

Angry villagers threaten to reclaim their homes

By KIERON FLYNN

FURIOUS New Territories clansmen say the property developers who bought their village 14 years ago have failed to comply with the spirit of the agreement.

And the former residents of Sha Lo Tung — a hamlet in a remote valley about 12 kilometres northeast of Tai Po — have threatened to forcibly reclaim the territory unless the developer builds a new village, linked to the sale, by the end of this year.

Sha Lo Tung Development Company bought the 340-year-old village and around five million square feet of surrounding land in 1980 for \$12 a square foot. Central to the sale was an undertaking by the company to re-house residents in a new village to be built on a specific parcel of nearby land.

But the Government has consistently blocked the developer's plan for a country club and golf course on environmental grounds, leading to the company putting its commitment to the villagers on hold.

The former residents lost patience earlier this year and appointed Roger Li Kwok-keung to take on the developer. Mr Li was born in the village but is now an accountant and a Justice of the Peace in Birmingham, England.

After months of discussion with the company, he now holds little hope of resolving the issue and says the villagers are prepared to use force to reclaim their ancestral homes unless they are rehoused and compensated for the 14 years of rent they have been forced to pay.

"For 14 years [our people] have waited and waited," he said.

"The developer promised to resettle us in a new village, they even gave us models of what our new houses would look like.

"But they keep saying we will only get the new village when their project is finished. That could be many more years and we cannot wait.

"We have demanded the village be built now and we want compensation for the years our people have been paying rent," Mr Li said.

"We have given the developer until the end of the year to do these things or we will take back the village.

"It is our view that they have failed to meet the terms of the sale so whatever they paid us will be treated as a deposit and forfeited."

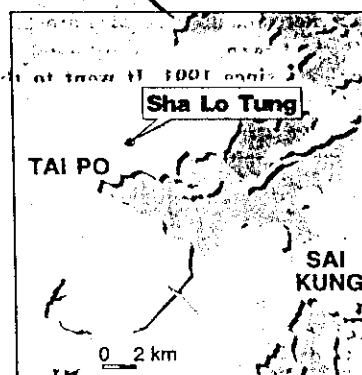
The contract of sale failed to specify a finishing date for the new village, stating only that it would be built at the expense of the developer and handed over to the former residents of Sha Lo Tung in lieu of higher prices for their original homes.

But Mr Li believed the spirit of the agreement dictated the lapse between sale of the property and completion of the new village would be minimal.

"They are saying the whole project is not going ahead so the village will not go ahead," he said.

"This is wrong. They are trampling our rights and we will not allow this to continue."

Sha Lo Tung Development Company's project manager, John Hui Wing-to, said he sympathised with the villagers and blamed the En-



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vironmental Protection Department (EPD) for holding up the project.

"The whole development [including the new village] is a package," he said.

"We really want to fulfil our obligations [but] we can't build the village separately.

"All of this is subject to EPD approval," he said.

"We understand the villagers are desperate for housing."

Mr Hui accepted the villagers' 14-year wait was "not reasonable" but

said the company would not provide compensation for the delay and the rent they had been forced to pay.

Any attempt by former Sha Lo Tung residents to reclaim their village "can be dealt with", he added.

EPD acting assistant director Elvis Aw Wai-kwong confirmed the development had been rejected on environmental grounds but said revised plans would be considered.

"We are saying there is an unacceptable impact with those plans," he said.

Sha Lo Tung was first settled by the Cheung family — farmers from southeast Guangzhou — in 1658.

They were joined 30 years later by the Li family and the village remained home to the two clans until the sale in 1980.

At that time Sha Lo Tung had nearly 1,000 residents. Water, electricity and telephone services had been connected only after 1975 and, even now, visitors must travel about five kilometres from the nearest main road along a rough track then a further two kilometres on stone paths to reach the village.