

Tsunami strays get help: Georgian joins effort to treat animal survivors
M.A.J. MCKENNA
1139 words
30 January 2005
The Atlanta Journal – Constitution

Ban Nan Khem, Thailand --- In the corner of a bureau in what used to be a dining room, a tuxedo-coated kitten crouched in a shadow.

The front and back walls were gone and the floor was a waist-high heap of rubble. Consie von Gontard was looking for a safe place to step when she spotted the small white paws. She shook the bag of cat food she was holding. The kitten sat up alertly. Soft thumps sounded from the torn roof overhead, and a black cat and a spotted one dropped into the room.

"They know that sound," von Gontard said. "They're used to being fed by someone." She regarded the ruins of their home. "I don't think that person will be feeding them anymore."

Thousands of volunteers have converged on Thailand to comfort, feed and house the human survivors of last month's tsunamis. A much smaller contingent is caring for a separate set of survivors: the pets, strays and agricultural animals who somehow escaped the waves.

For more than a week, von Gontard --- a 46-year-old veterinary nurse and videographer from Roswell --- has combed the flattened villages of Phang-nga province, part of a three-member disaster team fielded by the Humane Society International.

Many animals died

In every village, dogs and cats sit on broken patches of tile that were once the floors of the homes they lived in. They look toward the sea, where the people who cared for them went, and wait for those people to return.

The team's mission is to find and treat the injured, vaccinate and sterilize the healthy, and ensure that ownerless animals will be sheltered and fed. "Animals have been displaced, so they are moving into new territories and fighting, rummaging in garbage for food and catching diseases," said Melissa Forberg, a team member who heads the Humane Society of the United States' Disaster Animal Response Team.

There were reports in the first days after the tsunamis that animals along the coasts had instinctively headed inland. In Thailand, authorities have determined those reports were incorrect. Wild animals may have evaded trouble, but numerous domestic animals --- dogs, cats, chickens, goats, water buffalo --- died in the waves.

Still, so many remain that Thai animal charities are overwhelmed. Von Gontard's group arrived after an urgent plea from the Soi Dog Foundation of Phuket, a small private group run by English expatriate John Dalley and his wife, Gillian. (Soi dog --- "soi" is Thai for "alley" --- is the local term for strays.)

Getting attached

On Thursday morning, von Gontard, Forberg and veterinarian Leo Egar --- the field director of Rural Area Veterinary Services, who was castrating a herd of wild horses in New Mexico when he got the call to head to Asia --- coiled coated steel leashes around their shoulders, stuffed muzzles and treats in their pockets and fanned out across Ban Nan Khem, a subsistence fishing village where more than 1,000 people died.

Within minutes, they were confronting two growling, short-legged yellow dogs, guards for the ruined market and billiard parlor of Panomsak Aiyarattanaruk. Aiyarattanaruk, in his 50s, had fled on his motorbike with his family when he saw the waves, he said through an interpreter. It took them two days to get back. The shops' front walls and furniture were gone, and the metal grates that protected the windows were crumpled on their brackets, but the dogs had survived on the roof.

The dogs struggled and bucked as the muzzles went on. They yelped and whined at the injections. One urinated on von Gontard's knees as she held her down.

"If I haven't been peed or pooped on at least once in a day, I can't really say I've been working," she said, wiping sweat out of her eyes.

There were dozens more: Vaccinations for a dark-muzzled, plume-tailed dog whose owners had built a treehouse above their devastated boat yard rather than leave their home. Deworming for a litter of kittens with stunted tails, born in the back of a small shop selling recycled water bottles full of motorbike fuel. Emergency surgery on a desk at a ruined fish hatchery for an elderly golden retriever left with a seeping, maggoty wound from a fight with another dog after the waves tore open their kennels.

"We'll ask one of the Thai vets to check in on him and bring him antibiotics," Egar said afterward. "We'll have to hope he'll be all right."

To succeed, the rescue team members have to be able to leave animals for others to care for. But sometimes they cannot. Von Gontard is bringing back to Atlanta two tsunami survivors, hoping to find them homes, after they recover in a Thai veterinary hospital. The dogs are not expected in this country until at least February.

One rescuee is a small black dog named Kem, after her village. While the vets were spaying her, Kem stopped breathing, and they kept her alive by breathing for her through a ventilator tube. Another, called Thai, is a 4-month-old puppy who had taken refuge at the temple where the team set up its temporary clinic, about 100 yards inland from where the waves stopped.

Hoping perhaps to stop a case of mange, a man who lives with the monks had poured a bottle of cleaning chemicals over the puppy. Instead, he poisoned the dog. The team worked for hours to revive him, and Egar and von Gontard were left vomiting from chemical burns. "I begged Kem and Thai both, 'If you just live, I will take you home, I will get you a better life,' " von Gontard said.