



The fight to survive

Dogs in Ukraine need urgent support as winter threatens to compound their situation and place further strain on volunteers and shelters. **Joanne Bednall** finds out more.

Above: Two hungry pups await their food.

Right: A man is evacuated from the city of Irpin and manages to take his dogs with him, but thousands of residents had to abandon their homes and their pets.

Image: Courtesy of Alamy Stock Photo. More details at www.alamy.com.

How will your dog be celebrating Christmas? Wrapped up warm and comfortable with some new toys and a turkey dinner, perhaps? Then spare a thought for the poor pets in Ukraine, many of whom now face the festive season struggling to survive on the streets after being separated from their owners fleeing the Russian invasion.

Images of cats and dogs left behind by their desperate families as they ran for their lives continue to touch the hearts of animal lovers around the world.

No story symbolises the scale of the devastation more succinctly than that of Krym (Crimea), a traumatised dog who remained sitting, scared and alone, on the ruins of his home in Ukraine's fourth largest city, Dnipro, after a Russian rocket killed all four members of his family, along with his puppy Jack. Suffering from shellshock and grieving for his family, the confused canine at first refused to leave the rubble but was eventually taken to a vet by first responders. It's thought the blast may have rendered the elderly dog blind and deaf, but he is safe now and his story has prompted countless offers of shelter from as far away as the UK, Belgium, Germany, and Israel.

"Crimea embodies so many situations in Ukraine right now," explained Yuriy Tokarski, CEO of non-profit animal welfare organisation The U-Hearts Foundation, established by Ukrainian pet food manufacturer Kormotech to improve the lives of abandoned pets in Eastern Europe.

With the help of partners,



"...the confused canine at first refused to leave the rubble..."

including the International Fund for Animal Welfare and the Pet Industry Federation, U-Hearts aims to provide food and veterinary care, promote pet relocation and adoption, and source grants, donations, and in-kind donations from public and private donors. Launched nine months ago in response to the Russian invasion, the foundation's Save Pets of Ukraine initiative has coordinated global efforts to supply more than 414,000 kilos of food to pets in the country's hardest-hit regions, feeding 70,000 dogs and 40,000 cats on the streets and in shelters, as well as those being cared for in private homes.

"The scale of destruction in Ukraine is huge," continued Yuriy, who added that U-Hearts liaises with a large team on the ground to coordinate the distribution of aid, raise funds, and rescue and care for

pets across the war-torn country. According to Yuriy, current estimates suggest the number of animals on the streets are in the tens of thousands, with as many as



Right: Yuriy addresses the attendees at a press conference during Global Pet Expo, urging companies to donate cash and/or products to help the pets and people of Ukraine.



Above: Inspired by the images of Crimea howling amid the ruins of his home, graphic designer and illustrator Anton Khoziaikin drew him surrounded by the souls of his four family members, killed by a Russian missile.

Illustration: Anton Khoziaikin. Images: Twitter.

100,000 stray and shelter pets in need of urgent help.

"Our short-term response is feeding and vaccinating these animals while the long-term response is treating those in shelters and using a database to match them to suitable homes for adoption in Ukraine," he said.



Right: A dog in the liberated region of Kharkiv receives some food from volunteers.

But despite the horrors endured by the beleaguered country's pets and people since Russia invaded on February 24, Yuriy believes the worst is yet to come.

"We need to prepare now before the situation deteriorates as the shelling and fighting on the frontlines increase," he warned. "And we expect Russia to target Ukraine's electricity, heating, and water supplies during the winter."

With this in mind, and with the onset of plummeting temperatures, U-Hearts is working with shelters to establish their needs for the coming months.

"We must ensure we have enough supplies in the worst-case scenario, so we are building up our stocks of dog food," continued Yuriy. "If there's no electricity or heating, we want to support shelters by providing them with generators and crates to keep dogs warm."

"The readiness to help has been

"We must ensure we have enough supplies in the worst-case scenario..."

overwhelming and the solidarity shown is heartening."

Yuriy is immensely grateful for the aid already donated by businesses, individuals, and fellow charities. Coordinated by the UK's Pet Industry Federation and Birmingham-based PR company Spottedydog Communications, truckloads of food have already arrived in the stricken country and been distributed to dogs in need.

"Our largest donor is Pet Family (the owner of more than 150 Pets Corner stores in the UK), which has made a two-year commitment of financial support and donations of food," said Yuriy, who also praises the bravery of volunteers who risk their lives daily to help animals and ensure vital supplies get through.

"The situation is fluid and volatile but the need is very great, particularly in the east of the country, where shelters are full to bursting. Considering the challenges posed by the war, conditions in the shelters are surprisingly pretty good."

