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Dog lives most of life on death row over law with more bite than bark

HACKENSACK, N.J. (Reuter) Talk about a dog's life! Taro is 5 and has spent more than half of his life on death row, pacing back and forth while lawyers and Brigitte Bardot plead for mercy.

Taro's tale has all the elements of a human drama on death row.

Gov. James Florio has been pressed to grant a reprieve, but he is in the middle of a tense campaign and might lose votes if he acts for one side or the other.

Taro's owners have spent thousands of dollars on lawyers and court appeals. Even the Japanese government asked for clemency and offered to let Taro live freely in Japan.

Bardot, the legendary French sex kitten turned animal rights activist, sent a plea for clemency to Florio, saying, "It seems to me that when one is condemned to death, after 2½ years of incarceration, then that someone has paid his debt to society."

Taro, an Akita — a breed of dog that originated in Japan — was found guilty of biting a 10-year-old girl and sentenced



LOU PIPON, a Bergen County police officer, pets an Akita named Taro outside the jail in Hackensack, N.J., recently. The canine has been on death row most of his life. AP PHOTO

to death under a 1987 state law designed to put the fear of God into owners of vicious pit bulls.

So far, court decisions have gone against Taro. An appeals court last week upheld earlier rulings and said the dog must die.

Taro has been on death row at the county jail here for nearly three years, with kennel costs and legal fees surpassing \$100,000.

He allegedly bit the girl on the lower lip on Christmas Day 1990. It was not a serious wound to the girl, a niece of Taro's owners.

Appeals for clemency from around the world have flooded Florio's office.

The governor, locked in a fierce re-election battle, has tried to sidestep the controversy. A Florio spokesman noted that Taro's owners still can appeal to the New Jersey Supreme Court, "so nothing is going to happen to the dog until the court appeals are exhausted."

Even the man who sponsored the state's vicious dog law, Assemblyman Joseph Azzolina, says Taro should live.

"The court ruling is as ridiculous as it is unbelievable, since my law was meant to affect only vicious pit bulls and other dogs (that) attack humans," said Azzolina.