

Greek officials accused over mass poisoning of stray animals

Athens authorities behind a cruel clean-up campaign ahead of Olympics, says RSPCA

BY DAVID HARRISON
Environment Correspondent

THE RSPCA has accused the Greek authorities of poisoning thousands of stray cats and dogs, including many pets, in what it fears is a secret campaign to "clean up" the streets of Athens in time for next year's Olympic Games.

The Greek authorities deny any role in the poisonings, which have shocked British tourists, but the RSPCA says that evidence from animal-welfare groups points to official involvement.

Suspicion deepened this month when 40 cats and 15 dogs were found killed by poison in the National Gardens in Athens, where Greece — which holds the European Union presidency — will host key European Union meetings over the next six months.

Vets found plastic dishes containing poison and said the animals — healthy strays that had been looked after by animal-welfare groups — were killed so that they would not be seen by visiting political leaders.

David Bowles, of RSPCA

to show that it is a civilised country, then poisoning cats and dogs is the wrong way to go about it," he added.

Poisoning animals is a criminal offence in Greece, but prosecutions are rare.

Up to 40,000 stray cats and dogs are on the streets of Athens alone. Many are dumped when owners grow bored with them. Their numbers have grown quickly because it is illegal to have an animal put down in Greece, and few strays are adopted. The problem is compounded by a "macho mentality" which deems it "unnatural" to neuter cats and dogs as a way of controlling their numbers, according to RSPCA International.

Carol McBeth, the director of the London-based Greek Animal Welfare Fund, said: "The mass killings, just as Greece begins the EU presidency, suggests that the slaughter was officially approved. It is very alarming and we are fighting to stop thousands of animals being cruelly slaughtered to ensure that the streets of Athens and other parts of Greece are animal-free for the Olympics."

was drawing up plans to clear strays off the streets in time for the Olympics, but denied that any poisonings were being carried out with official backing.

"We will be setting up special places where the cats and dogs will be kept during the Games," he said. "We like animals and want to deal with the problem humanely. The embassy guard has two cats and we love them very much."

International, which is campaigning against the slaughter, said that poisoning animals was "a barbaric practice happening on a daily basis all over Greece".

The killings were carried out secretly, often by individuals and companies, in a "misguided attempt" to cut the country's large number of strays, he said. "But the mass poisoning in Athens suggests official involvement.

"We are seriously concerned that poisoning is being stepped up with the authorities' approval as we approach the start of the Olympic Games. Poisoning could be seen as a convenient quick-fix solution before the world's cameras arrive in Greece."

Mr Bowles said that along with the many strays being looked after by Greece's fledgling animal welfare groups, pets allowed out by their owners were also falling victim to the poisoners. "That is obviously very distressing for the owners," he said.

Animal welfare groups say that in the past refuse collectors have been used to place poison, and fear that this could be happening again.

Mr Bowles said the Greek government was determined to show the world that it was an advanced country capable of successfully staging such a prestigious event. "If it wants

RSPCA International has held talks with ministers and urged them to stop the poisoning and introduce a programme of neutering, shelters, humane destruction and adoption for strays.

The Greek government says it takes the problem of strays seriously and will address it in animal welfare legislation ahead of the Olympics.

The RSPCA is concerned, however, that the laws will not be enough to prevent a big increase in poisonings. "Time

'This could be seen as a convenient quick-fix solution before the world's cameras arrive'

is running out and poisoning could be seen as a quick, easy solution," said Mr Bowles.

Animal welfare groups plan to demonstrate outside the Greek embassy in Brussels on Thursday. They will hand a 45,000-signature petition to the ambassador, demanding an end to the poisonings.

Alexandros Sandis, the Greek ambassador to London, declined to comment on the RSPCA's allegations.

His spokesman admitted that the Greek government



A puppy with its dead mother — a victim of Greek poisoners

The Sunday Telegraph
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After the hare coursing season, unwanted hounds are hanged

...while in Spain, dogs face barbaric hanging

THEY HANG pitifully from trees – condemned to death because they have outlived their usefulness or have not raced as well as their owners would have liked, writes David Harrison.

This is the undignified end that awaits hundreds of greyhounds at the end of the hare coursing season in Spain, an investigation by a British animal welfare group has found.

The dogs, known as *galgos*, are killed in a variety of brutal ways, according to how well they have raced. Poor performers are hung low to ensure a slow death. This ritual is known, among those who inflict such cruelty, as “the piano player” or “the secretary” – because the dogs’ frantic scrabbling of their legs in a vain attempt to avoid choking is thought to resemble the actions of a pianist or a busy typist.

Better racers are “rewarded” by being hung higher in the tree where they cannot touch the ground, resulting in a quicker death.

Jonathan Owen, an investigator for the World Society

for the Protection of Animals, said: “Hanging dogs is gratuitous cruelty. It is scandalous that Spain, supposedly a modern Western country, is allowing man’s best friend to be so callously abused.

“These gentle creatures endure misery in their short lives as a tool for their owners’ hobby of hare coursing, and are then ‘rewarded’

This has nothing to do with tradition and everything to do with cruelty for cruelty’s sake’

with a brutal death. This has nothing to do with tradition and everything to do with cruelty for cruelty’s sake. It is a graphic example of why a national animal law is so desperately needed in Spain.”

The WSPA’s investigators found dogs dumped in shallow graves or lying under trees where they had been hanged, and evidence of dogs

hanged and set on fire. Neither hare coursing nor hanging dogs is illegal in Spain, where there is no national animal protection law. Under a local law in Castilla y León, anybody found hanging a dog faces a £10,000 fine but, so far, there have been no prosecutions.

It is estimated that 50 per cent of *galgos* die by the age of two, after only one season of hare coursing, during which they exist on bread and sugar and are raced twice a week over many miles.

The Marquis of Tamarón, Spain’s ambassador to London, told *The Sunday Telegraph* that he was appalled by the hangings. “It is an atrocious act of cruelty,” he said.

The marquis, who keeps horses at his home in Andalusia and describes himself as an animal lover, said that any evidence of the hangings should be reported to the Spanish authorities.

He added that Spanish law was currently being amended to make dog-hanging a criminal offence with tough penalties.