A wildlife sanctuary in northern Mexico has relocated more than 700 animals to a safer location, following a dramatic surge in organized crime and violence in the region.

The Ostok Sanctuary, located in the city of Culiacán, Sinaloa, has closed its doors after facing increasing threats from local criminal groups. The sanctuary's director, Ernesto Zazueta, announced the massive relocation effort this week, calling it the largest wildlife evacuation ever undertaken in Mexico due to violence.

The animals — a striking collection that includes elephants, lions, tigers, monkeys, crocodiles, hippos, and even chickens — were transported roughly 212 kilometers (131 miles) to a new site named Bioparque El Encanto in Mazatlán, located in the southern part of the state.

Zazueta said the decision was driven by mounting dangers to staff and animals alike. "Culiacán is the toughest area. We had never had problems before, but it became nearly impossible to even access the sanctuary," he said. "They practically chased us out of the place."

He detailed how sanctuary staff had faced repeated robberies, threats, and extortion attempts. Volunteers and partner organizations joined forces to carry out the complex transfer operation earlier this week, ensuring the safety of the animals despite logistical challenges.

The final straw came when Viki, one of the sanctuary's elephants, suffered a leg injury. With no veterinarians willing to travel into the increasingly hostile city, the sanctuary realized it could no longer guarantee the well-being of its residents.

The violence in Culiacán is part of a broader wave of conflict across the state, fueled by fighting among rival factions of the Sinaloa cartel. While the sanctuary had previously weathered instability, the latest flare-up proved too dangerous to endure.

“We had to put the safety of the animals and our people first,” Zazueta said.

Bioparque El Encanto, the new home for the animals, is a secure facility equipped to handle the diverse needs of its unexpected new residents. For now, Zazueta and his team are focused on helping the animals settle into their new surroundings — far from the chaos they left behind.

As organized crime continues to disrupt everyday life in parts of Mexico, the relocation of these animals stands as a sobering reminder that no corner of society — not even a sanctuary for wildlife — is beyond its reach.