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By [Crux Guest Blogger](#) | June 10, 2013 11:55 am

By Kenneth Miller

The border guards, wary of advancing rebels, fired their guns in the air as three motorized skiffs approached along the Sangha River in the late April night. But the boats' occupants were unarmed foreigners, fleeing a bloody insurrection that had gripped the Central African Republic (CAR). Among the refugees was elephant researcher Andrea Turkalo, carrying \$25,000 in cash and six hard drives—packed with more than 20 years of data—which she'd grabbed before fleeing her jungle compound.

Turkalo, 60, is a field biologist for the Wildlife Conservation Society, and one of the world's foremost experts on African forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*). Since 1990, she's been observing the elusive pachyderms—thought to be a different species from their larger, curvier-tusked, savannah-dwelling cousins (*Loxodonta africana*)—at a clearing known as Dzanga Bai, in the CAR's southwestern rainforest. But her life's work now hangs in the balance, as does the fate of the elephants themselves.

Driving out research

The trouble began last November, when a coalition of rebel groups known as the Séléka, based in the country's northern region, started an uprising against the government of President François Bozizé. Turkalo was in the United States at the time, getting some

dentistry done, but she returned to the CAR in late December. She arrived just as the U.S. embassy's staff evacuated from the capital, Bangui. But Turkalo decided to stay on at Dzanga Bai for as long as possible.

She spent a tense three months at her compound, near the village of Bayanga, as the Séléka marched southward, massacring civilians along the way. On March 24, the rebels took Bangui, and Turkalo got word that they were heading toward her area. She consulted with World Wildlife Federation staffers at the nearby headquarters of the Dzanga-Sangha National Park, who agreed that it was time to go. Turkalo joined a dozen others heading downriver toward the Congolese border, 50 kilometers to the south.

As they neared a riverside border checkpoint, around 10:00 PM, they heard angry shouts and a burst of gunfire. Turkalo and a WWF technical director, Anna Feistner, got out and approached a drunken guard brandishing a rifle and a revolver. "We just started talking to him very calmly," Turkalo says. "I said, 'I'm sorry, we didn't see you, you had no lights...'" The guard threatened to search her belongings, and she feared he would find and confiscate her money. But two of his colleagues recognized her from previous trips; they apologized and waved the group through without further incident.

Turkalo reached Bomassa, in the Republic of the Congo, around midnight, and hunkered there for the next three weeks. When she heard that the Séléka had cleared out of Bayanga, she returned to her compound—which had been looted in her absence—and got back to work observing elephants. But after three days, word came that the rebels were returning, and she fled to Bomassa again. From there, she made her way back to her childhood home in Massachusetts.

The plight of Dzanga Bai

Since then, Turkalo has been trying to draw international attention to the plight of the people as well as the elephants around Dzanga Bai. Soon after her return, she traveled to Washington to brief State Department officials on the situation. Forest elephants, found only in the CAR and a few neighboring countries, have long been under siege by organized poachers supplying the booming Asian market for illegal ivory; according to [a recent study](#) published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, their numbers fell by 62 percent between 2002 and 2011, to about 100,000. (Savannah elephant populations have also

declined, though more slowly, and now total about 400,000.) And the chaos in the CAR is making previously protected areas far more vulnerable.

On May 8, a gang of poachers armed with AK-47s mowed down 26 elephants (including four babies) at Dzanga Bai. “I’m sure some of them were individuals I knew,” says Turkalo, who learned of the killing in e-mails from local contacts. Guards at the site had previously been disarmed by the rebels, and were unable to stop the slaughter. After the poachers sawed off the tusks, wildlife officials reported, villagers butchered the carcasses. “It was a food fest,” Turkalo says ruefully.

Even in exile, Turkalo is determined to continue her scientific work, including a longtime collaboration with Cornell University’s Elephant Listening Project. Since 1999, she’s been recording her subjects’ complex vocalizations using microphones strung up around the *bai*, with the eventual goal of developing a forest-elephant lexicon. This summer, as in the past, she’ll spend a few weeks on campus, working with ELP researchers and writing papers of her own. After that, however, her plans are uncertain.

Turkalo has witnessed two previous coups in the CAR, and she’s not easily intimidated, but this is the first time that armed rebels have invaded her part of the country. One villager in Bayanga was killed by the Séléka in March, while Turkalo was in Bomassa. She learned of the murder from a park official by satellite phone: “He said something they didn’t like, and they just shot him in front of everybody,” she says. The rebels have reportedly raped hundreds of women, and she’s conscious of her own vulnerability in an isolated jungle camp.

For now, Turkalo is watching and waiting. “I’m not going to go back until I feel that the situation is much more secure than it is right now,” she says. “But I will go back.”

Learn more about endangered forest elephants [here](#).