

'I want to kill these dogs': Yangon are determined to wipe out stray callous canines

Myanmar's commercial capital is overrun with an estimated 120,000 stray dogs, which attack children and carry the threat of rabies. Mass culling was recently stopped but spay, neuter and vaccinate programmes have yet to start

Zu May Naing was playing with her brother outside their house in Bago Region, close to Myanmar's commercial capital of Yangon, last month when a pack of stray dogs rounded on the 18-month-old. Her mother, San Thar Myint, found her lying prone on the ground, bleeding and in shock. "Her temperature was over 100 [degrees Fahrenheit] before they got to the operation room," she says.

At the nearest children's hospital in Yangon, doctors performed surgery and injected the baby with the anti-rabies vaccine. It was the second time that week a child had come in with dog bites. A doctor who declines to be named (he is not authorised to speak to the press) says they see between two and five cases per week.

A few days later, Zu May Naing's arm is swaddled in bandages at the wrist where the dog seized her in its jaws. A red-brown gash sweeps from her left eye across her cheek. Another droops from the corner of her bottom lip where it was torn off. She glances fitfully around the hospital ward. "She can't sleep well at night," her mother says. "She wakes up suddenly. She's still afraid." But she is one of the lucky ones.

Like many parts of the developing world, Myanmar has lived with stray dogs for generations. More than six decades ago, travel writer Norman Lewis described the mutts of Mergui, a coastal city in the south, with unsparing vividness: "There are more dogs than humans; they are a slinking, evil breed, cursed with every conceivable affliction ... Many were earless, partially blind and had paralysed or dislocated limbs."

The situation has not improved – and is arguably most acute in Yangon, the country's rapidly developing commercial capital with a population of some five million. It is overrun with strays; government estimates seen by the Guardian put the number at more than 120,000. Some are scrawny creatures, rib cages pressing against flea-bitten skin, tumours flapping as they nose through rubbish carts. Others are visibly well fed, their muscular tawny torsos straddling spindly legs.

After dark, when the traffic clears and the air cools, some neighbourhoods descend into a chorus of howling. Others face more niggling problems: in a recent post on the local Facebook group “Eliminate All Stray Dogs”, one resident claimed an unruly pack kept jumping on his car, destroying its windscreen wipers.

In the past month, two children have been bitten in his quarter alone – including four-year-old Thurein Lin. He and his mother, Zin Mar Min, were sitting at a teashop when one of the dogs milling around lunged for the boy, sinking its teeth into his skin. The same dog had bitten a different child earlier that day; the girl was in hospital for a week. The dog was later beaten to death. “The residents are scared,” says Ye Naung Thein. “They are scared of sending their children on to the streets.”

Yangon’s regular mass dog culls have involved municipal workers laying out poisoned meat; scooping up the corpses later.

Even in places where anti-rabies spay-and-neuter plans have showed signs of success, including Bali and some Indian cities, the expense of the programmes and the sheer terror of rabies has led governments back to culling.

“I live in India, which has 35 million stray dogs,” says Sehgal of HSI. “A massive amount of money is needed to do this, and [implementation of spay-and-neuter] has been sporadic there ... You work for a year, you stop for a year. By the time you are coming back to it, the dog population has multiplied again.”

But if the efforts are sustained, Sehgal says, “it just cannot fail.”

The thing about culling, by contrast, is that the results can be seen straight away. As San Thar Myint cradles her baby in the hospital ward, she is in no doubt about what she wants.

“I want to kill these dogs – I don’t want to look at them,” she says. “I want to say that villages and residential areas should not have dogs.”