

Animal rights activists target China dog meat festival

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BEIJING (AP) — Animal rights activists are seeking to shut down an annual summer dog meat festival in southern China blamed for blackening the country's international reputation as well as fueling extreme cruelty to canines and unhygienic food handling practices.

Activists from a coalition of groups said Monday that they will continue press for the festival to be banned as well as legislation outlawing the slaughtering of dogs and cats and the consumption of their meat.

While an estimated 10-20 million dogs are killed for their meat each year in China, the June 20 event in the city of Yulin has come to symbolize the cruelty and lack of hygiene associated with the largely unregulated industry.

Yu Hongmei, director of the VShine Animal Protection Association, said China needs to follow the example of the vast majority of developed nations that have banned eating dog and cat. "China needs to progress with the times," Yu said. "Preventing cruelty to animals is the sign of a mature, civilized society."

Restaurant owners say eating dog meat is traditional during the summer, while opponents say the festival that began in 2010 has no cultural value and was merely invented to drum up business. Since 2014, the local government has sought to disassociate itself from the event, forbidding its employees from attending and limiting its size by shutting down some dog markets and slaughter houses.

Still, as many as 10,000 dogs, many of them stolen pets still wearing their collars, are slaughtered for the festival held deep inside the poor, largely rural Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Some are trucked in hundreds of kilometers (miles) stuffed six or seven to a crate or small metal cage without food or water. Slaughtering takes place in front of the animals, usually with a club to induce the pain and fear that restaurant owners claim makes their adrenaline-rich meat tastier.

"Psychologically and mentally, they have already died many times," said Peter J. Li, Humane Society International's China policy specialist.

Dog meat also poses a risk to human health by spreading diseases such as trichinellosis, rabies and cholera, the Humane Society says. Guangxi is already one of China's five worst areas

affected by human rabies, and Yulin ranks as one of the top 10 Chinese cities in terms of cases, the organization says.

Activists said rallies held around the country to oppose dog eating, as well as outrage on social media from the growing ranks of dog lovers, are already having an effect. Dog meat restaurants have been forced to take the festival indoors and large-scale open air dog meat consumption is no longer seen.

However, a draft animal cruelty law remains mired in China's legislature and prosecution of dog thieves and those violating animal transport laws remains lax, activists complain.

Yu Dezhi, secretary general of Animal Protection Power, said he was confident that shifting consumption habits will eventually help build the necessary groundswell against the Yulin festival and dog eating in general.

"There is simply no market for dog meat among young people," Yu said.