsidized food because of what he called 'bureaucratic ineptness'.

"My father died because he couldn't get his Aadhaar card during his lifetime and I'm not getting food because my Aadhaar card is not linked with the ration shop," said the 25-year-old, dressed in a red vest and tattered trousers.

Reuters spoke to three ration shop owners in the area who said they could not give subsidized food to those who did not have Aadhaar cards or failed the biometric identification process.

They said the Malhars' cards were not linked to the system because that had to be done by another government department.

In the state capital, Ranchi, Jharkhand's food minister Saryu Rai said he had ordered local officials to distribute subsidized food to the poor even if they did not possess the Aadhaar card. But activists said those orders have not been transmitted to the shop level.

Rai told Reuters it was not clear that the deaths in Jharkhand had occurred because of starvation. Officials have previously said people had died because of illness, not lack of food.

"There must be a system to know what constitutes starvation deaths and I welcome food activists to work with us on this," Rai said.

Digitize economy

Officials in other states said they have eased rules that insist on Aadhaar. Still, activists claim that the decree has deprived some families of subsidized food in Rajasthan, a state that is also ruled by the BJP.

Aadhaar is part of an ambitious effort to digitize India's economy, and almost all transactions with the government are dependent on the card, including banking, food subsidies and tax and other payments.

Among other things, the government says the use of Aadhaar will plug thefts and leakages in the \$23.63 billion a year food welfare program that guarantees ultra-cheap rice and wheat to nearly two-thirds of India's 1.3 billion people.

Nearly a third of the food meant for the poor gets stolen every year, with middlemen, traders and government employees colluding to sell the produce in the open market, economists estimate. The government said nearly 30 million fake and duplicate cards have been weeded out, saving about \$2.35 billion.

But in a vast nation where many of the people are uneducated and dirt poor, the Aadhaar system is far from foolproof.

Some of the poor have not enrolled in the program, or their fingerprints do not match those on the database, the largest in the world. Others suffer because the identification system requires functioning electricity, an internet connection and operational servers, not always assured in interior India.

Ajay Bhushan Pandey, the chief executive of the Unique Identification Authority of India that runs the Aadhaar program, said that connectivity and power problems do crop up, but added authorities have been told not to withhold social benefits if people can provide other, acceptable identification.

"People are dying because of government callousness," said Hemant Soren, the leader of the opposition and a former chief minister of Jharkhand. "Mark my words, voters will teach them a lesson in the next election."

In the hamlet near Ramgarh, Malhar and other men took shelter under a tree as a light drizzle came down, seeping through the makeshift roofs of their huts. They were joined by some women who said they were struggling to light damp firewood inside their huts.

Malhar lives with his 22-year-old brother Videshi in the hut with four other family members — their sole possessions are a few utensils and clothes that look like rags. They subsist on the brothers earning between 70 cents to \$2.70 per day, picking through trash or working nearby rice paddies.

"We've lost our faith in the government which is responsible for my father's death," said Prem Malhar. "The most unfortunate part is that authorities still continue to be callous and their callousness is starving poor families like ours."

Pygmies, masters of forest, tackle tough lifestyle changes

Just back from the hunt with a choice selection of plants, Ebona feels at home in the endless forest where many Gabonese fear to tread.

"Townfolk paid me to find these leaves," the Pygmy said, setting the heap down outside his wicker hut, 500 meters (yards) from the rest of Doumassi village in north Gabon, AFP wrote.

Ebona's people, the Baka, are held in folklore to be Africa's oldest inhabitants, living today in forests stretching from Gabon and Cameroon inland to the Congo and the Central African Republic.

The dense woods where national borders cease to exist hold no mysteries for the Baka.

"This is our first home," said another villager, who introduced himself as Jean, declining, like the other Pygmies, to divulge their Baka names, used only within the community.

"We sleep in it, we hunt in it, we live in it," he added.

The ethnic Baka Pygmies often have a difficult relationship with their Fang neighbors, the main ethnic group in the area, who tend to treat them like children, leading to complaints by the Baka.

They also struggle to have a legal existence in Gabon, as they find themselves without identity cards, which complicates their lives.

"I am Gabonese, 100 percent, but I don't have an identity card. They promised us that we would have it, but we're still waiting..." said villager Christian, who, like other Baka, wants the same rights as other Gabonese citizens.

"How will I send my children to school?" he asked, in frustration. "How will I vote? How do I get medical care?"

Dilemma

Just weeks before parliamentary elections, the first round of which is planned for October 6 with a second round later next month, electoral officials have made little effort to put Baka adults on the voters' roll.

But many Baka steer well clear of national politics. They say they just want to 'survive'.

Jean-Baptiste Ondzaga-Ewak works for the Association for Family Mediation (AMF) that seeks to

bring mutual understanding to the communities.

The NGO records Baka births to make them official so the children can go to school and receive health care.

For lack of access to health facilities, villager Norbert saw five of his seven children die prematurely, but he joyfully announced that his wife is pregnant once more.

For a long time, the ways of 'city people' had a limited impact on communities of hunter-gatherers.

The Baka are still reluctant to go where "cars make a noise", except to buy goods such as "tobac-



STEVE JORDAN/AFP

co, soap and petrol", according to Christian. But the need for money has raised problems for Pygmies whose profound knowledge of the forest is their sole source of income.

Seen as one way to help their children go to school, the Baka hire themselves out like 'integrated GPS' devices, ready to guide outsiders hundreds of kilometers (miles) into the wild to find game.

'They never miss'

Despite their poor relations, the Baka are nevertheless prepared to hunt for their Fang neighbors, too.

While they tend to treat the Pygmies as 'subhuman' purely on account of their short stature, the Fang acknowledge that there is no equal to a Baka hunter's skills.

"At close range, they never miss their shot," said Rigobert, a Fang who sent two Baka off to hunt for him. He gave them a dozen shells and an ancient gun and they returned in the morning with three prey.

Jean was one of the huntsmen. "The army offered to enlist me, but I said 'no'. I have my family, I'm a hunter. That's inside me, why should it change?"

"The only animal I fear is the gorilla, because he reacts like man," Jean added. "He's unpredictable."

'Always eaten elephant'

International wildlife NGOs hire Baka guides, while urban residents pay them to fetch bushmeat and valued plants. But the Baka are also employed by ivory poachers to track elephants.

"With one cartridge, I can kill him (an elephant). If I hit her, behind the ear, I kill him," boasted Jean, who said he often goes into the forest with poachers from Cameroon.

"The gun and the shells belong to poachers," Jean said, well aware that their activity is outlawed in Gabon.

At the same time, he is the official tracker for an NGO dedicated to protecting the endangered beasts, but Jean has no love of the law.

"I've always eaten elephant, this is our home and that is our meat," he said.

Furthermore, helping poachers is lucrative. He said a single kill can earn him "200,000 or even 300,000 (CFA) francs (€300 or \$150, \$348 or \$522), depending on the size of the tusks".

None of the Baka interviewed by AFP approved of the 'law of the city' banning elephant hunting, despite the risk the animals may die out if nothing is done to stem the ivory trade.

In a single decade, 80 percent of the elephants have been slaughtered in the Minkébe National Park in northeast Gabon, the country's main forest sanctuary for elephants, according to park officials.

Melvin, one of Doumassi's most respected hunters, objected to what he terms 'a bad law', but added "we're obliged to respect it, we don't want to go to prison".