

S & M.P.

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Bray: MAC patrols successful in housing estates

Security patrols formed by Mutual Aid Committees are a success as abuse has not been a problem, the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr D.C. Bray, said.

He said such patrols have been found to be successful in public housing estates but are not thought to be of much value in private housing.

Mr Bray was replying to various points concerning MACs raised by an Unofficial, Mr Wong Lam, who, among other things, faulted the Government for not giving official recognition to the MAC security patrol teams.

Mr Bray pointed out that such patrols are legal - "they are not tolerated illegal bands."

He said: "When the idea of security patrols was first aired, there was some fear that they might degenerate into bands of hoodlums doing more harm than the criminals they aimed at deterring. This fear has proved unfounded and is so because of certain features of the patrols."

They are firstly patrols of residents themselves. Everyone takes his turn. Secondly, they work "very closely" with the Police Community Relations Officers who are able to explain how far a patrol may legally go, and how to follow the most effective procedures in preventing crime and reporting it, Mr Bray said.

"The Police Community Relations Officers and Neighbourhood Police Units follow up this

training by maintaining close contact with the security patrols by way of regular visits to their estates and offices where advice and guidance are given," he said.

At present, there are 159 such patrols which perform duty in multi-storey buildings, corridors, staircases and surrounding areas.

Mr Bray said they have proved to be a deterrent to criminals, particularly during their main hours of operation at night.

They have helped to make arrests and apprehend suspects, who are then handed over to police.

"In doing this they exercise powers given to every citizen by law to arrest criminals and hand them over to the police," he said.

Mr Bray said while the policy is to encourage MACs to develop these perfectly legal patrols, it is essential in the interests of law and order, that the police maintain close contact with them in case any over zealous individual abuses his position as a guardian of the law.

On the MACs, Mr Bray said there is no coercion, no system of statutory powers, obligations and sanctions. Yet they work.

"They work because most people want to live a better life and realise that a little personal restraint and consideration is required," he said. Mr Bray said he entirely agrees with Mr

Wong's assertion that MACs must be supported by more than a handful of residents to be effective.

"Most existing MACs have over 50 per cent participation and we shall continue to aim at this level of support. It is not possible however to lay down hard and fast rules," he said.

The Government did, he said, accept 20 per cent participation in the early days and many MACs formed on this basis have gathered much greater support as they started to show what could be done in the buildings.

"Nowadays we look for much more than 20 per cent participation," he said.

A general solution to problems caused by vice establishments cannot be devised, said Mr Bray, but practical arrangements for dealing with individual cases should be possible.

"I would suggest that any MAC chairman finding this problem discuss it with his CDO. Any obviously criminal activities should be reported to the police," he said.

Mr Bray suggested two methods to deal with roof-top squatters. First they could be encouraged to join the MAC. Many have been there for years, and the Home Affairs Secretary hopes that in many cases they could now be regarded less with suspicion and more as fellow residents.

"But if these illegal structures are centres of illegal activity then they are unacceptable and steps should be taken to remove them. These steps are for the property owners themselves. While CDOs will be happy to advise and help there is no pretending that legal processes are either easy or quick. They can work only if there is sufficient determination," he said.

Mr Bray said difficulties with the collection of MAC subscriptions have been much less common than one might expect.

He pointed out that the Multi-Storey Buildings (Owners Incorporation) Ordinance provides the simplest possible machinery for creating legal obligations. Once legal obligations are created they can be enforced through the courts and, in particular, the Small Claims Tribunal.

"CDO staff are able to help in the formation of owners corporations and it is not necessary to engage lawyers. They really should be tried if some residents will not acknowledge an obligation to each other," he said.

Mr Bray noted that Mr Wong mentioned also indifference by civil servants approached by MACs.

"This is unacceptable. We may not always be able to give help of the sort necessary but we are

concerned. I hope MAC chairmen will not hesitate to raise criticisms of this sort direct with CDOs or, if they wish, with the Director of Home Affairs or myself," he said.

Mr Bray said the Government can look again at the courses offered to MAC office bearers. For those who just want to read a manual, he said one is being prepared.

He said apathy is indeed a threat to a successful MAC. Once a group has banded together successfully and, if necessary, with outside assistance, eliminated dirt, crime or vice it is quite likely that group strength will decline.

"This is not altogether surprising or necessarily a bad thing. But when MACs do develop an interest in wider affairs an opportunity to raise these exists in the area committees," he said.

Mr Bray noted that Mr Wong has quite rightly spoken about points of difficulty that have arisen in the operation of MACs. But in sum these problems do not detract significantly from the great benefits that have been shown to result from mutual co-operation in tall buildings, he said.

"We have in MACs a social experiment on a gigantic scale and it is succeeding," he said.