

Fatal dog attack sparks soul searching

swissinfo December 2, 2005 9:49 PM



People gathered in Oberglatt to remember the deceased child (Keystone)

The death of a six-year-old boy, savaged by three Pitbull terriers near Zurich, has prompted the Swiss government to consider new laws on dangerous dogs.

Hundreds of people gathered in the village of Oberglatt for a silent march on Friday evening in memory of the deceased child.

Many of those marching to show their solidarity and demand stricter legislation against dangerous dogs were children. The organiser, Rolf Schweizer, said authorities and politicians had to act and ban ownership of these animals.

The 15-month-old dogs were put down and their owner detained after the boy was mauled to death just metres from his school in Oberglatt on Thursday. The owner and his girlfriend, who let the animals escape from a friend's nearby apartment, are being investigated for negligent manslaughter, along with the owner of the flat.

Swiss law already forbids breeding to produce fighting dogs. And by the end of next year all dogs, regardless of their breed, must be tagged with microchips or tattoos and placed on a national register.

But Economics Minister Joseph Deiss said on Friday that the current situation was "unsatisfactory". He has called for stricter measures against dangerous dogs and asked the Federal Veterinary Office – which he oversees - to make some proposals.

But there are no plans so far to ban so-called attack dogs in Switzerland, according to veterinary office spokesman Marcel Falk.

"We are not proposing a ban on particular breeds of dogs because the problem is not with the dogs, but with the owners. Certain people choose these dogs as a symbol of power and we must focus on that," he told swissinfo.

"One measure we are discussing is only allowing people to keep certain types of dogs with special permission.

"We have already taken steps to educate dog keepers and children, but we will be talking with experts in the coming weeks about the possibility of other measures."

Cantonal laws

Each canton is responsible for setting laws to control dog ownership. Canton Zurich compels owners to keep dogs prone to biting on leashes and muzzled at all times. Cantons Basel, Geneva and Ticino have tighter laws, including microchips for dangerous breeds.

Canton Zurich laws have not been amended since 1971 and a review, following the death of a woman who drowned in the River Limmat trying to escape a Dobermann in 2000, was shelved for financial reasons.

A review of the laws is due to be debated next year, but the issue of muzzling dogs is not on the agenda, according to canton Zurich Veterinary Department head Regula Vogel.

"From an animal welfare point of view that is counter-productive," she told swissinfo. "Dogs are social animals and if they are not taught to behave properly then there are more problems overall."

Several politicians are now calling for swifter action to be taken, including Claudio Schmid of the rightwing Swiss People's Party.

"I cannot understand why it is so easy to own dangerous dogs. Even criminals can have these dogs, and it is not right," he told swissinfo.

"When society becomes bad at handling dogs or weapons or cars we have to act. I have written to the cantonal parliament to demand action."

Dangerous weapon

His views were backed by canine therapist Heini Meier, who called for muzzling to be made law.

"These dogs are bred for this purpose [killing]. Anyone who says otherwise is lying," he told the newspaper 20 Minuten.

"[People who buy these dogs] are buying a dangerous weapon. It doesn't have to be that way, but the risk is high. Unfortunately many owners don't know this."

Germany, France and Britain have already introduced laws banning the import or breeding of certain breeds, such as Pitbull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers and Japanese Tosa.

But Jacques Barillon, founder of dog owners' group ProDog, told Le Temps that he is opposed to similar regulations in Switzerland.

"I'm against certain races being blacklisted," he said. "There are of course breeds which are aggressive and dogs which by their nature can cause more harm. But any list would be arbitrary and would risk inducing a false sense of security."

swissinfo, Matthew Allen with agencies

URL of this story

<http://www.swissinfo.org/sen/swissinfo.html?siteSect=105&sid=6286430>

Related Sites

Federal Veterinary Office: <http://www.bvet.admin.ch/index.html?lang=en>

Swiss economics ministry:

<http://www.evd.admin.ch/evd/index.html?lang=en&PHPSESSID=56d868cdd59ceccde43416bc8e7e74af>