

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Barking mad at animal

Police indifference to acts of barbaric cruelty against animals in Japan shows the need for stricter legal protection of animals, while activists say the public also needs to be taught about responsible care of pets.

By **ROY K. AKAGAWA**

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The horrific Kobe case of the murder of two young children has spotlighted the lack of concern in Japan for treatment of animals.

Reports that the 15-year-old murder suspect, a junior high school student arrested in late June, cut out the tongues of cats among other cruel acts against animals, prompted Elizabeth Oliver of Osaka to write a letter to the Asahi Evening News, appealing for a stricter law to protect animals against abuse.

Oliver is the director of Animal Refuge Kansai (ARK), an animal shelter in a rural part of Osaka Prefecture that is close to the borders of Kyoto and Hyogo prefectures. ARK was last in the news after the Great Hanshin Earthquake, when it found itself taking care of close to 600 animals, mostly pets that had nowhere to go when their owners were forced into temporary accommodation.

Oliver, a British citizen who has lived in Japan now for almost 30 years, voices a criticism commonly heard among animal welfare advocates in Japan about the current Law for the Protection and Control of Animals.

"The law is like a sieve because there is no definition of cruelty," she said. "It will be very difficult to prosecute if you don't know what cruelty is."

Another group, the Tokyo-based Citizens Conference for Consideration of Nature and Animals, is collecting signatures to petition the government to strengthen the law's provisions.

Spokeswoman Yoko Shimizu said the group had already gathered about 190,000 signatures, close to its target of at least 200,000.

Diet members whom the group has contacted are showing increasing interest, even those belonging to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, Shimizu said. The recent Kobe murder incident, as well as past reports that Tsutomu Miyazaki—who is appealing a death sentence handed down earlier this year for the serial murders of four young girls in 1988 and 1989 in Tokyo and Saitama Prefecture—had also killed dogs and cats before he

that taking action against animal cruelty might stem more violent acts against humans.

Shimizu said the group was hopeful that debate on amending the animal protection law could begin as soon as the next extraordinary session of the Diet convenes, expected later this month.

In addition to spelling out concrete examples of cruelty in a revision of the animal protection law, the Citizens Conference also advocates the licensing of animal vendors as well as stricter penalties for acts of cruelty.

Under the current provisions, the maximum penalty for an act of cruelty against an animal is only 30,000 yen. Animal welfare advocates say that the low figure dissuades police from actively seeking out perpetrators of cruelty against animals.

Tomomi Hagiwara of the Japan Anti-Vivisection Association (JAVA) cited the case in February of a cat in Tomakomai, Hokkaido that was apparently set on fire with either gasoline or kerosene. Family members found the burning cat and took it to a veterinarian, but with about 70 percent of the cat's skin burned, the animal died within a week.

