

'DEATH ROW' DOG

Akita wins gubernatorial pardon

TRENTON, N.J. (Reuter) Like a scene out of a 1940s prison movie, Gov. Christie Whitman on Friday pardoned New Jersey's 'death row' dog, whose fate had brought appeals for clemency ranging from Brigitte Bardot to the Japanese government.

Whitman's action ends more than three years of legal wrangling over the fate of Taro, a 5-year-old Akita which spent the time at a special kennel at the Bergen County jail.

"This has gone on long enough," Whitman told reporters, noting the case had consumed over \$100,000 in legal fees on both sides.

Taro had been ordered to be destroyed after a judge ruled

the dog had attacked a young girl visiting the Haworth, N.J., home of Lonnie and Sandy Lehrer on Christmas Day, 1990. The dog was committed to the county jail Feb. 11, 1991.

Whitman faced a peculiar legal problem since her power to grant clemency applies to people, not pets, but she said she had found a way out through the law on property forfeiture.

Since pets are property, the executive order says, and the governor has the power to remit forfeitures, she will exercise this power to spare Taro and return her to her owners.

The dog must be removed from the state within 30 days and the owners must accept

any liability.

Taro's saga became an international cause celebre: dog lovers from around the world offered to take in the 45-kg Akita. Even the Japanese government expressed interest, since Taro's breed is native to that land.

Bardot, the sex symbol turned animal rights activist, had telegraphed Whitman's predecessor, Jim Florio, last year in support of the dog, but Florio refused to get involved.

Taro was to have been killed under a law that orders dangerous dogs to be destroyed. But the author of that law said he meant it for pit bulls and other dogs bred to be aggressive.