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Dire need for low-cost homes

Shukor Rahman

EX-SERVICEMAN Abdullah Hassan, 47, who is now a petty trader, has waited for six years after registering for a low cost house in Seberang Perai.

"If I am successful, I hope to get a three-room flat as I have two daughters and a son. A two-room flat is not of much use to couples with several children," he said.

There are others who have waited between 10-20 years and who are still waiting.

The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) said in one case a woman who had registered for many years died without getting a low-cost unit.

Her daughter then registered and is still waiting. Some workers who registered are still waiting even after they have retired from service.

Abu Bakar Mat, adviser to the State 4B Youth Movement, says he does not believe that the authorities can come up with a solution to this major problem soon.

"There seems to be no political will in overcoming this problem. One cannot help wondering whether this is due to the fact that Tanjung and Bagan are not Malay constituencies," he said.

Bakar said the State Islamic Religious Affairs Council (MAIPP) can certainly contribute significantly by building low cost houses on wakaf (endowment) land.

Figures compiled by Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1997 revealed that state endowed wakaf land through re-acquisition amounted to 613.4 hectares, and wakaf land owned by MAIPP is 106 hectares and commands a value of over RM100 million.

Most of the land are in strategic locations and suitable for development to increase the value of Bumiputera property.

"Unfortunately, due to poor leadership the MAIPP is more dead than alive since the 1970s. As a result, the Malays suffered the consequences," said Bakar.

Ramlan Raji, deputy leader of Umno Kampung Manggis branch, said several thousand Malays in the state were in dire need of low cost housing.

Most of those in the low income group, he said, could only afford low cost flats costing not more than RM50,000 a unit.

"This is why there is a squatter colony with a population of more than a thousand people in Bayan Baru since the last 10 years," he said.

Ramlan was also critical of MAIPP for its non-performance as well as its wasteful and negative attitude and called for deadwood to be replaced.

But Datuk Abdul Rahim Khan, who was MAIPP's secretary from 1961 to 1980 said the council had encountered strong opposition from residents when it tried to build low-cost housing in Kampung Baru, Kampung Makam and Kampung Dodol in the 1970s.

Rahim said the council's only contribution towards housing was to add an extra storey to its existing three-storey flats in Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling and also to develop Taman Abidin in Jalan Perak through a co-operative society.

"We wanted to build eight-storey flats on the Alim Shahwali wakaf land in Lebu Chulia but the Municipal Council did not approve our plans and the site is still a car park today," he said.

Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, site manager of Unesco LEAP which carried out a recent survey on wakaf land in Penang, felt that MAIPP could certainly have done much better in advancing the interests of Malays from the lower

income group insofar as urban housing is concerned.

"Surely MAIPP could have sought a solution for the Alim Shahwali project instead of merely giving up and letting the site go to waste all these years," he said.

According to the Penang Island Municipal Council (MPPP), Bumiputeras make up 30.3 per cent of the island's population but own only 16.8 per cent of the land area.

A state household income survey in 1994 found that 10.4 per cent of Malay households were earning less than RM600 per month while 71.4 per cent had incomes of between RM601-1,999 per month. Only 19.2 per cent had incomes of more than RM2,000 per month.

"In George Town, the wakaf is the only alternative for poor Muslims. Where else can they turn to?" asked Razzaq.

He regretted that several Muslim families from the low income group were evicted from MAIPP flats following the recent repeal of the Rent Control Act, and suggested that MAIPP provide accommodation for rent for those who could not afford to purchase flats.

"Wakaf housing should be a mixture for the higher and lower income groups. If the need is more pressing, MAIPP should only go for low cost housing to ensure the presence of Malays in urban areas," he said.

According to Islamic law, he said, the poor of the local Qariah (parish) have the first right to benefit from the welfare provided by the wakaf.

"The rest of us as members of the Qariah have a responsibility to see that they are provided this welfare in the form of wakaf housing, as they deserve," he said.

In June last year, Tanjung Umno Youth sent a memorandum to Deputy Prime Minister Dato Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi protesting against several redevelopment projects of government buildings in Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah.

They protested that the redevelopment was essentially commercial and did not bring any social benefits to Malays in Tanjung. They wanted low and medium cost housing for Malays to be part of the projects.

Penang is already facing a glut of office and commercial space at present. According to property market reports, office space oversupply is the main reason for the overall decline of the commercial sector and this is expected to go on due to the continued construction and poor demand for office space.

The state government had decided in 1995 that it was no longer feasible to build low-cost terrace houses and that it would only construct low-cost flats as land in Penang is too expensive and scarce to accommodate the demand.

It is believed that a total of 14,800 registered applicants are still waiting for low cost homes. The only way Penang can cater to this increasing demand for low cost housing is to build highrise flats, or at least five-storey walk-up flats.

The price of a low cost house here used to be about RM25,000 a few years ago. Today it is RM50,000 and above.

State Housing Committee chairman Datuk Abdul Rashid Abdullah said eight new low cost housing projects, costing RM109.69 million will be built under the Eighth Malaysia Plan.

The projects to be carried out from 2001 to 2005, will create a pool of 2,974 units. Two other low cost housing projects in Kampung Besar and Padang Chempedak in Seberang Perai Utara costing a total of RM22.32 million are under construction.

Rashid said the state also helped in reviving seven out of 21 low cost housing projects which were affected by the recent economic downturn.

CAP spokesperson Meenakshi Raman said it was clear that the State Government had failed dismally in providing low cost housing to the

people.

"The financial crisis which began in 1997 exacerbated the situation. Not enough has been done. There should have been much better planning ahead in the light of the repeal of the Rent Control Act," she said.

CAP officers discovered a lot of abuses in the allocation of low cost houses. Many undeserving and unqualified applicants were given houses while really deserving ones were ignored.

In many cases, the officers alleged, politicians and government officials had aided and abetted dishonest applicants in obtaining low cost houses.

"Even the public display of photographs of successful low cost house applicants have not discouraged or stopped these cheats," said a CAP officer.

Penang Malay Association (PEMENANG) president Datuk Mohamad Yussof Latif believes that a proper and systematic utilisation of wakaf land will certainly help to solve the acute housing problem facing the Malays.

"If Malays in the city are marginalised, they will lose their identity. Only proper wakaf development will give them a chance to live in urban areas," he said.

Yussof has plans for the redevelopment of Kampung Makam into a modern urban kampung which he has submitted to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin.

The Kampung Makam wakaf area is valued at about RM40 million. He said the project required the purchase of a 2.8ha site at neighbouring Solok Perak where villagers would be re-located.

To make this project a reality, he said, the government would have to establish a body of trustees to which a grant of RM100 million could be channelled.

"If this is successfully implemented, Kampung Dodol should be similarly redeveloped," he said.

But as Abu Bakar Mat said, many of the local Malays he spoke to were rather cynical and pessimistic. "Easier said than done" seemed to be the general reaction.

"Can you blame them for feeling this way? As for me, I hope my children or grandchildren will get to enjoy decent housing and a better standard of living in Penang one day as compared to myself," he said.

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