

9-6
13-5

J.C.M.P.

15 August 1982

\$200m aid plan for squatters

By ROY EDMONDS

The Executive Council is to be asked to accept a programme of improvements to squatter villages which could cost up to \$200 million over a number of years.

Housing Department officials expect the programme to be accepted as they say the cost of ignoring the problem could prove much higher.

The Department also expects its building programme to halve the number of urban squatters over the next five years.

The \$200 million figure is based on preliminary findings of a Housing Department pilot scheme. This suggests amenities can be provided at a cost of \$2,000 per person for the lifespan of the village.

Officials stress that the true cost has yet to be proved.

The Squatter Improvement Division was set up in January and given \$21 million to overhaul four squatter sites.

It was also to estimate the cost of implementing a territory-wide improvement scheme.

The division, under the Assistant Director of Housing, Mr Tony Miller, was due to report back to the Executive Council next month but its report will be two months late, due to the disruption caused by heavy rain.

Its formation followed a commitment from the Government to improve conditions in the squatter villages until residents are absorbed by the housing programme.

Latest figures put Hongkong's total squatter population at 580,000 but any improvement work is likely to be concentrated on the urban areas where there are an estimated 200,000 squatters.

Villages in the rural areas are generally older and better organised.

The division has concentrated on Sau Mau Ping, Lam Tin and Hongkong Island's Eastern District.

Its fourth pilot area, Wong Tai Sin, has been held up because the village may be disrupted by a nearby road development scheme.

Mr Miller says he will need all of his \$21 million budget for the four areas.

He expects Exco to go further with improvements because the cost, not just in human terms, of doing nothing could be higher.

"Last year 35,000 people were made homeless because of fires in squatter areas," he said.

"It's pretty hellish for families being pushed out to Tuen Mun and then waiting for temporary housing. It also disrupts the clearance programme for housing.

"It may seem like a lot of money but if the place is burned down or you have an epidemic it is going to cost a lot more.

"A big fire is bad news for everybody." His unit is installing firebreaks, which means moving about five per cent of the squatters. The cleared area — usually following existing paths — can also be used for recreation.

Metred water supplies are also being installed to all huts. As well as improving conditions this cuts down on racketeers charging for connections to standpipes.

It should also stem wastage of water at present said to be "tremendous."

Public toilets are being installed, bath-houses, electricity (at present illegally connected by triads), street lighting, refuse collection and drainage to each hut.

Poor hygiene conditions, caused by rubbish, inadequate drainage and limited water supply, are the main concern of squatter families.

At Sau Mau Ping the nullah running through the village was two feet deep when the unit first started its work.

Apart from the risk of epidemics, the rubbish causes flooding in heavy rain. Flooding and accompanying landslips pose the gravest danger, along with fire, to the villagers.

Mr Miller is confident that the improvements will work, but the big test — the first drainage installed — is yet to come.

"I need five weeks to decide how things are going. Everything hinges on the drainage," he admits.

But solving the squatter problem does not merely depend on the nuts and bolts of improved facilities.

Voluntary workers, pressure groups and officials agree that squatters — mostly new immigrants in the urban areas — have to be brought closer to the rest of the community and taught to organise themselves.

"Squatters represent 40 per cent of people in housing areas," said Mr Miller.

"In the older areas they are well organised and liaison with local officials is good.

"In the case of people coming since 1979, they started as illegal squatters. Their first experience has been one of conflict.

"Getting them to make use of obvious facilities like schooling is easy but getting on housing waiting lists takes time.

"We aim to put in basic facilities like sewers and then help people organise themselves."