

Arizona Daily Star®

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Published: 10.16.2006

Rescue mission saves 295 critters

Lebanon fight prompts U.S. group to help

By Shelley Shelton

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Oro Valley-based mobile veterinarian Chris Miller recently got an idea of what it might have smelled like aboard Noah's ark.

He spent most of September in Beirut, Lebanon, as part of an animal-rescue effort that culminated in a long airplane ride across the Atlantic Ocean with 295 dogs and cats.

The plane carried the menagerie from Beirut to London, then through New York before landing in Las Vegas, where the animals were put on trucks and driven to Kanab, Utah — home of Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, which coordinated the mission.

"All in all, it was a solid 24 hours aboard a plane when we came back," Miller said.

The plane in question was a United Arab Emirates cargo plane that had exactly enough room for about 300 animal cages and eight seats for the furry passengers' human companions.

The flight itself was the easy part. The weeks leading up to the flight were tricky.

"The whole venture was instigated by the recent conflict in Lebanon," Miller said. Many of the animals he helped bring to the U.S. were left behind by evacuees. "There's no animal control to speak of."

Conditions for animals in the country before the conflict were poor already, wrote Joelle Kanaan in an e-mail.

Kanaan is a co-founder of Beirut for the Ethical Treatment of Animals — or BETA, which is no relation to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

BETA began in early 2004 to provide a no-kill sanctuary for abused and abandoned animals, Kanaan wrote.

"During the war and until now, the number of our rescues has doubled, and we have new cats and dogs entering our shelters every day," she wrote.

During the military conflict, Best Friends contacted BETA to offer financial and moral support, eventually offering to bring animals across the ocean.

The trip was originally planned to take a week and a half; it became a three-week venture instead, said Rich Crook, rapid response manager for Best Friends, which bills itself as the nation's largest no-kill sanctuary for homeless animals.

Each day of work became a two-day affair, he said, partly because of the time difference in communication between Beirut and the United States and partly because of unforeseen tasks that had to be completed.

To help

? To donate to Best Friends Animal Sanctuary or to adopt one of the animals rescued from Lebanon, visit www.bestfriends.org or call 1-800-919-5463.

For instance, Miller drew blood from 150 dogs to test for a certain disease, and when he was finished, he found out he also needed to give shots to the same animals to ward off parasites.

It would have been faster to draw the blood and give the shot to each animal at the same time, Crook said. Instead Miller had to go back through, one by one.

Crook had worked with Miller on a previous project and was relieved to see him turn up for the Lebanon trip, he said. He had been expecting a different doctor.

Miller has all the right qualities for field work, Crook said.

"You have to be willing to set aside all you're used to, as far as clinic work," he said.

In field work, people must think on their feet and be able to work in adverse conditions.

When the U.S. team arrived in Lebanon, they found the dogs housed at an abandoned pig farm in the mountains, whereas the cats had free rein over two rented apartments.

The animals were in better shape than anticipated, Crook said.

But the group meandered through touchy events happening in the outside world while they were there, including the Sept. 11 anniversary, a visit to Lebanon from British Prime Minister Tony Blair and a good-sized Hezbollah rally.

"The organizations we worked with were very careful about not leaking any publicity," Miller said.

Now the animals are going through a sort of adjustment period in Utah while Best Friends looks for support to cover its \$300,000 in costs for the mission and care of the animals.

The dogs and cats are half spoken-for already, Crook said, but they officially go up for adoption in about two weeks.

"We had a lot of obstacles thrown at us, but we took care of them as they came up," Crook said.

Northwest

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