

## Animals of the “Axis”

U.S. containment policies toward Iran don't just affect the regime



Operated by the Center for Animal Lovers (CAL), VAFA is a unique place of hope for many Iranian strays. “VAFA” is not an acronym, but a word that means “loyalty”—a virtue CAL is giving back to man’s best friend. CENTER FOR ANIMAL LOVERS

**W**hile there are communities in the United States in which animal care and control remains the lowest of local priorities, even the most isolated and underfunded American facility operates within a country where other animal shelters exist.

This is not the case with VAFA, the first animal shelter in all of Iran. Created by the Center for Animal Lovers, an advocacy group founded by Fatemeh Motamedi, the shelter became operational in 2002. It is located on a piece of land donated by Motamedi’s husband in a village about an hour from the capital city, Tehran. Two paid staff and a few

dedicated volunteers care for thousands of stray dogs in a country where there is literally no other animal shelter—and where the concepts of giving money to support animal welfare, and controlling the stray population by a method other than shooting, are still new and strange.

Motamedi has always had an impulse to help animals. She grew up pitying the strays she saw in the street—animals who had no legal protection and were often taunted and abused by children, or simply starving and neglected. Even now, when stray dogs become bothersome, they are often rounded up and shot. Stray cats are simply ignored. There are so many stray animals in Iran, she says, that the locals scarcely seem to see them at all.

Motamedi and her husband live in America now, and have spent years trying to raise money to send back to the small group of staff and volunteers who continue to work at the shelter. In fact, she and her husband successfully raised \$5,000 and were prepared to send it home to Iran. To their dismay, they discovered that current U.S. economic policies toward Iran—a nation which President Bush recently referred to as the biggest state sponsor of international terrorism—mean that sending money there is tightly controlled and typically not allowed.

While Motamedi has sought legal help on the matter, thus far the funds remain frozen—and the shelter continues to operate without regular running

water or electricity. Motamedi visited The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) in late 2007 and met with staff to provide a glimpse of animal care in a country where no municipal animal control facilities exist.

In this excerpted interview, Motamedi speaks with HSUS senior policy adviser and historian Bernard Unti about the Center for Animal Lovers' ongoing work.

**Animal Sheltering: What drove you to create the organization?**

**Fatemeh Motamedi:** I was working with another animal organization, the Iranian SPCA, for two years, but their pace was very slow. I needed to be more active, to go faster than that. So I, myself and some friends, we separated from that organization after a while (in some areas, we have different opinions). So we decided to begin our own organization, which was the Center for Animal Lovers. At first it was just cultural movement—we only were trying to educate people toward kindness to animals—then we [found out] that people don't believe those who just talk and do not [do something] like having a shelter or something that people can touch, can see. So first we began with spay and neuter and release. Then we saw that government would kill all the dogs we would spay and neuter and release, so it was in vain; and at the same time, we made some bonds with the dogs we were spaying or neutering, and it broke our hearts to just release them and [not] know what happened to them. ... At this time, actually, my husband donated a piece of land to us, which was a great help, because we decided to have a shelter and continue on our work.

**In terms of your personal experience, can you recall your first experience helping animals?**

It's a difficult question, because I have been living with animals from childhood. But one of the cases that I remember was a cat which had fallen inside a well. Everybody was telling me to forget about him, that it was impossible to bring him outside the well, but I insisted and I kept on insisting, and they finally



Fatemeh Motamedi and Bernard Unti discuss the state of animal welfare in Iran. MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSUS

had to dig a second well and go through and find the cat and bring it out. He was alive, but his eyes were very swollen, and he needed some help.

**And you were a girl at the time? And you were able to command this authority?**

Well, yes. Just by crying. [Laughs] It was my family who helped, not the authorities.

**Was there something in the recent years that made you decide to become active in animal welfare?**

Well, it broke my heart seeing all those stray animals around me, and the poor conditions, and their struggles to find food. And I saw cruelty towards them, like ropes around their necks and things like that that made me think we need organizations and shelters to help them.