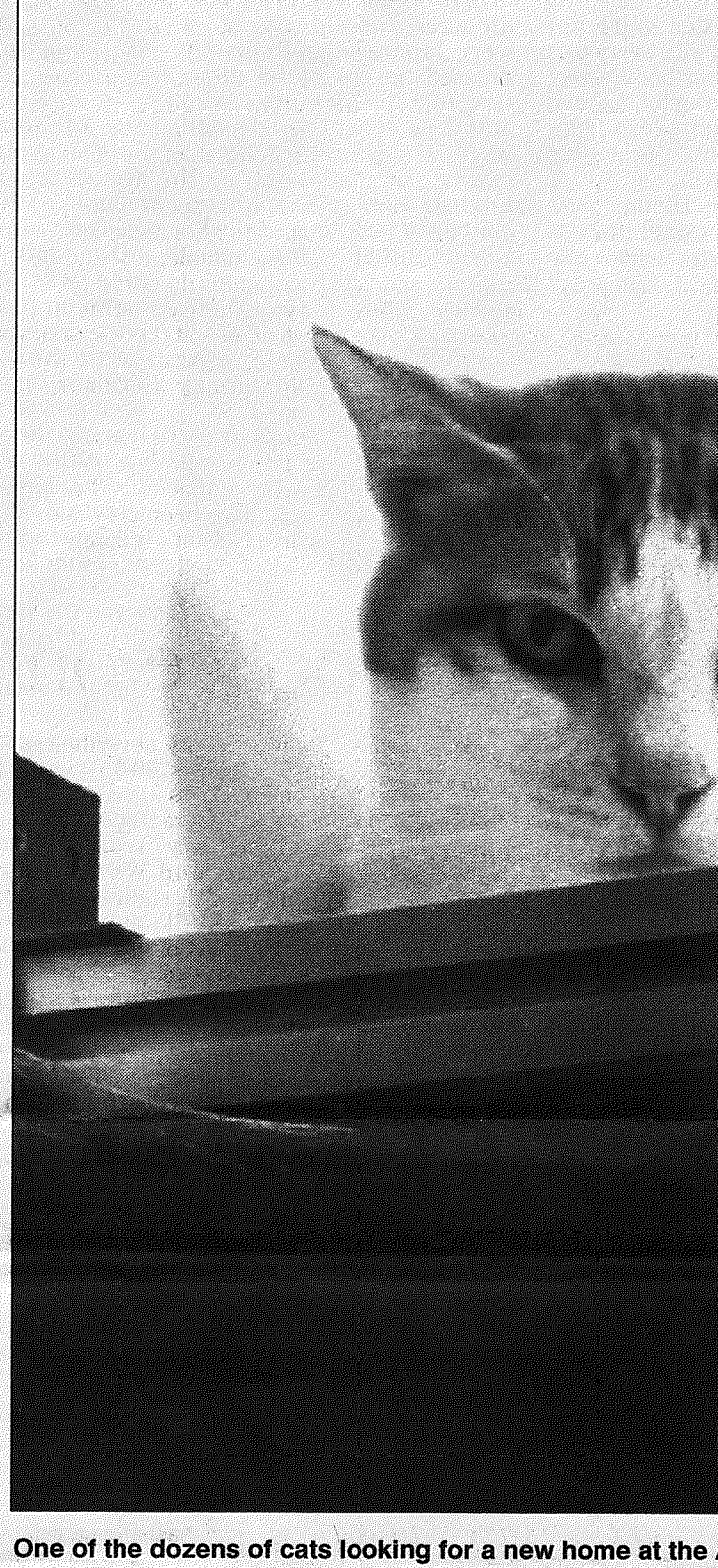
Is burning a cat not a crime?

Police handled the case as an incident of damage to property since a building near the home of the cat's family had also been burned, but no suspect was ever arrested.

Hagiwara said a study by JAVA found that in Britain a similar case would have been treated by police as abuse of animals, and the perpetrator would have been liable to a maximum penalty of £5,000, roughly 1 million yen, or up to six months in prison.

In addition to a stronger law, ARK's Oliver said she would also like to see a more extensive network of animal shelters to care for homeless dogs and cats.

She said the lack of an established animal welfare system in Japan made it difficult to take care of all the animals in need. In the West, she added, most communities have five or six animal shelters, and people who find abandoned animals have a number of alternatives when one is full and they themselves are unwilling or unable to take care of the animal. However, she said in Ja-



One of the dozens of cats looking for a new home at the

could take the animals, since ARK is at full capacity now.

"In Japan, it's either take the animal to the *hokensho* (public health center) or throw the animal away," she said. "There is nothing in between. So, of course, people will contact us. The more publicity we get, the more people think this is a place they can take their animals."

She said ARK gets about 15 calls

The reason for the low age of pets that are returned to their owners in Japan is that owners do not begin searching for lost pets until many days have elapsed, said Hagiwara. In that time, the cat may have been picked up by local authorities and taken to a pound where they are likely to be killed in a short period of time.