

Tenri revisited

A river divides two prefectures. One day someone notices a corpse floating downstream. They run, like any conscientious citizen would, to call the police. By the time the police arrive the body is floating close to the bank. They take a long bamboo pole and push the body out into midstream again. With a sense of relief they watch as it is carried towards the opposite bank. This is the classic way prefectures handle potentially unpleasant problems. It not only saves them a lot of trouble but a load of paperwork as well. So it is with the Tenri hell-hole case which I wrote about in September Kansai Time Out.

Japanese will go to almost any lengths to avoid outright confrontation. Negotiation is spun out until a compromise is reached. Resorting to legal means, in this case using the existing Animal Protection Law with its anti-cruelty clause, is the last thing they want to do. Instead, by pandering to the senile old man and the loony *obaasan*, patting them on the head as one would naughty children, they hope to win their trust and prise the animals away from them. This slow soft approach may suit the authorities but for the suffering animals it is an eternity.

Events in Tenri have unfolded as follows. Throughout the summer pressure built up to force Nara Prefecture to do something about the animals incarcerated in the hell-hole. Over 10,000 signatures were collected in Japan and protest letters from overseas animal welfare organisations poured into Japanese embassies abroad, some to the Prime Minister's office in Tokyo. At the same time, protest postcards, 9,000 in all (around 800 from the 50 K.T.O. readers who contacted me)

began to arrive at Nara Prefectural Office. A perfect target. Nara is acutely aware of its tourist image which it doesn't want tarnished.

The Prefecture moved amazingly quickly to remedy the situation or rather, to save face. It managed to secure the release of 32 dogs with the old man's consent, only by promising that they would not be euthanised but that the Prefecture would treat them (at tax payers' expense) until they were well enough to be re-homed. It is questionable whether these dogs, many mentally scarred from their miserable treatment can be rehomed, but that's a hurdle they'll have to cross later. The animals are now being treated in temporary accommodation directly across the road from the old man's shack while permanent kennels are being built elsewhere.

Once the dogs were out of the old man's direct control, the Prefecture allowed the Japanese press to publish their story. (Up to this point only TBS had done a film report which wasn't picked up by the newspapers – so much for independent roving reporters.) Nara told them and showed them what it wanted reported, i.e., the unpleasant case was virtually wrapped up and what a great job the Prefecture had done. Never believe what you read in newspapers. Four of us (*gaijin* women) did a flying raid on Tenri at the end of September. True the place had been transformed, sand and lime covering the former site where the dogs had formerly been tied on top of decomposing piles of rubbish and the corpses of their comrades. (It took the Prefecture three days to exhumate the bones and clear the site. They estimated 1,000 deaths/year meaning over 10 yrs, 10,000 dogs had perished there, mainly of disease, dehydration and starvation.) As we walked near the shacks we were immediately harassed by the old hag who followed us around shrieking 'Killers'. We took her picture which made her madder and embarrassed prefectural officials hurriedly guided us to the new site where the rescued dogs were receiving 24-hour veterinary care. She kept up her tirade demanding that we hand over the film. We released 'a' film, not 'the' film.

Summoning a prefectural car like a taxi she spend off to the town to get it developed. We seized our chance and dashed back across the road. Inside her shack we found the same nightmare scene – cages upon cages of hell. No time to stare, to feel ill or to shed tears, just an urgency to press the camera shutter again and again and again. All the while her fellow torturer, the demented old man was phoning for the police. We escaped with the evidence we needed.

It's easy to say 'in any other country' because we are living in Japan where a different set of rules apply. But I will say it nevertheless. In any other country this pair of criminals would be under lock and key for the torture and neglect of thousands of innocent animals or at the very least they would be heavily fined and banned from ever keeping animals again.

The point is, are Nara Prefectural authorities willing to use the law that exists to pursue and prosecute this pair or are they going to continue their cover-up in the hope that the problem will go away? The lease on the land expires at the end of November by which time they hope the old hag will be forced to give up her dogs because she has nowhere to take them. My guess is that she'll do a midnight flit and set up another hell-hole in a distant prefecture letting Nara off the hook.

This is an unparalleled opportunity to expose the Animal Protection Law in Japan for what it is, a meaningless colander law but Japan see animal welfare organisations conditioned by failure and couched in the familiar pattern of compromise are letting this chance slip through their fingers. ARK will keep fighting, not only for the Tenri animals but for the sake of all abused animals in Japan. We are now preparing a new set of protest postcards to be used if negotiations grind to a halt.

Postscript: Any criticism I have made is directed against the powers-that-be in Nara Prefecture who have moved, not out of pity for the plight of the animals but out of embarrassment from the international protest arising over this case. I have nothing but praise for

the hard-working veterinarians from the *hokensho* who have been dealing with the unpleasant practical aspects, in particular Mr. Izumi Yukihiro who has put the welfare of the animals before everything – a rare and humane veterinarian.

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