**How did you recruit other people? How do you find people who have similar feelings?**

I haven't used a special kind of strategy. It's like a miracle; it's like a magnet; we find each other. I don't know how, but it happens. A few volunteers who run the

shelter right now, I found them in our area by accident. They decided to work and have this organization to help the animals. They are all very close.

**What is the response of the community where the shelter is situated? Are they supportive? Are there any complaints?**

They have been very encouraging, actually. Most people encourage our work, the authorities and local people. The villagers, they don't actually support us, but at the same time, they don't cause any problems for us. But they were very happy when we were gathering dogs and bringing them to our shelter instead of shooting them. So they encouraged us to do that. We received a lot of phone calls encouraging us. Emotionally, they would rather us gather dogs and bring them to the shelter than City Hall to shoot them and kill them.

**So you have some volunteers and some paid employees at the shelter?**

We have a keeper and a driver that we pay. All the other people who help us are volunteers. The keeper is there all the time, feed-

ing and cleaning, and if someone comes to the shelter he can assist. ... It is very far from the city, so it's not possible for everyone to go there, and it's hard to find. So if anybody wants to help, they talk to other volunteers or staff and go with them. And there are not that many, but there are five of them who go constantly to work. Others just go once in a while. Any given day there are three or four who work in the shelter. There is the keeper and when they need to clean the spaces, they hire someone for a day or two for that.

**What are your biggest challenges?**

Everything actually is a challenge, but the most difficult thing is fundraising. ... But also ... we're in the middle of nowhere, which is good in some ways, but we have no electricity and no running water. ... There are some pipes that come from far away, but during the winter, sometimes it freezes, so it's a big problem for us. Hopefully in the future, we will buy a piece of land that has electricity and water. But if we have the money we can solve some of these problems. For now we have a generator for electricity for light during the night, but it's not strong enough to have a refrigerator. We have to take everything we should wash, like blankets, to the city. We wash them, clean them, and then bring them back. And we have to cook for our dogs, two times every day for 200 dogs. You can imagine that.

**So you don't use commercial food, prepared food, for the dogs?**

We don't have a good one. So we use chicken parts, we buy those and add some vegetables. It's like a very good soup. And we add some bread to increase the bulk and then divide it to all the dogs. If they get along well, puppies for example, they have one dish and share. But for others we feed them separately in separate dishes.

**You've taken in thousands of dogs in the recent years, and you're handling about a thousand animals a year. How do you capture the dogs? Do you have poles or traps?**

Most of them are quite friendly, actually. And some of our staff are quite

good at capturing dogs with poles. And some of them are injured or sick animals who cannot escape ... they have broken bones, or just lack of energy or are sick. And we have some pregnant or puppies. But our priority is for injured and sick animals.

**So do you take animals that are just clearly too sick and provide euthanasia?**

Yes, if they need that. If we see that the animal is suffering a lot—for example, if we find outside a house or in a corner and in very bad stages of life and suffering, we do that. But on the whole, we are a no kill shelter. We keep animals as long as we can, as long as they don't suffer and there is a hope for their cure.

**And there's no government support for these things?**

No. We are trying to get a [new] piece of land, because there is construction around us, and we are unsure they will let us be there two years, three years from now. So we are trying to get a piece of land from the government, but I don't know if we can get it or not.

**What would have been your greatest achievements so far?**

I think we have planted the seed of the act of kindness toward animals. Not just being kind—we have showed people that you should *do* something if there's a problem, not just pity [the animals]. I see now, even though our space and facility is limited, people come to us and bring injured animals, so they feel more responsible, and they feel they should act. AS

*Prior to Motamedi's visit, Bernard Unti was invited to appear on the Voice of America radio program "Roundtable With You." Guests and callers on the show, which was broadcast into Iran, discussed a recent official crackdown on dog ownership in that country. Several weeks after his interview aired, authorities in Tehran backed away from the policy. To learn more about how the dialogue brought about change, please visit [humanesociety.org/iran\\_dogs](http://humanesociety.org/iran_dogs).*

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