# The squatters of Southeast Asia

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A recent trip through five Southeast Asian cities revealed the growing dimension of the squatter community in the region. Prior to World War II squatting was a minor urban problem. The end of the war brought mass migration into the cities, pushing the squatter problem into the limelight. Today urban squatter communities compose 25 to 30 per cent of the population of the capital cities of Southeast Asia.

Until recently most governments have considered the urban squatter community as a passing stage on their cities' road to modernization. As such, most governments have not come to grips with the reality of their squatter problem. The programs they have tried alternate between forcible eviction and attempts to improve existing squatter communities. The squatter communities, instead of diminishing, have persisted and, as the city has expanded outward, have increased in number and in total population. They have, in fact, become a natural part of the process of urbanization in Southeast Asia.

A quick review of the cities of Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Djakarta, Manila, Hongkong and Singapore will give some idea of the variety and extent of the squatter community in Southeast Asia.

## Bangkok

Bangkok, the Venice of the Orient, is famed for its temples and its *klongs* — the traditional water ways. Like the *klongs,* the growth of Bangkok has meandered in all directions. As migration from Northeast and South Thailand has continued, the city has spilled over into the open countryside. The land area of Bangkok, which was 50 square kilometers in 1937, is today over 250 square kilometers. During the same period the population of the city has swelled from 550,000 to over 3 million.

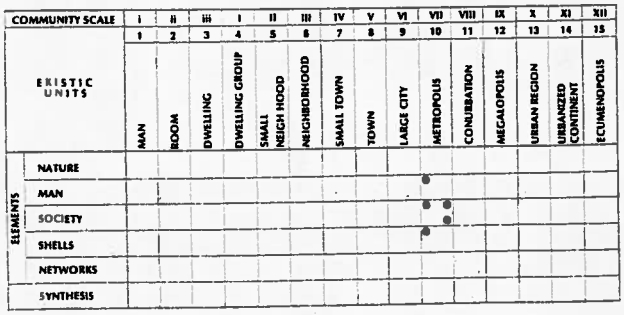
In the midst of this amorphous growth, exist over one hundred slum and squatter communities. Most of them are hidden from the casual observer. Commercial buildings, shop houses, provide the façade behind which live the people of the Bangkok slums. Narrow walkways lead into a jumble of wooden buildings and the maze of catwalks upon which children play, women gossip and itinerant merchants hawk their wares. More obvious to the eye is the squatter housing along the *klongs*. A trip down a *klong* reveals a wide variety of squatting — from house boats to makeshift squatter huts which perch precariously over the water in downtown Bangkok. Even the fine looking shops which hug the banks further up river are illegal occupants. Thai law requires a right-of-way on both sides of the *klong*.

In 1958 the municipal government created an Urban Renewal Committee to act upon the squatter problem. The committee's major achievement was the clearance of 10,000 squatters from crown land upon which it planned to build the SEATO headquarters. The government removed 1,500 houses, but paid over $3 million (US) in compensation to the squatters.

The high price of squatter removal has prompted the municipal government to look for other solutions. It has worked on rehabilitation of slum areas, by putting in drainage systems and roads. It has also favored movement to the suburbs, partly to relieve congestion in central Bangkok and partly because land is cheaper in the outlying areas.

Government agencies offer suburban lots for sale to government employees. The government has also attempted to relocate squatters to the outskirts of the city. But squatters prefer the central city. They take the monetary compensation which the government offers as an alternative and move to another downtown area.

Government officials are quick to agree that there has been no long range housing policy. The evidence speaks for itself. In the eighteen years between 1952 to 1969 the government has built only 7,000 housing units. The lack of consistent housing policy has created Bangkok's most trying problem — traffic congestion. As the government has built its offices in central Bangkok, it has encouraged the housing of government workers in the suburbs. On the other hand, industries build in the suburbs, but the workers come from downtown Bangkok. The daily rush of government workers into downtown offices and workers out



to suburban factories creates a traffic snarl equal to any in the world.

The Bangkok municipal government has searched world-wide for a solution to its traffic problem. The West German government has proposed a comprehensive traffic plan for Bangkok. A private Japanese firm has proposed a mass-transit system which would provide rapid commuter service for metropolitan Bangkok. An American technical advisor has suggested filling in a major *klong* as a main expressway out of the city. But one keen observer of the Bangkok scene claims that the problem is not traffic but housing. «The solution», he says «is to keep people off the streets. Build housing close to people's work, so they don't have to travel long distances. People should be in walking distance of their primary needs». The solution sounds simple, but it requires a new view of the city and how it functions.

## Kuala Lumpur

In Kuala Lumpur, the existence of urban squatter communities has been complicated by racial conflict. The political events of the last twenty years have produced an uneasy balance between the Chinese and the Malays. The emergency period of the early 1950's holds vivid memories for Chinese and Malays alike. Communist insurgency disrupted the plantation areas of the country and delayed the move for independence. Chinese participation in the guerrilla activities raised Malay suspicions about Chinese loyalty to the new Republic.

The Chinese, on the other hand, have a stake in Malaysia. They compose over one third of the population.

The repressed tensions under which Malaysia has lived erupted on May 13, 1969. Outbreaks between Chinese and Malays brought bloodshed throughout the land — particularly in Kuala Lumpur. The government immediately focused on the squatter communities as the source of the violence.

