

01/05/2001

Joint concessions an important factor in resolving squatter problems

Abdul Razak Ahmad

IN the Sean Connery movie Entrapment, the Petronas Twin Towers were artificially grafted against an unreasonably decadent background of neglect and poverty.

Such portrayals are unfair but international news magazines have also been known to use photographs of decrepit areas in Kampung Baru with the gleaming towers in the background, in order to gain a similar effect.

However, as unreasonable as Hollywood and the international news magazines are for using such depictions, so too the attitude of residents in these areas who demand exorbitant sums before they agree.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's observation on Sunday that excessive demands by squatters and residents in areas earmarked for development have made it difficult for the Government to relocate them needs serious consideration.

Take the case of the still-unconcluded plans to develop the Kampung Baru area, which sticks out like a sore thumb against the modern skyline gracing the city centre.

Dr Mahathir said he was saddened by the attitude of residents who demand up to RM1,000 per square feet as compensation.

"We want to develop Kampung Baru for the Malays. But if they want similar rates to that of their surroundings, we will not be able to help them."

For such residents and many squatters, the persistence of the squatter problem is more often than not due to a vicious cycle of manipulation by political interests.

An example of this could be seen last Wednesday, when a group of 75 DAP and Pas members from Kampung Midah Dalam in Cheras turned up at Umno headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

Declaring that they had left their parties, the group wanted to join Umno.

A brief ceremony was held where the group of people submitted their application forms to the Deputy Prime Minister's political secretary Mahadzir Khalid.

A member of the group, Abdul Rahman Maarip, said they left DAP and Pas because the Opposition parties were not delivering on their promise of helping the group resolve compensation issues for their relocation to another area.

"Opposition leaders like Parti Keadilan Nasional deputy president Dr Chandra Muzaffar and the DAP's Lim Guan Eng promised to help solve our problems before the (1999) general election.

"Until now, all those promises remain as such. We feel only Umno can help us."

For Opposition parties, the squatters represent a ripe audience of potential supporters, whose dissatisfaction can easily be turned against the Government.

Thus the many cases where squatters attempt desperate measures to prevent bulldozers from leveling their illegal homes, like lying down in front of the bulldozers.

Many pro-Opposition Non-Governmental Organisations also champion the plight of the squatters.

Their argument, that access to affordable housing for every citizen, has merit. But it does not negate the fact that squatters are illegal

occupiers of land, either private or Government-owned.

It does not detract from the paradoxical displays of wealth and luxury in some squatter areas said to be populated by people too poor to rent houses.

Many NGOs argue instead that poverty is relative and that ownership of cars by a minute segment of squatters does not make them undeserving.

The NGOs want to portray squatters as hapless, voiceless victims of development, who believe what NGOs say and oppose the Government because the Government is inherently evil and corrupt.

For the squatters though, political parties represent a more beneficial shoulder to cry on in resolving their plight.

Take the stereotypical sequence of events in many a squatter colony.

First, an industrious group of "settlers" build ramshackle dwellings on private or Government-owned land.

Their actions go "unnoticed" and their numbers swell. The settlement proliferates, and after some years, the original settlers build even more houses, which they sell, or rent.

Politics enters the fray at this point. Party branches are established, either when authorities start getting serious about evicting them, or when talk of relocation in low-cost housing schemes start to surface.

For the pragmatic squatters who establish Barisan Nasional party branches in their settlements, an important reason for it is to secure low cost housing.

Unfortunately, some time after the last batch of keys are handed over, the grumbling resumes over how many settlers did not get homes, and how others got more than their fair share.

The squatters remain and the cycle repeats. The low-cost flats and houses are rented out, while more deserving people end-up renting or buying squatter houses.

Areas planned for development get bogged down in similar problems, and what results are the decrepit areas in Kampung Baru, eyesores and persistent squatter problems.

It should not take a veritable disaster like the outbreak of fire or the recent Kampung Medan clashes before the authorities step in and take decisive action.

Such problems are not insurmountable.

What's important is for both the Government and affected residents and squatters to realise that any conclusion to their joint problems must involve joint concessions.

If nothing else, the aim should be to ensure that there are no conflicting areas of extreme wealth and poverty existing uncomfortably side by side. That is not an unreasonable thing to ask for.

(END)