

A fatal flaw in housing

In a week notable for some devastating news, both locally and overseas, one item that will cause much anguish was the announcement that 17,000 Hongkong families living in 26 estate blocks are going to have to be uprooted from their homes in the next few years because the buildings have been declared sub-standard.

True, the writing (and the cracks) have been on the wall for a long time, and many residents must have feared what the Government was for a long time reluctant to confirm, that their buildings were not merely deteriorating but were beyond repair and have been condemned as potentially unfit for habitation.

The act of the Government in drawing a veil over this fatal flaw for several months may be rationalised by arguing that it did not want to say anything that would create despondency until it was absolutely sure; and in the event, it has given notice to ensure that people can make timely plans to move, and relocate their children in schools.

Apparently none is so dangerous that immediate evacuation is necessary, though a Government official has said not only are they below normal standards of safety but "they could be endangered by exceptional circumstances such as fires or freak storms."

The Housing Department will in the event have to be nimble-footed in moving

people out at the first sign of danger. People would like to be assured, without hitting the panic button, that contingency plans have been prepared. We may never face the danger of the luckless town of Armero, living under the avalanche path of an apparently dormant volcano, but as any Hongkonger knows disaster can strike suddenly and unexpectedly from other kinds of elements.

There is also a good deal of explaining for the Government to do both as to why the sub-standard work was passed in the first place and why it is not able to get the original contractors to make good their buildings which have so patently failed to measure up to adequate standards.

The public would also like to hear the opinion of the ICAC on the level of supervision of the work, presumably by the Public Works Department, and the Government and Legislative Council on measures to ensure this never happens again.

For apart from the inconvenience caused to large numbers of existing tenants, the knock-on effects for those on the waiting list will create understandable hardship. While Hongkong's patient and long-suffering people are used to waiting, it is particularly disappointing that this has come when the Government had at long last appeared to be getting on top of the problem. By building at a rate of 35,000 units a year it seemed likely

to make a decisive breakthrough on the rehousing front by the end of this decade.

Not the least disturbing is the high cost of the work, estimated at \$800 million, to a budget already well stretched with a variety of social and community programmes for the betterment of our people. Equally disturbing is the effect on their timing.

There is nothing to be gained by arguing that at least some of these tenants would have been due to have been rehoused anyway as part of the on-going renewal plans; and that it is just going to happen a little earlier. There is no way of gilding this issue or of masking the profound disappointment it will cause.

No one questions that the Government acted responsibly, even if belatedly, in making the facts known; but this has been one of our most spectacular social achievements and it is sad that it has been marred by avoidable lapses, if not deliberate deception, on the part of contractors and supervisors.

Quite apart from the problem facing Housing Authority tenants, some of whom may now consider Home Ownership as the preferable alternative, the larger question posed is: how many other buildings including those in the private sector, may be similarly unsafe? People everywhere will be looking at that ominous crack and wondering what lies behind the flaking plaster.

It would be irresponsible, however, to

suggest that Hongkong is experiencing a large-scale crisis of confidence in its housing because of this revelation. Fortunately the majority of our buildings appear sound and have withstood heavy buffeting over the years, notably from typhoons, and deluges.

But it will be recalled we experienced anxious times a few years ago with unsafe slopes, when many of our hillside came under suspicion and had to be reinforced at great expense. It may now be necessary to peer under the plaster of a number of buildings in the private as well as the public sector to see whether they have withstood the ravages of time in good order. Or whether jerry-building, sub-standard concrete, or the use of salt water in construction in times of water shortage has aged them prematurely — to the point where they will have to be rebuilt urgently.

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