

Area man helping transport animals out of Ukraine, rescues lion over the weekend

By Sam Odrowski

A Mono resident and business owner is helping transport animals out of Ukrainian cities that are actively under attack by Russia.

Since arriving to Ukraine two weeks ago, Nishan Kooner, owner of 10 and 10 Garden Centre, has been dropping off supplies and transporting pets who have been abandoned or are stuck in shelled animal shelters.

Over the weekend, he helped transport a lion out of the Kiev Zoo, with the not-for-profit organization Breaking the Chains, with whom he has been working closely. Kooner noted they've been rescuing other animals at the zoo and the lion likely won't be the last one they transport out, as Russian forces continue to attack Kiev.

There's going to be a few more exotic animals, but they're a little bit more of a process to get out,? said Kooner, during an over-the-phone interview on Tuesday, March 29. ?We have to deal with permits and custom-made cages, and bringing in specialized vets to sedate the animals. and all of that. It's an expensive process but we're getting [out] any animal that we can.?

Kooner's operating from the Romania border and estimates over 1,000 dogs have been safely transported out of Ukrainian warzones since he got there, with the help of several non-profit groups.

?I've joined up with quite a few really amazing organizations,? he noted. ?We've got a bunch of ex-military guys, and they go into the red zone to transport out the animals. We've been into Kiev, Mauripol, and Odesa. [The ex-military] guys go into the occupied cities, and they're doing a combination of resupplying [animal shelters] and getting as many of the shelter dogs out as possible.?

Kooner said when it's safe he goes into the ?red zones?, which are areas being shelled or under Russian attack, but it is mostly the ex-military members of Breaking the Chains who go in since they have the appropriate training.

?They go in and get dogs out,? he told the Citizen. ?There was a shelter that was bombed in Kiev, and 15 dogs died, but there was another 140 that survived. We were able to bring out 42 dogs, the ones that needed more care, and then we resupplied them.?

Kooner's working with registered charities and pet rescues at the border, who transfer the animals he brings to pet sanctuaries in Romania, after they receive veterinarian care.

?The goal is to essentially get them adopted out in Europe, and then certain countries can bring them in too, like Canada, U.K,? Kooner said.

In addition to Breaking the Chains, who spearheaded the lion rescue, other organizations Kooner is working with to get animals out of dangerous areas include DogBus, War Dogs, and Laika Animal Rescue.

Meanwhile, plans changed quickly for Kooner when he touched down in Ukraine.

He was initially hoping to provide humanitarian aid in addition to aid for animals who have been caught in the middle of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, since it started on February 24.

?When I got here, it's a whole different scenario on the ground,? Kooner noted. ?There are tons of humanitarian organizations here helping the people, but not a lot for the animals, especially with what we're doing resupplying these shelters, so they can survive another month or two.?

He added, ?There's not a lot of people doing what we do, so my goal has completely shifted from more of a universal care type of

ethic to just taking in all the strays.?

In addition to transporting dogs out of dangerous areas, resupplying affected animal rescues in Ukraine is an important part of Kooner's mission.

?They're not getting water [at the shelters] and a lot of times hydro's cut off,? he said. ?It's been cold at night here without hydro and water and heat. It has been an issue.?

Being on the ground in Ukraine, Kooner said one thing media and social media coverage of the war is missing is the scale of it.

?It's not okay over here, but like 80 per cent of Ukraine is still operating normally,? he noted. ?From what we see in the media, what we expect to come see here is some sort of post-apocalyptic world, and it's really not that. Eighty per cent of this country is operating like nothing's going on, and 20 per cent is under siege.?

?It's just the way it's reported at home is very different than what you actually find here,? Kooner added.

He said it's still very dangerous and scary, particularly around the red zones, but it's not what he expected.

?It's not what we see in the media ? we only see burnt out tanks and blown-up buildings and hospitals being attacked, but the people here are trying to live their normal lives as well as fight a war,? Kooner told the Citizen. ?It's just a very different feeling on the ground here ? very different.?

In a country of 44 million, the United Nations says 10 million people have fled their homes due to the Russian invasion, predominately from Odesa, Mauripol and Kiev.

Meanwhile, more people are joining Kooner's team each day, with some volunteers joining in from Australia.

?The team's expanding quite a bit, we're getting more teams on the ground. We just purchased two more vehicles, so we're able to get more extraction teams out there in Ukraine,? he said.

Kooner is currently working with the owner of an incomplete shelter in Romania who is allowing volunteers to use it until the Russian invasion is over if they complete the construction.

?There's spots for almost 1,000 dogs there with veterinary care and everything, so we'll be completing that shelter, and then we'll be operating all these volunteer groups together. Then we have our own secure facility where we can bring dogs out, house them, treat them and get them adopted,? Kooner said. ?I want to get them rejoined with their families.?

Next week he'll be heading back to Mono to prepare 10 and 10 Garden Centre for the spring season.

Kooner said he'll likely be back in town for a few weeks, but as soon as possible, he'll return to Ukraine to continue providing aid indefinitely.

?Even when this war is over, we won't have put a dent in this issue. It's going to be a really long rebuilding effort,? he noted.

There are a few people locally who want to join Kooner when he returns, so he might be coming back to Ukraine with a small team of area residents.

?People are seeing what I'm doing and if I can do it there's no reason other people can't either. They can help with resources or help with manpower. Everybody can help,? he said. ?This is not something you just have to sit back and watch, you can help.?

Supplies are readily available through donations from humanitarian organizations on the ground in Europe, but money is needed for the purchase equipment, said Kooner.

Some of items he needs funds to purchase include gas masks, bullet proof vests, helmets, night vision goggles, and satellite phones.

Gas is another major expense as diesel is just under \$3 a litre in Ukraine.

The best way to help is through monetary donations, which can be sent to Kooner through his online fundraiser:
fnd.us/11xoQ0?ref=ab_8B6NRb_sh_AkrJNYhNvEIAkrJNYhNvEI

Follow 10 and 10 Garden Centre's Facebook Page for more updates from Kooner about his efforts in Ukraine.