

Authorities begin tearing down historic Pudu jail
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Authorities last night began tearing down part of a historic 115-year-old jail where Allied prisoners-of-war were held by the Japanese despite fierce criticism from heritage enthusiasts.

Critics of the controversial redevelopment plan say Pudu jail, which sits on prime land in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, should be preserved because of its heritage and tourism value.

Heavy diggers began demolishing a huge segment of the 394-metre-long (1,300-foot) wall surrounding the Victorian-era jail Monday night, to make way for road expansion.

NONEDuring World War II, Japanese occupation forces used the jail to hold Allied prisoners-of-war, many of whom were tortured and executed there, but Malaysia's government has said Pudu does not qualify for heritage status.

"The government has studied the matter and decided that the site is not a heritage site and will not be made a heritage site," Deputy Finance Minister Awang Adek told lawmakers yesterday.

"The government is of the opinion that it is not something we can be proud of, there may be many (other) things we can be proud of compared with a jail," Awang added.

He said government-linked property group UDA Holdings would develop the site, with hotels and apartments to be built over a 10-year period beginning 2011.

Activists, residents turned up

More than 300 activists and nearby residents turned up to see the demolition of the wall which began at 10:20 pm under flood lights and cordoned off for public safety.

However, with only a small portion of the mural-covered wall demolished, workers were forced to halt as onlookers broke through the cordon to get a better look with some climbing atop the rubble to take photographs or collect a souvenir.

"I came here to get a piece of the jail because even if the government doesn't value this historic site, I want to keep part of it for my children and grandchildren," schoolteacher Thomas Ng, 45, told AFP.

NONENoorshikin Rashid, 68, turned up with her four grandchildren to get a last look at the jail.

"I grew up with the prison in my neighbourhood and it's been there my whole life so it is sad to see such a historic building go," she told AFP.

Lawmaker Fong Kui Lun, in whose constituency the prison is located, lamented the decision not to preserve the complex.

"It is a shame as we keep losing our history every time such buildings are torn down," he told reporters.

Historians were also angry, saying at least part of the jail should be preserved.

"There are many other places in Kuala Lumpur that can be redeveloped for commercial and residential purposes but there is only one historic prison with such significance," Singapore-based military historian Brian Farrell told AFP.

Parts of it should remain

Malaysian heritage board chairman Ahmad Sarji told AFP some semblance of the prison should remain even if the rest of the building was to be torn down.

"The prison has heritage significance so at least preserve the facade of the entrance, which can dovetail with whatever is being built there," he said.

NONEFormer Australian prisoner-of-war Charles Edwards told AFP in 2008 that Pudu jail should be preserved.

Edwards was a private in the Australian 8th Division, part of Commonwealth forces that defended Malaya, as it was then known, at the outset of the 1939-1945 war.

He was captured by the Japanese and endured torture and deprivation while being held at Pudu along with thousands of other prisoners-of-war.

After the war Pudu continued to be used as a prison and in July 1986 Briton Kevin Barlow and Australian Brian Chambers were hanged there, the first Westerners to be executed under Malaysia's anti-narcotics laws.

Pudu, built in 1895, was closed in 1996 to make way for a prison museum which shut in 2005. It was then used as a holding centre for prisoners undergoing trial before closing in 2008.

- AFP

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