

Macau's Canidrome greyhound track is targeted by animal rights groups

Activists are concerned that dogs at the Chinese enclave's track are killed once their racing days are over

Vaudine England in Macau

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The Canidrome stadium in Macau, where an animal protection group says 302 greyhounds were injured in a 10-week period, with a sixth likely to have been killed. Photograph: Neil Setchfield / Alamy / Alamy

The howling of the dogs can be heard behind the high concrete walls topped with barbed wire that circle the Canidrome in Macau. This run-down track near the former Portuguese colony's border with China is the only greyhound track in Asia, and is targeted by animal activists, who accuse its owners of brutality and of killing dogs after their racing days end.

Some greyhound tracks run active rehoming programmes, but discussions about one at the Canidrome have broken down because of a lack of trust, according to the Macau

animal rights group, Anima.

The Canidrome, built in 1930, is in the north of Macau, the gambling hub of China. On race night, men wearing livery to match that of the six dogs march out under the floodlights in a near-empty stadium as the dogs strain at their leashes and defecate on the track before being shoved into the starting gate.

A whirring sound grows louder as the locked-in dogs whimper. Then the mechanised lure flashes by and the dogs are released, gulping up the track with amazing speed. All too soon, that mad dash is over and the dogs are taken away – perhaps to their death.

"There are reports from animal welfare groups that many of the owners think of the dogs just as an investment, so that when the dog is injured they don't want to pay for the maintenance," said one handler who, forbidden by his bosses to talk, refused to give his name. "So the dogs are just killed."

No one else at the Canidrome would talk, neither staff nor management.

This handler, a veteran staff member, believes the dogs he looks after are "happy". But he won't say more, fearing for his job.

A study by the animal protection group Grey2K – which runs greyhound rescue projects in the US – estimated that 383 dogs were put down in Macau in 2010. The Macau press has reported Choi U Fai, head of Macau's municipal and civic affairs animal control division, as saying 30 dogs were killed each month.

Grey2K said that its analysis of records held by Canidrome showed that 302 greyhounds were injured in a 10-week period, many suffering multiple injuries, including broken limbs. A sixth of those hurt were "recommended retired", which Grey2K interprets as meaning they were killed.

"It's a one-way death sentence," said Charmaine Settle of Grey2K after a visit to Canidrome last November. A dog needed only to come unplaced in three races before being put on death row, a charge the Canidrome has denied.

Albano Martins, of Anima, was hoping he could start finding homes for greyhounds released from racing. But even if owners can be persuaded to rehome instead of kill their dogs, his problems are just starting.

Macau is an overcrowded, over-developed enclave dedicated to huge gambling complexes. It has a shifting population of mainland Chinese tourists and high-rollers and migrant workers from south-east Asia – leaving little time or space for the niceties of pet

ownership.

"Macau and Anima cannot absorb such a huge amount of animals. And Macau is a such a tiny place, with no laws at all protecting animals – we are afraid to have them here," said Martins.

He has been pressing the government of Macau for dog safeguards since 2003.

Embarrassed by the attention it has received in lurid local exposés, the Canidrome management is also facing pressure from Australia, the main source of the 360 dogs it imports each year.

The Australia chapter of the Animals Asia group is pressing Canberra to ban the export of the greyhounds. Many argue the only solution is to end the racing. "Everybody in Macau is embarrassed," said Martins, who wants to meet owners in the enclave, though not at the track. He said he finds it hard to go there and hear the dogs howling.