

Rescue teams treat animals saved from the rubble of Turkey quakes



A Turkish health worker brings a rescued puppy to a field hospital in the city of Antakya [Patrick Keddie/Al Jazeera]

Ankara, February 22 (RHC)--In a field hospital set up for animals in the southern city of Antakya, a cat meowed in half-hearted protest as he was gently laid on a table, examined, and injected with painkillers and antibiotics by a volunteer veterinarian and her assistant.

The British Shorthair had been stuck in an apartment following two huge earthquakes on February 6th. After almost two weeks, he finally jumped to the ground several floors below, where somebody found him injured.

The dust-coated cat could not use his back legs and was suffering from suspected hypothermia, so he was transferred to an incubator to warm up, where he continued protesting plaintively behind the glass. Once warm, he would probably have to be sent to a clinic outside the disaster zone where X-rays could be done on his legs and spine.

“There are lots of animals stuck inside rubble, many have been trapped for a long time,” Zinnet Patan, a 49-year-old vet normally living in Istanbul, told Al Jazeera at the field hospital. “They get dehydrated and they have broken bones and wounds. The equipment is really limited here, so we only do first aid. Local vets are also the survivors of the earthquake and are often not able to help, so we are trying to help all kinds of animals.”

In a tent in a park about 1 km (0.6 mile) downstream from Antakya’s devastated old city, Patan treats close to 100 animals a day. She administers vaccinations, stitches wounds, and helps animals give birth and care for their sickly young. Birds chirruped and cooed from their cages inside the small tent. “People in this area really love pigeons – we once had 40 pigeons come in at once,” she said.

The historic city of Antakya in Hatay province has been devastated by the magnitude 7.8 and 7.6 earthquakes, which have now killed more than 40,000 people in Turkey and about 5,800 in Syria. It is thought that nearly 35 percent of the buildings in Hatay have collapsed, while about 30 percent are severely damaged.

Amid the immense human suffering caused by the earthquakes, animals have been hugely affected, too.

Haytap, an animal welfare organisation that has experience working in earthquake zones and areas hit by wildfires, has taken charge of coordinating aid efforts and volunteers, who come from across Turkey and abroad. It set up the animal hospital on the first day of the disaster.

Patan had been volunteering at the hospital for four days. She would be replaced by another vet and go home on Monday, and the steady stream of injured animals had not slowed. “I work almost 24 hours!” she said, laughing. “I get woken up a lot during the night.”

By the severely damaged seventh-century Habib-i Neccar mosque in Antakya’s old city, Haytap’s Hatay rescue team loaded more animals onto a truck carrying an assortment of cats, dogs, and rabbits.

Mehmet Gürkan T??o?lu, who leads the rescue team, said Haytap volunteers are also working in three other earthquake-hit cities in southern Turkey – Kahramanmara?, Malatya, and Osmaniye. “In Hatay alone, we have rescued more than 1,000 animals. It’s a huge number and a big responsibility. We are working constantly,” he told Al Jazeera. “It’s not an easy job. We enter really dangerous, collapsed buildings – it’s a risk to our lives. We are really tired, but when we rescue the animals, it gives us so much joy.”

The animals do what they need to survive, including eating their own faeces, and when they are rescued, they are often highly agitated. “The animals are very stressed, they scratch, they bite – but it’s normal, they are protecting themselves and they are traumatised by the earthquake,” he said.

Michael Sehr, who normally works in a police animal rescue team in Germany, arrived in Antakya on Tuesday with his seven-strong crew to help. “We rescue animals big and small,” he said. “Yesterday we went to a village and rescued a cow that had been trapped for 12 days.”

Ömer Semih Çelik, a 30-year-old from the northwestern city of Bursa, was coordinating the field hospital site. He said the owners of many of the animals being treated died in the earthquake or lost everything and could no longer care for them. Animals can be permanently housed at a farm run by Haytap in Bursa, or they can stay there until they are re-homed.

“We got used to [rescuing animals] in other situations, but in Hatay, the situation is really tough right now so we’re getting emotional more easily,” he said. “We feed our souls by rescuing animals – it makes us really motivated.”

He said the field hospital in Antakya most urgently needed food. “We especially need bird seed – most people donate food for cats and dogs. And we need to carry boxes and crates, in every size – because we treat everything from mice to huge dogs,” he said, pointing to an enormous black mastiff, whose owner could no longer look after him.

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