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## Redeveloping Tanjung Tokong

By Salleh Buang

A RECENT news item in a local daily reported that UDA Holdings Bhd will soon spend a massive amount of money - an estimated RM360 million - to build two major projects in Tanjung Tokong, Penang.

The two projects, named Warisan Tanjung and Tanjung West, will comprise low-medium cost flats, apartments, condominiums and commercial units.

According to UDA Holdings managing director Datuk Zahari Omar, Warisan Tanjung will be developed on a 26-acre site, currently known as Kampung Tanjung Tokong, while Tanjung West will be built on 41 acres of reclaimed land.

Warisan Tanjung is due for completion in 2010, while Tanjung West is expected to be completed a year earlier. The former is substantially, though not completely, residential in nature and the latter, commercial.

If you are a frequent visitor to the island and often make a beeline to the popular Batu Feringgi beach hotels, you would certainly have passed by these two project sites, and maybe even noticed the abject and deplorable living conditions of most of the residents of Kampung Tanjung Tokong.

What surprised me when I read the news was the fact - as revealed by Zahari to reporters - that the area is actually a temporary occupation licence or TOL land. To put it simply, the Penang State Authority has never, in all these years, alienated the land to the villagers.

That does not seem to me a hallmark of a caring and responsible State Government, one that is committed to looking after the welfare of its subjects. On the inevitable question of why the State Authority did not alienate the land to the villagers - and finally chose to give it away to UDA - only those holding the reins of power can give the answer.

Leaders should remember that they will ultimately be held accountable for their omissions and commissions.

The development of Kampung Tanjung Tokong is yet another reminder of the darker and inhumane side of the Torrens land system in this country.

Many of us may be familiar with similarly depressing events in other areas of the country, where villagers have been driven out of the land they had occupied for several generations, to make way for big-time developers to whom the land had been alienated.

One that remains etched in my mind is the painful case of Chong Wooi Leong & 29 Ors v. Lebbey Sdn Bhd ([1998] 3 AMR 2053).

Zahari said that the Kampung Tanjung Tokong TOL holders would be relocated to "modern longhouses" during Warisan Tanjung's construction period. In the end, when the project is completed, the dislocated 310 families would be given a unit each, while the non-TOL holders among them would be offered the opportunity to buy the units at affordable prices.

While it remains to be seen whether the price asked will be affordable to the villagers, we can be sure that if they cannot afford the price, they will have to leave the place with empty hands, and probably a broken heart as well.

A little over a year ago, then Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, said any firm undertaking the redevelopment of Tanjung Tokong and the adjacent reclaimed land must think of the poor residents of the village.

He observed, rather pointedly, that although Penang has generally developed well over the past few decades, there are still settlements that seem to be trapped in a time warp, as if locked in the 1950s.

"There must be a balance in development," Dr Mahathir had said.

Driving through the area accompanied by Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, Dr Mahathir was distressed to see people living in slum houses in Kampung Tanjung Tokong.

Acknowledging that people in many urban parts of the State still lived in "congested settlements and improper housing", the then Deputy Chief Minister, Datuk Dr Hilmi Yahaya, said remedial action was being taken. The State would provide more than 5,000 low- and medium-cost houses for the poor over the next 10 years, he pointed out.

These would be built in Sungai Pinang, Jelutong, Kampung Pisang Awak and Batu Uban on the island and in Bagan, Ujung Batu, Ampang Jajar, Rumah Hijau and Sungai Rambai in mainland Penang, which have been identified as depressed and disadvantaged areas by the State's Urban Poverty Eradication Committee.

It was in August 2002 that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (who was then Deputy Prime Minister), called on the Penang Government to take immediate steps to "close the development divide" between the ethnic communities in the State. Development on both the island and mainland Penang, he said, should be comprehensive and holistic, fair and just.

Abdullah's rise to the Prime Minister's seat should bode well for the residents of Tanjung Tokong in particular and the people of Penang in general. After all, Penang is his own backyard.

The next time you take a trip to the beaches of Penang, stop by Tanjung Tokong for a teh tarik and see for yourself the last few days of one of the few remaining Malay villages on the island. Soon, like the dinosaur, it too will become extinct.

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