"But volunteers face security risks by working during shellings and navigating landmines to deliver food to dogs in areas under Russian occupation, such as the recently liberated city of Kharkiv in the north east of the country. We are extremely proud of these very brave people."

But it's not just the logistics of feeding the huge number of needy pets that is U-Hearts' concern. The large, uncontrolled street dog population, which existed to a lesser degree before the war, has increased several fold, with disease now the biggest threat.

"Spaying, neutering, and vaccinating dogs against rabies needs continual engagement," added Yuriy, who estimates the scale of the problem is so big, the animals of Ukraine will need support for

UKRAINE

Right: Stanislav and his wife aim to feed more than 100 abandoned dogs and cats in Orihiv.

another two years after the war has ended.

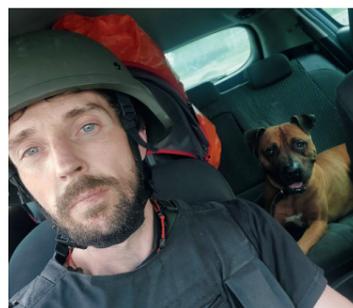
UKRAINIAN DOG OWNER DENYS DESCRIBES THE DAY WAR BROKE OUT

“February 24: Loud explosions woke us up when it was still dark. In Tsirkuny (a village in eastern Ukraine), electricity was lost, explosions and shots could be heard, and you could see military equipment moving towards Kharkiv. Did I understand that this was the beginning of a war? Of course. Did I believe it? Not really.

“At first, we were convinced it would end in a few days. But towards the end of the first day, when shots became more frequent, it became clear we had to leave as soon as possible.

“After gathering our documents and possessions, and preparing six dogs, a cat, and a hedgehog, I went to collect the car. But explosions and shots rang out everywhere. It was not possible to leave. We had to wait...

“February 25: My wife, who’s seven months pregnant and I, along with two of our dogs, the cat, and hedgehog, crammed into the car, and hurriedly left in the direction of Kharkiv. I decided not to take any possessions or documents, instead planning to unload there and return



Right: Denys says without the help of Save Pets of Ukraine and U-Hearts, he doubts his dogs would have survived.



to Tsirkuny as soon as possible.

“Finally, we were in Kharkiv. The explosions started again and I realised we couldn’t go back. It was as if we were in a bad dream: the danger of premature birth, no medications, hiding in garages and sleeping in the corridor of a relative’s apartment with our dogs. I had no information about my other dogs left behind in the village to fend for themselves.

“Then my daughter, Marusia, was born and Tsirkuny was liberated on the same day. Men from the armed forces brought food to the village and volunteers delivered dog food and evacuated my dogs.

“I made attempts to travel to the village, collecting aid and food en route for animals who found themselves in the same situation. Huge thanks to Save Pets of Ukraine and U-Hearts: without their help, who knows if the dogs would have lasted even a day?

“With the help of our army, I saw my dogs at last, alive and unharmed.”

Four Ukraine facts

- Before the war, a high number of Ukrainians — 50 per cent — were pet owners.
- To counter the spread of rabies, U-Hearts procured 1,000 vaccines and has immunised 100 dogs in Kharkiv, 150 dogs in Gostomel, 125 dogs in Chernobyl, and 100 in Poltava.
- The Save Pets of Ukraine initiative has received more than 21,500 requests for help from pet owners, animal rescue volunteers, shelters, and breeders.
- Despite continuous shelling, U-Hearts delivered 500kg of dog food and 100kg of cat food to pet-lovers Stanislav and his wife, who attempt to feed more than 100 abandoned dogs and cats every day in Orihiv, a city in the Zaporizhia region of south-eastern Ukraine.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

There are a number of ways you can help pets in Ukraine this winter.

“Please support us by spreading the word and raising awareness on your social networks,” said Yuriy, who hopes UK animal lovers will get behind the Save Pets of Ukraine Christmas campaign to provide dogs with vital supplies over the coming months.

Inspired by charity shoebox appeals, animal lovers in the UK can choose and buy a box online to be sent to a pet in need. Different boxes will contain items geared towards dogs, cats, pets with owners, or those in shelters. Contents will include warm blankets, food bowls, treats, vitamins, toys, leads, collars, and parasite treatment. Each week, an online pet store will send the boxes to U-Hearts who, in turn, will distribute them across the country to those animals most in need.

For more information, or to donate money, pet supplies or food, visit:

- <https://u-hearts.foundation>
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/uhearts.fund
- Instagram: www.instagram.com/uhearts.foundation/
- LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/80526462