

Amid the devastation in Turkey, rescuers with a nose for saving lives

Yang Jian

Chinese rescue dog Lucky is living up to its name, helping a Chinese rescue team find survivors trapped under earthquake debris in the Turkish province of Hatay.

The Ramunion team from the city of Hangzhou — the first from China to arrive at the scene — has helped pull seven survivors from the rubble and found 14 victims. The team has also helped Turkish rescuers locate 16 trapped people.

“Lucky has truly brought good luck to us,” said team leader He Jun.

Areas of Turkey and Syria along the Anatolian fault line were devastated when the initial 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck on February 6, collapsing buildings and killing or injuring tens of thousands over a wide area.

Sniffer dogs from China and other nations have been playing a key role in search and rescue operations, especially after the critical 72-hour mark for finding survivors passed. They are often deployed in areas of instability where heavy machinery might cause rubble to collapse further.

As the rescue of survivors wanes with time, every person pulled alive from the rubble is called a “miracle.”

Lucky pointed his paws and uttered three sharp barks to his handler after locating a survivor. Rescuers from China and Turkey managed to extricate a man who had survived four days underground.

In another instance, a search dog from an Azerbaijan rescue team led to a little girl named Zeynep pulled from the rubble.

Trained dogs are considered ideal for rescue work because



Rescue dog Lucky works with a Chinese rescue squad in Turkey. — Photos / Ti Gong



A young girl makes friends with a sniffer dog on the sidelines of rescue operations in Turkey.



A sniffer dog among the Swiss rescue team ready to take off for Turkey from Zurich Airport

they can smell humans trapped underneath concrete and metal — survivors often too weak to cry out for help.

“Nothing can match canine skills in finding people over a wide area in a limited amount of time,” Yunus Goren, a German rescue dog handler, told Xinhua news agency.

This is the first time that Lucky, a 3-year-old springer spaniel, has taken part in an overseas rescue mission. Last year, the dog participated in search and rescue efforts in Sichuan Province after an earthquake there in Luding County.

The dog was chosen for this latest assignment by his handler Gao Zhijiang, one of Ramunion’s eight-member squad in Turkey, because of its “sharp nose, small appetite, smart mind, hard work and small size,” Gao said.

Lucky was trained by using hide-and-seek techniques in mountains. The pup was required to find different volunteers in simulated earthquake and landslide situations.

After arriving in Turkey on Friday, Lucky took part in operations immediately. Since then, the dog has been

working with little time off for rest or food.

The rescue squad saved a Turkish family of three children and their parents from the debris of a collapsed home.

Apart from Lucky, the Chinese national rescue team has brought four sniffer dogs to aid rescue efforts in Turkey.

The four Belgian shepherds have helped the 82-member China Search and Rescue team to find four survivors, including a pregnant woman, and five victims.

Many international rescue

teams have asked for help from Chinese canines to locate trapped survivors, said Xu Dongliang, trainer of the dogs.

A dog named Flame Knife, star of the national canine squad, will keep searching as long as Xu keeps clapping on its chest.

If dog are successful in finding survivors, Xu rewards them with food treats or toys.

“The dogs don’t actually realize they are saving lives,” said Xu, who trains the canines to be sensitive to the scent of human blood.

Rescue dogs alert their handlers to possible victims by movements such as barking, digging and tail wagging.

“Dogs always do better than devices in searching for living survivors,” Xu said, citing their keen senses of smell and hearing.

Many high-rise buildings in southeastern Turkey collapsed in what is called “pancake mode,” which restricts the use of heavy machinery to sift through rubble in the initial phases of rescue work.

The US, the UK, Greece, Poland and Germany are among the countries that have sent sniffer dogs to earthquake-stricken areas. The work can be as dangerous for dogs as for people. A German sniffer dog named Boom was injured on Saturday and had to be withdrawn from the mission.

Mexico’s search and rescue dog team — which helped save people after the Puebla earthquake in 2017 — has also been dispatched to Turkey.

“We believe in miracles,” Ramunion leader He said. Whenever Lucky detects human life, “everyone stops working to listen for any signs of life. Those waits in silence are the longest, most heart-wrenching moments.”