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Denogean: War refugee cats, dogs live, thanks to Chris

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Countless dogs, cats and farm animals were left behind by fleeing residents during the 34-day bombing of Lebanon this summer.

Homeless pets wandered the rubble-filled streets in search of food and water. Others remained locked in their homes or chained up by owners who had thought they'd be returning soon. Cows, donkeys, goats and horses rambled through abandoned villages.

Tucson veterinarian Chris Miller, 53, was among those who responded to an international plea for help, culminating in the airlifting late last month of 295 cats and dogs to the United States for adoption.

Though it's unlikely any of the owners will be reunited with their pets, at least the owners "can derive some comfort with the idea that their pets are safe and comfortable," Miller said.



Rescued dogs roam the makeshift shelter at an abandoned pig farm in the mountains above Beirut.



The veterinarian, who runs a mobile ultrasound service for small animals in Tucson, became aware of Lebanon's abandoned animals through the Utah-based Best Friends Animal Society.

Best Friends, which runs the nation's largest sanctuary for abused and abandoned animals, rescued some 6,000 animals from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Shortly after Israel began bombing Lebanon in mid-July, the Best Friends' Web site started carrying updates from Lebanon's only animal-rescue organization, Beirut for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Lebanon has no formal animal control agency.

BETA, no relation to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, is a fledgling group made up of fewer than a dozen brave young women that Best Friends took to calling "the BETA girls."

With the country cut off by air, land and sea from the rest of the world and normal fundraising at a halt, BETA was desperately in need of cash for the increasingly expensive supplies of food and medication needed for its animal shelters.

As the shelling intensified, the BETA girls risked their lives to take food to their three shelters in Beirut, including a dog shelter on the edge of a targeted area that eventually was hit by shrapnel. They rescued more animals from the streets and rooftops and visited a zoo in southern Lebanon to make sure the animals were getting enough to eat.

By mid-August, Best Friends had collected \$25,000 for BETA and agreed to organize an airlift for up to 300 cats and dogs.

Miller, who has done volunteer work in the rural United States and Mexico, "realized there probably wouldn't be an overwhelming response to their call for vets."

He was correct. He was one of only two, and the other stayed only a few days.

Miller left Sept. 18 and met the rest of the eight-member Best Friends team in Beirut. He arrived with 200 pounds of cat food because there was no kitty kibble in the entire country.

The dog shelter had been moved to an abandoned pig farm in the mountains outside Beirut. There was much work to do in little time.

The team had to determine which dogs and cats, based on age, health and adoptability, would make the trip.

Each animal was tested for disease, vaccinated, dewormed, microchipped and documented as to age, breed and gender.

The traveling kennels had to be ordered, assembled and outfitted to provide food and water.

There were numerous regulations to comply with, those of the Lebanese officials, U.S. Customs and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

On Sept. 24, the 295 animals and the eight-member crew boarded the cargo plane bound for the U.S. It was a 20-hour flight with stops in Manchester, England, and New York City, Miller said.

Many of the animals developed "stress diarrhea," he said.

How bad did it smell?

"It smelled like a confined space with 300 animals," Miller said wryly.

But all the animals arrived in Las Vegas alive. They were taken by trucks to the Best Friends sanctuary in Kanab, Utah, where they will remain until matched with families.

Once left to fend for themselves, the now-pampered pets are being kept warm on Utah's crisp nights with blankets, heating pads and doggie igloos.

The entire operation has cost \$300,000 and \$350,000 to date, all funded by donations, said Michael Mountain, president of Best Friends. The next step is to help BETA establish a permanent shelter and create a spray-and-neuter program. It could be a model for animal welfare in the Middle East, Mountain said.



Best Friends is accepting donations to help the animals and BETA.

Anyone is welcome to fill out an adoption application for a rescued Lebanese pet, but Mountain urges people considering adoption to think first of the needs in their communities.

He told a story – apocryphal or not, I'm not sure – of a cat that garnered much media attention after she ran back into a burning house to rescue her kittens.

The shelter that took in the cat "spent the next three months . . . adopting out her 500 kittens, if you understand what I'm saying," he said, laughing.

"If people have space in their home and heart for a dog or a cat, the No. 1 thing is, please go down to the local shelter," Mountain said.

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