

But the government has sealed off the area since April 22 and has bussed in only small groups of evacuated residents on quick trips to collect photo albums, laptops and other valuables in small plastic bags.

"We want the government to give us more access to the area and to provide more shelters for the animals," said Mrs. Tsuruta at a protest of about 500 animal welfare activists in the Shibuya shopping district of Tokyo.

"It's very hard to find shelters in Japan for pets from the nuclear zone."

She and other pet rescuers also want the Tokyo Electric Power Co., which operates the stricken Fukushima reactors, to reimburse them for the cost of animal rescues.

"We're keeping receipts," she said. "We're waiting for their reply, but we're not sure if they are sincere about giving us an answer."

Since the March 11 disasters left thousands of animals abandoned around the nuclear plant, animal activists in Japan have banded together to form a vocal lobby group.

"Many people want to save these animals, but the government won't give them permission. It's really horrible," said Akiko Fujimura, a leader of Japan's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"If the pets have radioactive elements on their skin, it's no problem to wash it off. I think the government basically doesn't care about animals."

Ms. Fujimura said she is worried that many pets will starve to death, especially as the summer heat begins to build up.

Like many activists, Ms. Fujimura temporarily is taking care of a pet while its owner sleeps in a crowded evacuation center.

Her new friend, a Shih Tzu named "Ringo-chan," meaning "Apple," was shaking with fear at first when Ms. Fujimura brought her home to join her two other dogs.

"She wouldn't eat for about five days. She was really scared and confused. But now she's relaxed and eating, and she's going to be OK. I hear it's the same with all the other rescued dogs," Ms. Fujimura said.

Most of the volunteer rescuers, including growing numbers of foreigners in Japan and overseas, are spending a lot of time on phones or the Internet raising funds, finding shelters or trying to match up owners with animals.

Ms. Fujimura said the Japan Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has received more donations of money for pet food, cages and other equipment from the United States and Europe than from within Japan.

Katrina Larsen, a Tokyo resident from Australia, said a group of rescuers are renting a house from a pet-friendly owner in Fukushima in order to be closer to the disaster zone.

However, there is little they can do if the government continues to block entry into the area within the 12-mile radius around the nuclear reactors.

With shelters full across Japan, Ms. Fujimura said she hopes more Japanese will take in pets. Japanese already have one pet for every four persons, on average, she said.