

WHEN a severe earthquake devastated the Bam area of Iran a few weeks ago killing more than 30 000 people, South Africa wasted no time in sending a rescue team to do whatever it could to help. They performed admirably but not, they're the first to admit, as heroically as the four-legged rescuers who accompanied them.

There's little doubt the four German Shepherds were the true heroes of the mission, managing to find almost 60 bodies. Ask any one of the 46-member team and they'll agree: without their four-legged canine friends that feat would've been near impossible.

Within hours of arriving in Bam the team was searching through the debris of buildings for a six-year-old whose body was trapped under what was left of her home.

"We spent about an hour in the house," Inspector Pierre Marx says. "In the first area my dog Mosko scratched we found a blanket covered in blood. In the second area another one. The third time we found her body. I'll never forget the relief on her family's faces. Each one of them thanked us."

Later an elderly man shuffled over to where the South African team was standing.

"He lost his whole family," the interpreter explained. "They've managed to dig up everyone except his 14-year-old son."

Within minutes two of the dogs found his body and the team moved on.

Captain Pierre Olivier, head of the South African Police Services' (SAPS) search and rescue dog unit, hoped the team would find more survivors.

"We covered huge tracts of land and because we were constantly on the move for survivors, we didn't dig up the bodies we found – that we left to the Iranian soldiers and the family. We just showed them where the body was. People were so thankful for that. They

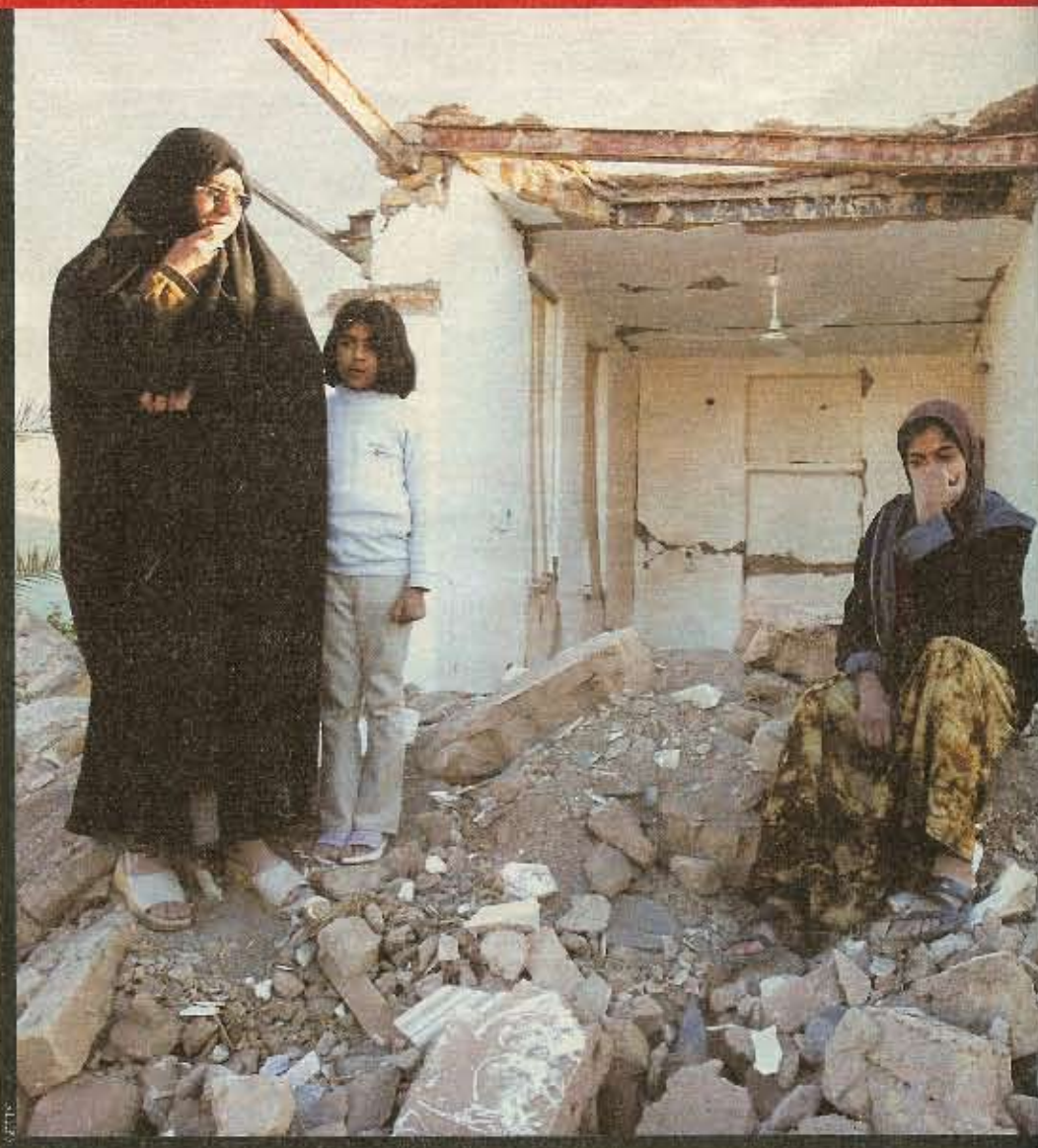
wanted to talk to the dogs. You saw them patting them, stroking them."

