

Abused dogs in Nara get stopgap refuge

Vets run bank as safe haven till new owners come forward

By PAUL DISS-HOLLAND

Regional correspondent

TENRI, Nara Pref. — While the animals here in Nara Prefectural Government's new Dog Bank look healthy, some bear scars, and others cower away when visitors approach — testament to the terrible ordeal they have survived.

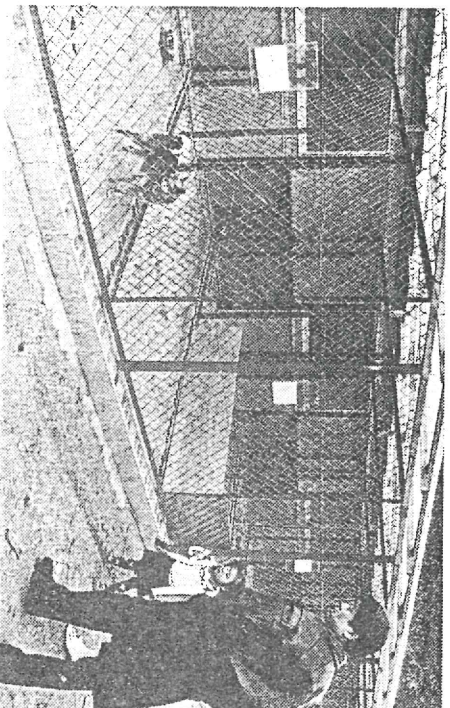
The dogs, now being cared for by a team of 6 prefectural vets, lived in atrocious conditions under the charge of Kinshichi Fukushima, who lives in a shack about 1 km away.

For 16 years, Fukushima, 71, made his house available as a shelter for unwanted pets. However, over the last 10 years he rarely fed the dogs, and simply stacked them in cages and left them to die, according to Hideo Nakatani of the prefecture's Environment and Hygiene Department.

A television report exposing Fukushima's "dog home" was screened by Tokyo Broadcasting System last June. By the following month, the Japan Animal Welfare Society had presented 10,000 signatures to the prefecture, calling for action.

However, no official response came until Elizabeth Oliver, 50, who runs a shelter for animals in Toyono-gun, Osaka Prefecture, organized a protest drive last summer. Oliver prepared postcards addressed to Nara Prefecture, and supplied cards to anyone willing to send them to friends in Japan and overseas.

Over 9,000 cards poured in from animal welfare groups in Japan, and from places as far away as Scandinavia and Australia.



PROSPECTIVE NEW OWNERS view a caged dog in the Dog Bank in Tenri, Nara Prefecture.

KIMIO IIDA PHOTO

"Foreign protest is more effective than protest from within Japan," Oliver said. "Japanese organizations are often not listened to, whereas protest from abroad embarrasses the authorities."

According to Nakatani, it was these overseas postcards that eventually prompted the prefecture to move in last Sept. 10 and confiscate Fukushima's dogs.

"We then sanitized and covered over the site," Nakatani said, "discovering in the process the bodies of all the dogs which had died there."

Oliver said about 10,000 carcasses were discovered. Nakatani simply said the number is uncountable.

The approximately 30 surviving dogs now live two to a kennel in hygienic conditions, and the team of vets works in turn to nurse them back to health.

"Many of the dogs were suffering from spinal deformities," said Yukihiko Izumi,

one of the vets. "We lost seven dogs since we moved in, they were in such bad condition."

The name Dog Bank was been chosen in the hope that new owners can be found for the animals. A plaque in front of each kennel gives the dog's name and some personal details, such as "has recovered from a bladder operation" and "perfect watchdog."

Posters advertising the Dog Bank have been displayed all over Nara Prefecture, and notices have appeared in the local press, according to Nakatani. "I think everyone in Nara knows about us now," he said.

The backgrounds of people wanting to adopt dogs will be checked to ensure similar abuses never happen again. But Nakatani admits that, while initial interest is great, actually placing the animals is not going to be easy.

The site for the facility lies on land borrowed by the prefecture. It must be vacated by

May, so the current facilities are only a stopgap solution for the specific problem of Fukushima's dogs.

There are currently no concrete plans for a more general facility to provide refuge for strays, which are normally destroyed in the prefecture as elsewhere in Japan.

Oliver alleged that the prefectural government only acted in response to the postcard campaign in order to safeguard its image as a tourist destination, and is not genuinely concerned about animal welfare.

"There is another establishment still being run by an old woman right next to where Fukushima's used to be, and it's just as bad as his," she said.

Oliver called on the prefecture to confiscate these dogs as well, and to prosecute the woman.

But according to Nakatani, the case is different — the woman does at least feed her animals. Prosecution, he said, while theoretically possible under the law, is extremely difficult in practice.

"The law is vague and doesn't define precisely what constitutes 'cruelty.' The fact that the woman feeds the dogs effectively prevents us from taking any action," Nakatani said.

However, Oliver feels tax laws are not to blame.

"It's quite possible to sue under present law, but the Japanese are reluctant to solve this kind of issue by direct action," she said. "Even if the laws are given a sharper edge, they won't use them."