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125,000 squatters in next few years

The Governor, Sir Murray MacLehose, spoke out strongly on the Colony's housing problem during his speech to the Legislative Council yesterday — describing it as “an affront to our city.”

He warned that Hongkong might have to accept an additional 125,000 squatters in the next few years, until public housing catches up with the number of squatters.

He also outlined the steps the Government plans to take in the years ahead to provide better housing for the people of Hongkong.

Lack of decent housing is probably the greatest single deficiency in the Colony, he said. It is probably the greatest source of unhappiness and stress and a cause of crime.

“We set out to solve the problem in the shortest time our resources permitted — accepting of course that resources would change for the better or worse with our economy,” he said.

Sir Murray said he would try to put in perspective how the Government was

progressing in its aims.

Hongkong could justifiably point with pride to the steadily increasing number of people with permanent homes in greatly improved environments, he said.

He did not think more could have been done in the past two-and-a-half years or for the period up to 1977-78.

He doubted that the housing achievements of Hongkong could be matched anywhere in the world.

Sir Murray said he wanted to express his admiration for the vigour, dedication and professionalism of the Housing Authority.

But, he added, Hongkong also has to face the fact that unless the authority could get the necessary resources from rents and loans to quickly build more homes from 1978 onwards, the results would be “much less than the situation demands or the community expects.”

“We have made a good start, but we must follow through,” Sir Murray said.

The Governor said the Housing Authority is pursuing

the long-term programme to improve housing conditions in the Colony with considerable thrust.

A new generation of estates — built with the concept of comprehensive planning — was fast becoming a reality.

Production of new public housing increased from accommodation for 47,000 people two years ago to 65,000 last year and to an expected 100,000 this year.

New housing will stay at this level for two more years, and will increase in the 1978-79 year to 127,000. After that, it will increase again the next year to 148,000 and in 1980-81 to 190,000 a year.

The pause in growth at the 100,000-a-year figure reflects “unavoidable restraints” imposed by budgeting in time of recession because of competing claims for available resources.

“When we consider the urgency of the problems involved, obviously a more rapid build-up to 150,000 or more would have been highly desirable,” he said.

“It is only at such levels that

we can begin to make the decisive impact which we set out to achieve.”

Speaking on licensed areas, Sir Murray said the number of squatters had risen noticeably in the past few years.

The figure was probably inflated both by new arrivals from China and the high rents charged in private housing.

For those who claimed to have no other way of meeting their housing needs, the Housing Authority provided a simple form of housing in licensed areas, the new style of which had greatly improved.

“Admittedly, these temporary housing areas are expensive but they can be constructed quickly and bring relief to many families,” Sir Murray said.

“It is a sobering thought that it may be necessary to accept a further 25,000 persons a year into licensed areas for the next four or five years.

“Only then, and assuming that resource are forthcoming, will production of permanent public housing reach a point at which they can start to be run down.”