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1997 'mustn't halt progress'

The Government's plans for the development of the New Territories should not be affected by political uncertainties about 1997, a Chinese University lecturer, Dr Joseph Cheng, said yesterday.

Otherwise local residents would have cause for worry, Dr Cheng, who is with the university's department of government and public administration, warned.

"The development of Hongkong hinges on the NT and NT development should not be delayed or we will have to pay a high price."

Land in the NT is needed now for housing and industry, among other purposes, he said.

"No one can deny the psychological impact of the expiry of the NT's lease in 1997 on residents and investors.

"Even the Peking Government recognises this is a problem.

"If it wants to maintain the status quo in Hongkong, it must do something. But I do not believe negotiations have taken place or that the

Peking Government has a formula to solve the 1997 problem."

The initiative remains with Peking, he told a dinner meeting of the Y's Men's Club of Peninsula.

"But when negotiations begin, I hope the British Government will look to the interests of the Hongkong people instead of those of London or businessmen," Dr Cheng said.

The local people must understand that the future of Hongkong lies in the New Territories.

The Government should have a comprehensive plan for the New Territories and make it known to the people.

"It should also take the lead in such development projects.

"It has quite a number of plans in mind such as the Chek Lap Kok airport, the bridge to Lantau, the light rail system to Tuen Mun.

"But we need to see a definite schedule for these plans as they are essential for local developments," Dr Cheng stressed.