

▼ Civic authorities have been told to sterilise, vaccinate and relocate all street dogs from India's capital

PHOTOGRAPH: ARUN SANKAR/AFP/GETTY



Order to remove all stray dogs from Delhi divides residents

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Delhi

India's supreme court has ordered the immediate removal of thousands of stray dogs from the Delhi capital region, citing canine attacks and the country's alarming rabies toll.

The sweeping move has set up a clash between public safety advocates and those who see dogs as beloved fixtures of their neighbourhoods.

The ruling on Monday, one of the strongest in the nation's long-running struggle with its street dog population, directs civic authorities to capture all strays, sterilise and vaccinate them and relocate them to newly built shelters. The court gave authorities eight weeks to create the facilities and install CCTV monitoring to ensure no animals are released back on to the streets.

"Round up all stray dogs from all localities ... whether sterilised or unsterilised," Justice JB Pardiwala declared. "Children must feel safe while cycling and playing. The elderly must feel safe on their walks."

While some residents see the dogs as a menace, others consider them to be like family. Many are fed daily by "community feeders" who provide food, water and veterinary care.

Nishima Bhagat, who attended a candlelight march in the centre of the city on Monday night to protest against the court ruling, said: "We are walking in solidarity to show that there are people for the voiceless. They [the dogs] cannot speak for themselves. They cannot be put into the pounds. We cannot uproot them from the place where they live."

India bears the highest rabies burden globally. Each year about 5,700

people die from rabies, according to government figures, and the World Health Organization believes the toll to be as high as 20,000 deaths.

The last dog census, in 2012, put Delhi's stray population at 60,000 and the figure now is estimated to be closer to 1 million, with dog packs roaming parks and residential lanes.

Between January and June this year, Delhi reported 35,198 animal bite incidents and 49 rabies cases, municipal data shows.

Pardiwala dismissed India's animal birth control rules, which mandate that sterilised dogs be returned to their territories, as "absurd" and ineffective. "All these so-called animal lovers, will they bring back the children who have lost their lives?" he said, urging civic authorities to act decisively rather than debate policy.

The ruling said there could be no exceptions and that anyone resisting dog removals would face charges.

Animal protection groups called it "impractical and inhumane". Bharati Ramachandran, the chief executive of the Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations, urged large-scale sterilisation, vaccination, and public awareness campaigns.

Mini Aravindan, a senior official at Peta India, said: "It's infeasible to build and staff enough shelters for hundreds of thousands of dogs" and the cost would be huge.



▲ Many residents across the region provide the dogs with food and water