

World's top dogs' home exterminates pit bulls

Susan Young

AMERICAN pit bull terriers have been routinely destroyed for the past two years by one of Britain's leading dog charities.

Battersea Dogs Home decided in 1989 not to find new homes for any of the scores of stray pit bulls it received each year, on the grounds of public safety.

Its cautious approach has been underlined by two horrific, unprovoked attacks during the past three weeks — on a Leicester man whose face was almost destroyed by two pit bulls, and on six-year-old Rucksana Khan who was mauled by a dog in Bradford.

No other breed is affected by the charity's blanket ruling, although in the past Battersea has temporarily banned the 'rehoming' of rottweilers and German shepherds.

But the Dogs Home still regards Home Secretary Kenneth Baker's decision to legislate for the destruction or export of all fighting dogs as impracticable and unacceptable. It has joined the storm of protest against the legislation from owners, animal charities and the British Veterinary Association.

Tony Hare, director-general of the 131-year-old Dogs Home, said he knew of no particular incident that had led to

Battersea's policy on pit bulls. 'I think we've taken the view that it's a dangerous dog and we don't want to rehome them,' he said.

Last year 143 pit bulls were brought to Battersea, of which 33 were claimed and the rest put down.

All were strays and there has been no increase in their numbers since the current scare began. Nor have worried owners been asking whether it is safe to keep their dogs.

The RSPCA has reissued its guidelines on 'rehoming' animals to its individual kennels, but it says it has no intention of imposing an automatic death sentence on every pit bull it acquires.

Tory MPs plan rebellion

THE Home Secretary's unwillingness to have a separate vote on dog registration in the forthcoming legislation to ban fighting dogs could provoke a Tory backbench rebellion, writes John McGhie.

Labour has let it be known that it will not oppose legislation if Mr Kenneth Baker allows a separate recorded vote on registration. But the Home Secretary will not countenance it.

If there is not a separate vote, Mr Baker is in grave danger of a

repeat of last year's rebellion during the Environment Protection Bill, when 49 Tories voted against the Government, cutting its majority to only 12.

Although registration would probably be defeated on a separate vote, it would allow the Government to contain the matter. If there were not a separate vote, however, Labour would put down an amendment to the Bill which would pose the threat of Tories voting against the Government.

However, the charity is now likely to apply its rules so stringently that new homes are highly unlikely to be found. In common with other animal welfare organisations, the RSPCA advises that the pit bull is unsuitable as a family pet.

The RSPCA and two veterinary organisations are to meet Mr Baker this week to plead for the apparently doomed dogs to be reprieved.

They will suggest a variety of alternatives, including neutering, registration, third-party insurance or exemption certificates for exemplary pets.

But Mr Baker appears largely unmoved by the furore and is convinced that most pit bull owners would, if required, sur-

render their pets for humane killing without protest.

With otherwise law-abiding owners vowing not to give up their dogs, and vets objecting to wholesale destruction, the logistics of the operation could be horrendous. A shortage of Government vets to deal with the estimated 10,000 dogs involved could mean that the police would be faced with the task of putting down the animals.

Artist Isabel Hanmer, 25, who got her four-year-old pit bull terrier, Trixie, from the RSPCA as a puppy, said yesterday: 'I'm normally a law-abiding person, but I won't give up my dog without a fight.'

Animal rights extremists have joined the fray, threatening vets and RSPCA inspectors with reprisals if they destroy pit bull terriers. Security was stepped up at the Home Office late last week.

One organisation firmly in favour of completely outlawing fighting dogs as soon as possible is the British Association of Plastic Surgeons, whose members have repaired the shattered bodies of those attacked by pit bulls and other breeds. It has even expressed disappointment that Mr Baker did not go further and include curbs on dogs such as alsatians and rottweilers.

Let owners pay, page 22