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**Letter to Editor**

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### **Treat animal cruelty on par with other serious offences**

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is shocked at the extreme cases of cruelties meted out to companion animals - dogs and cats. Statistics from the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) revealed dogs and cats topping the list in animal cruelty complaints. Complaints have been steadily rising over the past five years. In 2016 the department received 463 cruelty complaints, and in 2017 the number was 510 showing a 10% increase.

However the number of animal cruelty cases reported in the media is just the tip of the iceberg as most cases are never reported. While animals suffered and some even died because of these abusers, not one of the culprits are imprisoned for more than six months. Many offenders escaped going behind bars because charges are dropped due to lack of follow up, or lack of evidence.

To say that we do not have laws in place would be wrong. In 2017, the previous federal government announced the new Animal Welfare Act 2015 (Act 772) where those found guilty can be fined a maximum of RM 100,000, or three years imprisonment, or both. How often is action actually taken and the perpetrators brought to court and charged? SAM would like to recall a case where a man shot two arrows into Brianna the Rottweiler. He was not prosecuted because he claimed that he had shot the arrows into the dog claiming that he was “protecting his children,” and had not known the dog was sick and blind.

Why are cases of animal abuse so prevalent in Malaysia? The police and the DVS should take more interest in dealing with animal abuse cases, many of which are left to animal rights NGOs and animal shelters to handle.

Recently reports about three different animal cruelty cases have been reported. The first involved a dog being dragged by a lorry along Seberang Jaya highway, and the second involved two men placing a pregnant cat into a laundromat's dryer, thereby killing the cat. Their actions can be described as wickedly cruel, chillingly heartless, and utterly inhumane abuse. There was an additional incident of a Penang teen escaping jail for kicking a kitten.

Animal cruelty is causing cruelty to a sentient being. It is not someone being inadvertently cruel to an animal. It is a deliberate act on a living animal and therefore it is just as important as other crimes such as burglary. It is now time for the courts to deal with animal cruelty as a crime on par with other serious offences.

The courts may consider a crime against an animal as an animal welfare issue and not as serious as a human related crime. The clamour to make jail time fit the crime of animal cruelty has never been louder, with ever increasing demands for abusers to face punitive sentences that recognise the crime as a national scourge, and deter others from taking out their tempers, or getting sadistic kicks from harming innocent creatures.

In addition to the increase in animal abuse, we must address the issue of stray dogs being killed for food. This has been going on as far back as 2015 when two baskets of skin and fur were found in an abandoned house at Merlin Lane, in Sibu. Increasing reports have surfaced of Vietnamese selling dog and cat meat in Johor Baru and in Selangor. Joining the bandwagon are Indonesians in Persiaran Elmina, Shah Alam, who brazenly continued eating the meat of a dog with the video focused on them. These Indonesians from nearby oil palm estate were celebrating a feast in which it was the norm to kill two to three dogs or cats for the purpose. In addition, reports of stray dogs with severed limbs, believed to have been trapped, have been found around the area.

Using the meat from dogs and cats of unknown disease status that are slaughtered and sold for meat, as well as using killing methods that are as unhygienic as they are cruel, poses a grave, and potentially fatal risk to communities and their animals from the deadly rabies virus. Additionally, young children witnessing the scene of cruel slaughter methods may soon become desensitized to the cruelty.

While some may defend these practices of eating dogs and cats as a local “custom, ” SAM believes that customs should never ever be allowed to excuse or normalise animal abuse. The reality is that regardless of its origin, the live animal markets undermine national and public interest and safety, and promote the illegal sourcing of animals, posing a serious risk to human health and animal welfare.

Sadly, there are no specific laws to punish people eating cats and dogs in Malaysia. SAM calls on the Ministry of Agriculture and the DVS to outlaw the consumption of dog and cat meat in Malaysia.

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