It all began in 1992 with the double murder on a farm 50 km northwest of Potgietersrus. Captain Olivier was part of the team that spent five days searching for the bodies. Frustrated with the time wasted, he set about establishing a new type of police dog. In those days police dogs were used mostly on patrol or to sniff out narco-

tics, explosives or abalone. Within two years Olivier had set up a search and rescue unit within the SAPS and today 30 of the 1 000 dog handlers do search and rescue.

Not every dog is suitable. A search and rescue dog has to be a natural retriever, always running around with something in its mouth. The German Shepherd is the preferred breed because of its great adaptability, physical prowess, intelligence and loyalty.

By Paula Slior



Search-and-rescue dogs have become the real heroes of relief operations such as the one launched in Iran recently – and some intrepid local hounds were in the thick of it



The dogs are trained according to a reward system – the SAPS use tennis balls – whereby they are taught to be obedient and to react to smell.

"Dogs can't tell the difference between a live and dead body and unfortunately you can't train them to do both. In South Africa it's not practical for us to train them to be able to find only live people as we have a lot of shallow graves where we need to be able to take bodies out," Sergeant Pierre Ferreira explains. His dog Falcon was the baby of the team at just under two years.

"Although he doesn't have as much experience as the older dogs he was very well prepared. The training centre we use in South Africa is very similar to the type of construction collapse we saw in Iran. The only problem for Falcon was he's not used to such big crowds and he sometimes got scared

when the children came up to pat him."

None of the bodies the dogs found responded to the search camera and hearing devices brought in to see whether a person is alive or not. Hence they were left for the Iranian army to dig up – something that worries Captain Olivier.

"There were stories of people being found alive after 13 days. If a person is found so long afterwards it's very likely he will not respond to the hearing device. It's possible that if we had dug out some of the bodies we might have found one or two of them alive."

"The dogs found this very stressful because in normal situations they get rewarded after digging the body out. So the only way we could do stress them was to hide the tennis balls we'd brought along and allow them to find them."

A stressed search and rescue dog is easily distracted and while searching for a body will pick up sticks and stones to reward itself. Inspector Marx saw it in his dog, Mosko.

"I could see he was starting to lose interest. He was getting agitated. The dogs worked extremely long hours on tough terrain – much longer than they were used to working back home."

Inspector Paul Rheeder's dog, Rex, was the oldest at eight-and-a-half years. By day two he was struggling.

"I'd never had to worry about him back home because I'd never worked with him for eight continuous hours," Rheeder says. "Iran was very good experience in terms of training and I want to now spend more time with the dogs on obstacles such as the ones we saw there so that they get used to them. Experiences like this one better prepare you should something similar ever happen in South Africa."

THE dogs lived on 800 grams of high protein pet cubes every day and bottled water. They slept in the same tents as their handlers and traveled on board the aircraft so as not to be stressed by being put in the hold in crates. They are now in quarantine in Pretoria where blood tests are being taken to ensure they haven't contracted any diseases. The logistics in organising all of this can sometimes prove nightmarish.

Ian Scher, CEO of Rescue South Africa, remembers trying to get the dogs to Bhuj, India, after the earthquake there three years ago. The Air

India ground staff was not keen on taking the dogs on board with other commercial passengers.

"The South African ambassador, myself and the head of SAA in India all stormed down on this poor purser, insisting how placid the dogs were. While we were doing this, one of them jumped onto the counter to take a better look at the lady checking us in. She almost collapsed in fright," he chuckles.

And just in case you thought it was all about what the dogs could do for the survivors and victims of earthquake zones, their contribution to the team members is just as significant. Andre Tomlinson of Rescue South Africa reflects that "having these playful creatures along had a soothing effect on the team. When you're feeling stressed, you can't really go up to your mate, rub his head and scratch him on his chest. But you can do that with a dog. Even when the guys were working in the collapsed buildings of Bam, every so often we'd just ruffle one of the dog's heads. I even got kissed by one on the bus," he smiles.

"I think it's the only kiss I got in Iran. I guess it's besides the point that after that I was promptly nudged off the seat. They're very solitary travel partners!" □



MAIN PICTURE: The Iran earthquake killed over 30 000 people. **TOP:** Mosko, from the SAPS search and rescue dog unit, investigates a hole for signs of life. **ABOVE:** The team searches for a 10-year-old girl. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Captain Pierre Olivier feeds two of the dogs on arrival in Iran. **RIGHT:** The team of rescuers from SA in Iran.

SA's amazing dogs of mercy