

Greyhounds exported to race in China

Animal welfare groups say dogs are put down if they don't win

Gabrielle Monaghan Published: 10 April 2016



Greyhound Racing Stadium Canidrome Macau (Alamy)

THREE Irish greyhounds have been exported to race in China, despite the Department of Agriculture previously blocking plans by the Irish Greyhound Board (IGB) to send dogs to the country over animal welfare concerns.

The three greyhounds arrived in Hong Kong on March 16 and were transported to Macau, home to China's only legal dog track, the Yat Yuen Canidrome. According to eyewitnesses familiar with Irish greyhound ear-markings, the names of the dogs raced at the Canidrome matched those of animals registered with the IGB, also known as Bord na gCon.

These are the first Irish dogs to race at the Macau Canidrome and may be part of a trial to determine whether Ireland can fill a supply vacuum, according to Albano Martins, president of the Society for the Protection of Animals (Macau), also known as Anima. Last December, the Australian carrier Qantas began refusing to transport greyhounds to Asia.

"The track is old and narrow, and the length of the track is not good for the animals, so many accidents happen," said Martins, who operates a rescue centre. "They kill the dogs and need more to replace them. Dogs cannot come from China as they must be in quarantine for rabies, and this must be done in the municipal kennel, which is impossible because of its lack of space."

Anima tracks each greyhound death at the Canidrome. Last year, it claimed, young and healthy dogs were being killed at a rate of 30 a month. Dogs are destroyed if they are ill, injured or fail to place in the top three in five consecutive races.

Australia had been the main supplier of greyhounds to the dog track. Qantas agreed to halt transport of the animals to Hong Kong after ABC, Australia's public broadcaster, showed footage of dogs being put down in Macau.

The photos, names, lineage and racing performance of the three Irish dogs are listed on Canidrome's website. Two of the dogs, Crossfield Leona and Crossfield Simon, are listed on the IGB website as having been owned by Brendan O'Shea, a trainer from Millstreet, Co Cork. The third Irish dog is Two Stone Tadgh, which the IGB site records as having been owned by Jason Lehane in Co Cork. The dog was raced at Curraheen Park in Cork on December 17, finishing fifth.

Lehane declined to confirm whether he sold the dog, or knew it was being shipped to Macau. "I've kept dogs all my life and I only have their best interests at heart," he said.

O'Shea declined to comment. It is understood he sold the two dogs to an agent.

While gambling is illegal in the rest of China, it has been permitted in Macau since it was handed back to China in 1999 as a special administrative region. Gambling remains Macau's biggest source of revenue. Irish dogs, along with those from Australia and America, are considered among the best in the world for both racing and breeding purposes.

IGB, a commercial semi-state body, sought permission to begin sending racing dogs to China in 2011. The Department of Agriculture blocked the move following lobbying by animal-welfare groups, with support from the RTE newsreader Sharon Ní Bheoláin. The department decided there was insufficient assurance "that adequate provision would be made to safeguard the health and welfare of greyhounds in China at the end of their racing life". However, this weekend the department pointed out that there was "no ban on the export of greyhounds to China".

Almost 51,000 people worldwide have signed an online petition on change.org calling on taoiseach Enda Kenny and Simon Coveney, the agriculture minister, to enforce an anti-export policy. The petition was started by Grey2K USA Worldwide, the world's largest greyhound protection organisation. Christine Dorchak, its president, said: "Every dog sent to the Canidrome will die there. And it seems especially cruel to take a dog raced in one country and send it to another just to make a few more dollars."

An IGB spokeswoman said that, while there is no legal ban on the export of greyhounds to China, it has begun to "make inquiries overseas" into the latest development. "We are extremely proactive in enforcing disciplinary action against any parties who are in breach of greyhound welfare legislation and continuously investigate all matters brought to our attention," it said.

Mark Beazley, executive director of Dogs Trust Ireland, said he raised the issue of potential greyhound exports to China with the IGB. "If an individual wanted to export greyhounds in accordance with appropriate international regulations, there is little the IGB could do to stop them," he said. "We pointed out IGB should write to owners and trainers and say it is not supportive of this practice.

"Ireland has seen huge improvements in animal welfare in recent years and we believe the export of greyhounds to China would be a retrograde step and bad for our reputation."