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Letter To Editor

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Inhumane Transportation of Livestock

August 29th commemorates the biggest live export disaster which took place in 1996 when a ship carrying 67,000 sheep on board caught fire and disappeared in the Indian Ocean. The ship was on route from Australia to Jordan – Australia's biggest market for live sheep – when fire started in the engine room and spread to the crew's quarters, killing one of the 55 crew members, while the remaining crew abandoned ship.

This tragic incident is not the only one, for another similar incident occurred in 1980, when 40,600 sheep were lost in a fire on a ship travelling from Tasmania to Iran.

On the Malaysian turf in February 1998, 2,400 head of livestock were stranded when they arrived from Geraldton in Western Australia on the MV Anomis. Suddenly the agent acting for the vessel's owners, Agro Livestock Ltd cancelled the contract causing the vessel to be refused entry to Port Klang. When the ship finally docked after obtaining an order from the High Court, 285 goats and 113 cattle were found to have died from exhaustion, stress and pneumonia.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is taking stock of this very day to spotlight on another source of animal suffering – the live transport of livestock. It is saddening that no attention is being paid to the millions of livestock that are transported by ship and on roads.

Livestock are seldom allowed even as much space in transport as they get in confinement husbandry. Haulers typically try to pack as many animals into a vehicle as can be shoved aboard. The animals are kept upright by the pressure of the bodies of the other animals around them.

On board ships, their trauma worsens. Many animals routinely die because of breakdowns in ventilation systems on board the ship, bad weather and rough conditions. Suffocation, starvation, dehydration and disease, sleep deprivation, diarrhea, heat stress, respiratory disease, trauma and motion sickness all take their toll on the animals who collapse, stay where they fall and die slowly and painfully.

Still those who die in transit can be considered lucky when compared to animals that arrived in countries with high temperatures and high humidity and for them, the beginning of a series of terrifying events. Offloaded under inhumane and terrifying circumstances animals are thrown, driven, belted and hacked to get them under control.

Poultry are held in plastic transport cage with many birds squeezed into one cage and stacked high in a transport truck and or lorries. With many birds inside the cage, movement is restrained until their destination at the markets. There is increased exposure to heat and sun and the amount of time spent without food and water during on longer trips, when truck stops at more markets along the way, has a breakdown or involved in accidents.

Can we as a caring society tolerate methods of meat production that confine sentient animals in cramped, unsuitable conditions for the entire durations of their lives? They are treated like machines that convert fodder into flesh and any innovation that results in a higher earning is liable to be adopted.

The perception of people towards animals bred for agricultural purposes are merely linked to the food chain. As such producers do not give any thought to their welfare and are ignorant to farm animal suffering. Since farm animals are mainly reared for slaughter the importance of animal welfare tends to be overlooked. Consumers are even less concerned with the issue and are content to remain uninformed so long as they have their meat on the table.

Then there is the virtual absence of laws governing the live transport of animals to safeguard animal welfare effectively on long journeys, and neither are there laws regulating living condition, nor daily handling practices of farm animals.

The question we put forth is whether we really allow the atrocities that exist with the export of live animals for slaughter? Countries should realize that the animals we rear must remain our responsibility till death. There is no satisfaction to be gained, and certainly no morality in not caring for the sake of commercialization.

Farm animals are meant for slaughter but still they are living creatures like dogs and cats and it is right for everyone right from the authorities to the consumers to be truly concerned for their welfare.

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