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Dear Mayor Marutvan and Mr Simonyan,

Bunka the Young Bull Elephant at the Yerevan Zoo

The Pro Elephant Network (PREN) consists of an international community of diverse individuals and organizations, comprising specific expertise, on wild and captive African and Asian elephants, including the fields of science, health, conservation, welfare, economics, community leadership, social justice and the law¹.

We have received reports about the solitary elephant resident at the Yerevan Zoo – a young bull called Bunka; members of PREN as well as private individuals, have visited him in Yerevan.

As you are aware, maintaining an elephant in a zoo requires great commitment, both in terms of managing the elephant's diet² and health care provision³ as well as nurturing his mental wellbeing⁴.

Members of PREN have contributed in recent years to extensive research and to the recognition of who elephants are and of their needs⁵. Results have shown that despite consistent efforts in providing

¹ [Members of PREN – PRO ELEPHANT NETWORK](#)

² Ullrey et al 1997 Elephants: Nutrition and dietary husbandry

³ Meehan et al 2016 determining connections between the daily lives of zoo elephants and their welfare.

⁴ Greco et al 2016 Using epidemiology to better understand stereotypic behaviour in elephants in zoos

⁵ Naoko Irie et al, 2009. Elephant psychology: What we know and what we would like to know

enrichment at the zoo, the needs of elephants are still compromised⁶. Not only are captive elephants likely to acquire physical ailments that invariably shorten their lifespan⁷, they are also prone to developing psychological issues that can render depression⁸, and aggressive behaviour, particularly in the case of solitary bulls⁹.

Essentially, elephants need more than just food and veterinary care – both of which we are certain that the hardworking staff of Yerevan Zoo are offering Bunka. Elephants need an appropriate social environment¹⁰, space¹¹ and mental stimulation¹². Elephants crave large territories to move about in and a great amount of exercise.¹³ Elephants also need the companionship of other elephants to maintain good physical and mental health. Contrary to general belief, elephant bulls are not naturally solitary animals¹⁴.

There is growing evidence that, of all animals, elephants are among those who suffer the most in captivity¹⁵.

We are aware that the Yerevan zoo is a candidate for membership of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria¹⁶ (EAZA). In order for this candidacy to be considered the zoo personnel underwent animal welfare training which was organised by the EAZA academy in 2014. Members of PREN commend the zoo for its commitment to welfare and for their effort to provide enrichment for Bunka. It is our continued belief that keeping the elephant in the Yerevan zoo is unfavourable and this might have negatively impacted upon the EAZA membership status.

Members of the Pro Elephant Network and other wildlife organizations have participated in the successful relocation and reintegration of elephants, particularly solitary ones into natural environments¹⁷ and to global sanctuaries. Elephant sanctuaries have sprung up around the world from Tennessee¹⁸ to Brazil¹⁹ to Cambodia²⁰ and California²¹.

⁶ Clubb R., Rowcliffe M., Lee P., Mar K.U., Moss C. & Mason G.J. 2008. Compromised survivorship in zoo elephants. *Science*, 322:1649.

⁷ Wiese & Willis 2004 Calculation of longevity and life expectancy in captive elephants

⁸ Bradshaw et al, 2005. Elephant Breakdown; Bell Rizzolo J. et al, 20016. Prevalence and Patterns of Complex PTSD in Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*)

⁹ C.M. Doyle, personal communication, November 4, 2020

¹⁰ Moss CJ & Poole JH 1983. Relationships and Social Structure of African Elephants. In: *Primate Social Relationships; An integrated approach*. R Hinde (Ed). Blackwell Publ

¹¹ McGreevy 2007 How much space does an elephant need? Leighty et al 2010 assessment of the use of exhibit space and resources by African elephants

¹² <https://theconversation.com/the-neural-cruelty-of-captivity-keeping-large-mammals-in-zoos-and-aquariums-damages-their-brains-142240>

¹³ Poole & Granli 2008 *Mind & Movement*

¹⁴ Goldenberg et al 2014 Controlling for behavioural state reveals social dynamics among male African elephants

¹⁵ Professor Lori Marino 2021 [Big Brains in Small Spaces – the Impact of Confinement on the Brains of Cetaceans and Elephants - Bing video](#)

¹⁶ [European Association of Zoos and Aquaria » EAZA](#)

¹⁷ Liv Baker et al, 2020. Asian elephant rescue, rehabilitation and rewilding

¹⁸ [The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee](#)

¹⁹ [Global Sanctuary for Elephants - Elephant Sanctuary Brazil \(globelephants.org\)](#)

²⁰ [Elephant Valley Project \(EVP\) - Elephant Sanctuary, Mondulkiri Cambodia](#)

²¹ [Performing Animal Welfare Society -- PAWS \(pawsweb.org\)](#)



PREN members would very much like to engage with you to discuss the welfare and wellbeing of Bunka and to discuss suitable options for his future that would be compatible with his biological, psychological and social needs.

There are many examples of zoos around the world (in Argentina²², Chile²³, Alaska²⁴, Pakistan²⁵, etc.) that in recent times have recognised that, despite their best efforts, they have been unable to meet the needs of their elephants; they have decided to prioritise the welfare needs of elephants and have agreed to translocate them to more suitable environments where the elephant can get more physical and psychological comfort.

Cher, an international icon of Armenian heritage, was recently involved with the relocation of an elephant, Kaavan, from the Islamabad zoo to a wildlife sanctuary in Cambodia. This event made global news²⁶; the international publicity positively highlighted the administrators of the zoo in question.

PREN members know that Armenia would receive the same international praise if the zoo administrators were able to engage with our elephant specialists in order to find the best solution for Bunka and to commit to ending the captivity of elephants at the Yerevan zoo.

We would be delighted to engage with you further on this matter and we hope you will consider allowing a visit from our elephant specialists, to Yerevan, as and when appropriate.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stefania Falcon', is written over a white rectangular background.

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²² [How to Move Your Elephant During a Pandemic - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com)

²³ [Last Performing Circus Elephant of Chile is Rescued and Moved to New Sanctuary to Live Out Her Golden Years \(goodnewsnetwork.org\)](https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org)

²⁴ [Alaska's only elephant heads to California \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com)

²⁵ [Pakistan to relocate lonely elephant to Cambodia sanctuary, South Asia News & Top Stories - The Straits Times](https://www.straitstimes.com)

²⁶ [Cher rescued an elephant then sang him 'My Way' - CNN](https://www.cnn.com)



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