

Squatters face daily danger from landslides,
but officials say resources are limited to help them

A problem that won't move easily

ON THE day of the black rain storm warning last month, 13-year-old Luk Sai-wai, who lives in a hillside shanty village in Tsuen Wan, watched nervously as rain pounded the soil around her family's hut. Mud and water washed inside, and little Sai-wai feared a landslide.

She was not alone. Some 8,300 squatters are yet to be cleared from precarious slopes in the New Territories.

The families remain from 12,000 squatters recommended for rehousing by the Geotechnical Engineering Office (GEO) after it re-inspected 70 New Territories villages between July 1992 and June last year.

The clearance, currently focused on villages in Tsuen Wan and Kwai Chung, will not be completed until 1997.

Legislative Councillor and United Democrats spokesman on works and lands, Albert Chan, has strongly criticised the slow pace of clearance.

The People's Council on Squatter Policy has called for dwellers on dangerous slopes to be given overall priority for rehousing.

The government has demurred, insisting that the needs of all groups be taken into account, and a balance achieved.

Peter Yip, Assistant Director of Operations and Development at the Housing Department, which is responsible for carrying out the clearances, argued they could not give all their resources to squatters because other groups also had to be attended to — for example, in emergency and temporary housing clearances.

There are 100,000 people on

More than eight thousand squatters living on dangerous slopes in the New Territories are waiting to be rehoused. Kathy Murfitt and Lily Mak look at the priorities and question the hold-ups.

the waiting list for public housing. Squatters in the development category — those to be cleared for development of crown land — could not be totally ignored in favour of the others, Mr Yip said.

They had to be accommodated so the land they would vacate could be developed into towns and support facilities.

Mr Yip refuted claims that his section has not been properly funded and did not have enough staff.

"If we are not clearing faster, it's not because of the manpower. It's the rehousing resources that are the problem."

The government secretariat (infrastructure) disagreed, maintaining that together, the Housing Authority and Housing Society had enough land to build more than 290,000 units between now and 2001.

This was disputed by Legislative Councillor and Housing Authority member Fung Kin-kee, who pointed out that this year's public housing allocation was lower than normal — 35,000 as opposed to the usual 40,000 to 45,000.

In this financial year, 5,800 flats have been earmarked for squatters. Those cleared out of

the shanties but not yet granted flats would first move into Temporary Housing Area barracks. Quotas are decided by the management and operations committee of the Housing Authority, whose chairman, Pao Ping-wing, defended the squatter allocation policy.

He agreed in principle that those on dangerous slopes should be given overall priority, but said a potential hazard was not the same as outright danger.

"It's not a case of (the slopes) being unsafe or dangerous, but that they 'might' pose a problem," he said. The GEO description of these slopes is "especially vulnerable in times of heavy rain".

About 1,000 squatters in the 1993-94 phase of the New Territories clearance program have yet to be resettled, despite the 1994-95 phase having already begun.

Explaining the delay, Mr Yip said some squatters had been made an offer, but were being choosy about where they wanted to live, while others were in the process of being rehoused, and some obstinately refused to shift at all.

"We have tried very hard to get them to move. It is not a compulsory clearance like development clearance, when we can use force," he said.

The Hongkong Standard paid a visit to squatters in Tsuen Wan to get their views. Many said they preferred to go straight into public housing rather than to a temporary housing area.

They maintained the temporary barracks were too cramped and in some cases, unhygienic. Others said they had already spent money buying the squatter hut and did not want to spend extra on relocation.

Those who live on a slope declared safe may not be as safe in the future, since its condition can deteriorate over time.

Yet the GEO has no regular, comprehensive ongoing re-inspection program for squatter areas in the territory, a fact much criticised by Mr Chan.

"Man-made slopes under close surveillance are still having problems, so imagine what natural slopes not looked at for years are like," he said.

KA Styles, acting chief geotechnical engineer (mainland east), defended the GEO's

HONG KONG STANDARD
22 AUG 1994

policy. "We will inspect specific structures on request, and if there is any evidence of immediate and obvious danger, the occupants of any squatter huts involved would be offered immediate rehousing," he said.

The office "strongly urged" people to go into a temporary housing area when the landslide warning was up, and if they could feel sediment moving, they must get out immediately, he said.

At the beginning of every wet season, district offices distribute letters advising squatters about precautionary measures to take before and during storms, and where to find temporary shelter.

But Mr Chan felt this was not good enough. "By then it could be too late," he warned. Some squatters interviewed in Tsuen Wan claimed they had not received the letters.

The story of rural squatter clearance doesn't end there. Some 80 village areas in the New Territories are still being inspected for the first time, and figures are only just becoming available on how many are vulnerable. The dates for their clearance have not yet been discussed.

Urban squatters on vulnerable terrain are "confirmed" to be cleared, but Wong Wai-hung, spokesperson for the Association of Government

Land and Engineering Surveying Officers, questioned this.

Squatters are still living on steep urban gradients, such as Ma Shan village in Causeway Bay, he pointed out.

The GEO replied that 30 per cent of the huts there had been especially vulnerable and were dealt with "years ago". The rest were in the process of being cleared.

A slope improvements program put the rest in relative safety, while they were waiting for clearance.

Some squatters have complained of arbitrary treatment from the government.

Mrs Lee, 35, who lives in a hut in Kwong Pan Tin, rang

the police during a recent downpour because of mud and water washing down the hill.

A government official told her her hut was not considered to be in danger. But a hut only a metre away had been targeted for demolition, and the squatters there were to be rehoused. Mrs Lee thought this was unfair.

Squatter clearance is a huge problem. There is evidence the squatters themselves are frustrating efforts, but critics say the government's allocation of resources is prejudiced.

Mr Chan said: "The government has placed a lot of emphasis on general development, but ordinary people are suffering."

HONG KONG STANDARD
22 AUG 1994