

It is a dog's life

Pakistan is fast becoming a rabies-endemic state. According to estimates by the World Health Organisation (WHO), 2000-5000 people die in Pakistan from rabies every year. Benazir Shah investigates if the inhumane slaughter of street animals is the only solution.

Rabies is highly fatal when transmitted to human beings. Largely passed on through the bite of an infected carnivore, such as a dog, bat or a cat, the disease causes gradual inflammation of the brain which leaves little chance of survival.

Experts view rabies in developing countries to primarily be dominated by street animals. In Pakistan, thousands of dogs and cats are found living on the streets and scavenging for their food in dumpsters. Frequent

run-ins between local residents and the growing population of stray dogs are common and at times, dangerous. Passer-by in

rural areas and cities are the most likely victims of unprovoked dog bites. In an attempt to curb the rising number of infected cases, civic authorities have embarked on a plan to reduce the population of street animals, by poi-

soning and shooting stray dogs.

Every year, during May and June, advertisements are promulgated around cities inviting potential dog shooters. According to the Multan-based Non-Government Organisation (NGO) Animal Save Movement Pakistan (ASMP), in Multan alone, 225 dogs were killed in a span of two days in 2007. NGOs argue that killing animals in this fashion is inhumane. However, shooting is limited to certain areas. The most common method used around the country is poisoning. Strychnine poison is added to meat chunks and sweets as bait, to allure the unsuspecting animal. "This is a



cruel method as the poison used is of cheap quality, causing the animal to suffer for at least seven to eight hours before dying", says Khalid Mahmood Qureshi, Director, ASMP.

In most cases, a culling fee is offered to licensed gun owners for every dog killed. Yet, due to the breeding habits, officials have been unable to note any significant fall in the number of rabies cases, or the animals. Qureshi explains to *NGO World* that "Only one out of 10,000 dogs is a rabid dog and carries the potential risk of spreading the disease."

He believes such a low ratio requires a more strategic method in targeting stray dogs contrary to the one presently employed.

The local legislature does not favour the rabies control method adopted in Pakistan. The killing of an animal, 'in this manner is unnecessary and cruel', and is punishable under section five of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1890. The perpetrator if convicted, can face a hefty fine and up to five years in prison. The act has not been recently updated and hence lacks proper implementation.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) the Animal's Birth Control (ABC) Programme would be a better ideal solution for controlling the spread of rabies. The programme requires the

capture, sterilization and vaccination of rabies in street animals before they are released back to their respective areas. India, which has the highest number of dog-bites and rabies cases globally, has integrated the programme into a government policy. An Animal Welfare Board was established in India in 1962 in accordance to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960. One of the functions of the board is to advise the government on any amendments required by the law and to prevent unnecessary killing of dogs. The board also requires the setting up of a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCAs), in each district with an attached hospital on land arranged by the local government. Other countries that have

seen effective implementation of the ABC programme include Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nepal, UAE, Egypt, Brazil, Greece, Kenya and Turkey.

"It is time that a similar animal welfare board is initiated in Pakistan as well", says Mahera Omar, Co-Founder, Pakistan Animal Welfare Society (PAWS). "One of our main objectives is to introduce a humane alternative to reduce the stray dog populations of our cities. Killing dogs is an ineffective approach and has never worked in Pakistan or any other country of the world."

PAWS and ASMP both agree a pet registration and vaccination program needs to be established, in co-ordination with an awareness campaign. Currently, PAWS is

working to create a school curriculum that teaches children kindness and compassion towards all living creatures whilst Animals Save Movement Pakistan (ASMP) is already moving door to door in Multan to educate people on the value and importance of animals by distributing pamphlets in Urdu and English.

"The way we treat our animals speaks volumes about the kind of nation we have become. It is our duty as human beings to look after those who cannot look after themselves, and this includes the animals we share our world with. Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated', says Omar. ♦

