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PLIGHT OF ANIMAL EARTHQUAKE VICTIMS

- PET DOGS BEING SOLD FOR FOOD AND TO LABORATORIES
- FEARS THAT MANY WILL BE POISONED

Hundreds of thousands of pets have been left starving and injured in the wake of the Kobe earthquake in Japan - and dogs are being sold for food and to laboratories for experiments according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW).

An IFAW emergency relief team is coordinating animal rescue efforts amongst the rubble with feeding programs, veterinary work and lost and found registers.

Annemieke Roell, IFAW's emergency relief program organiser, said: "Every day hundreds of pets are being euthanised in shelters. Our operation has a 'no-kill' policy which is why we are desperately trying to find more land where we can put up temporary buildings to house the animals.

"Obviously there is tremendous human suffering here but these animals have to be cared for too. Many are injured and starving, all are traumatised. Thousands of dogs have run up into the mountains."

Under the Government's rabies prevention regulations stray dogs are put down after just three days. IFAW has set up a communications network between the five sanctuaries involved in the animal rescue work to reunite owners with their pets as quickly as possible.

"Some people have handed their pets to us because they have no home and no way to care for them. Other people are living with their animals in makeshift tents and in cars. We are supplying them with pet food," said Elizabeth Oliver, who is working with IFAW at her private animal sanctuary called Animal Refuge Kansai - an hour's drive from Kobe.

"Animals are eating garbage in the rubble but it is full of glass. That is why our food deliveries are so important. Around 100 volunteers are travelling around to collect animals but it is extremely difficult as most roads are impassable. We have about 150 animals at the moment but will be able to care for around 500 when our new buildings are complete. If we can get more land then we will be able to do more. Sadly, we're only able to tackle the tip of the iceberg," said Elizabeth.

"We know that some unscrupulous people at the dog pounds are selling dogs for human consumption and to laboratories. They get about 500 yen (\$5) per dog. It is a sick and distressing trade. With the earthquake it is going to get worse as more and more strays are taken to the local government pounds. Now our main fear is that the authorities will put down poison to kill off the strays because of the risk of disease."

IFAW's Annemieke Roell added: "Sometimes there is some hope among the misery. We had a man come to us last night desperate to find his husky which had been missing for two weeks. By pure chance it was one we had rescued just a few hours earlier.

"Sadly tens of thousands of dogs and cats will probably die in the next few weeks, but we will do all we can to save as many as possible."