

Guan Eng's constituents face eviction nightmare

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By Susan Loone

Despite living in Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng's Air Putih state constituency, the future of Kg Boundary 5 folks hangs in a balance with many suffering sleepless nights over fears of eviction.

Their homes, on a four-acre land acquired by a developer some 10 years ago, are to be demolished to pave the way for three-storey bungalow units.

Penang eviction PC Jimmy Leow. Santok Singh "We face the nightmare of tractors bulldozing our homes, developers driving us to homelessness, into streets and five-foot ways," said resident Santok Singh (centre in photo).

Five villages housing thousands are facing similar threats, and the residents have come together to seek justice as they have been served eviction notices without being offered proper compensation packages.

"Our problems started in 2003 when our properties were sold and transferred to greedy developers," said Santok, who is the Kg Boundary 5 residents association chairperson.

"The effects of the action is only being felt now as developers are stepping up their efforts to move us out and develop their parcels," he told a press conference yesterday, attended by fellow residents.

The five villages are Air Itam's Kg Boundary 5 (comprising 23 houses); Batu Feringghi's Kg Catteir (1,000 houses); Jelutong's Estate Syarifah Aloya (72 houses), Tanjung Tokong's Kg Mount Erskine (31 houses) and Tanjung Bungah's Kg India (145 houses) - in all, home to over 1,000 families.

Before the press briefing in Air Putih, about 30 residents staged a rally in Kg Boundary 5 to protest against the demolition of their homes, and called for the relevant authorities to look into their plight.

Santok said the residents are looking at the case of Kg Buah Pala - once dubbed Penang's 'High Chapparal' - as an example of a benevolent developer who was willing to compensate the victims with double-storey houses.

"Our families have been living on these lands close to or more than 100 years. By right, these villages should be declared as heritage zones. They are tourist attractions that can benefit Penang," argued the 46-year-old bank clerk.

Can Lim make a difference?

Inevitably questions abound as to the effectiveness of Lim as the state assemblyperson for the residents to resolve the crisis - which began under the previous government - taking place right under his nose.

NONE Santok was quick to say that Lim (right), who is DAP secretary-general, has been helpful and has stalled the developers from driving the villagers out of their homes.

A High Court decision in February ruled that the villagers have a right to seek compensation for their land, but the matter is pending an appeal by the developer.

"We once owned the land. We had purchased it and we have our agreements, but not all developers are kind or generous to compensate us," Santok lamented.

"This has to stop. There are so many such cases of residents who experience the same frustration and

suffering like us.”

The residents share a similar fate to nine villages in Balik Pulau, whose problem of eviction and demolition of their homes has reached a "critical level".

PKR Balik Pulau MP Yusmadi Yusoff recently said that the villagers in his constituency are facing an on-going crisis, with many cases pending in court, and yet the developers managing to get approval for their projects.

‘State gov’t must intervene’

Santok was quick to add that the residents are not against development, but want developers to have a heart for those who are living on the affected plots.

"Most are senior citizens and pensioners who cannot afford, or are no longer eligible for loans for low-cost houses," he said.

"The livelihood of many villagers are disrupted too as many carry out small businesses on their plots, and (their eviction) will affect the education of their children. This would eventually lead to social problems," he added.

The group is seeking the intervention of the state government and other agencies to resolve the matter amicably.

They want the Land Office to look into the details of the land and obtain the approval from the residents and their elected representatives before it can be sold and transferred to the developers.

They also called for an investigation into the actual source of the developers’ funds, and whether money laundering activities are involved.

"This is because big money and powerful people are always involved in such situations, and black money is being channelled into these businesses," Santok said.

Other demands by the group include the setting up of an independent task force to investigate land scams in the country, and calling on the Bar Council to ensure its lawyers act professionally when representing clients in eviction cases.

The villagers also urged judges to be aware of the public interest elements involved in these cases, and that they should study them carefully before delivering their decision.