In an effort to eradicate future violence, the government conducted a head count of those living in the squatter *kampongs* of Kuala Lumpur. The survey disclosed a squatter population of 185,000 people, or 37 per cent of an urban population of 489,000.

The government next passed emergency legislation to clear the squatter *kampongs* out of Kuala Lumpur. It began first with those on state land. Early this year, the municipal government evicted the first families from the central business district. The five hundred squatter families from downtown Kuala Lumpur were offered flats in the resettlement area of Jalan Cheras, a relocation area 8 kilometers southeast of the city. Those who could not afford the rent had to find another place to squat.

In pursuit of its squatter clearance program in Kuala Lumpur, the municipal government is planning the construction of 30,000 low-cost housing units. The housing will cost between $50-$80 million (US). The government will fund the program through local resources — largely by increasing property taxes and by drawing upon domestic funds in postal savings accounts. Another part of the money — $15 million (US) will come from a revolving fund of the national government.

A controversy has ensued over the type of low-cost housing to be built. Physical planners call for low-cost, high-rise apartments to save on land and expense. Social planners suggest that land areas outside Kuala Lumpur be used for less intensive housing. They say that squatters, being rural migrants, prefer housing close to the ground, in an environment they can understand. In either case the municipal government of Kuala Lumpur is set upon solving its squatter problem in the cheapest and fastest way possible.

## Djakarta

Djakarta's squatter problem is symptomatic of the over-crowdedness of the island Java. Over ninety per cent of the migrants entering Djakarta come from other parts of Java — mostly from the western and central regions. Over two-thirds of the migrants come directly from the economically depressed rural areas into Djakarta. Under this growing pressure of population in Java, the Indonesian government has adopted a policy of social transmigration. Large numbers of people are being forcibly resettled to those islands of the Indonesian archipelago which are under-populated and under-developed.

Djakarta officials are faced with the task of relocating a squatter population of 800,000. In making their job more manageable, the city officials have distinguished between squatters and vagrants. Squatters — those not living on streets or along the canals, have been granted a five year grace period of squatting. Vagrants — those without any visible shelter, are not so lucky. They are «rounded-up» in periodic campaigns and sent to special rehabilitation camps on the outskirts of Djakarta. The *banti-sozial,* as the camps are called, house 336 families. Here the families are screened for social adaptability and trainability. Those who are «trainable» are given a skill and are sent to the resettlement areas. Southern Lampung (Sumatra) and Kalimantan (Borneo) have been those areas chosen for development. Last year sixty families were sent to the government rubber estates in West Java. Another 150 families were resettled on the government tea estates in Southern Lampung. A group will be employed in the timber concession granted by Filipino entrepreneur Gonzalo Puyat in eastern Kalimantan. The social transmigration policy has not made any observable dent on the migrants flowing into Djakarta. Many of those who are scheduled for resettlement never reach their destination, but are soon back on Djakarta streets.

## Manila

In Metropolitan Manila the squatter population is fast approaching thirty per cent of the city. In the face of mass squatting the Phillippine government has re-

sorted to a policy of relocation. The Slum Clearance Committee, created in 1950 under President Quirino, began the process of relocating squatters on land outside the metropolitan area. The earliest relocations were 8 to 12 kilometers away from the city. As land became more expensive the government was forced to buy cheaper land further away from Manila. The relocations to Bulacan Province in 1963-64 and to Cavite Province in 1968-69 were 40 kilometers outside Metropolitan Manila.

The distance of the resettlement areas from the city has contributed to the failure of relocation as a squatter policy. In the city the squatters generally live close to their jobs. When they are relocated they have to subtract from their income the expense of transportation to the city, or split the family by having the breadwinner remain in the city. Faced with this alternative, over half of those relocated to Sapang Palay, Bulacan, and to Carmona, Cavite, have returned to the city.

Present attempts at relocating squatters from the port area of Tondo, Manila have met with resistance. The Tondo Foreshoreland houses between 200,000 to 250,000 people. Many of them draw their livelihood from the docks and the nearby market area. The squatters, many of whom have been living on the reclaimed land for twenty years, have united in a «community organization» to pursue their legal rights to the land. Successive administrations have promised them the land, but have not met their part of the bargain. The Council of Tondo Foreshoreland Community Organization (CTFCO), representing over seventy squatter groups, is holding fast to the land and is bargaining hard with the government. The outcome of the struggle for the Tondo Foreshoreland will determine the future of the government's policy toward urban squatters.

In all the cities mentioned so far, one factor has determined the government's approach to squatters — land availability. Where land is available either outside the city as in Manila or on another island as in the case of Indonesia, governments have shunted the squatters off into other areas. For the same reason most governments have not gone into large scale housing programs. Where land has been available outside, there has been no urgency to invest scarce capital in a low-income housing program.

## Hongkong and Singapore

In contrast to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Djakarta, and Manila, both Hongkong and Singapore have gone into intensive housing programs to meet their squatter problem. Let us look at the circumstances out of which these housing programs developed.

Hongkong and Singapore have limited land areas: both have been forced to build upwards. The necessity for intensive use of land has led both cities, by different paths, to build high-rise housing.

The housing progam of Hongkong began as an expedient solution to an urgent problem. The wave of refugees from mainland China in the early 1950's forced the Hongkong government to consider a large scale housing program. The Christmas day fire at Shek Kip Mei in 1953, which left 50,000 squatters homeless, set in motion the government's multi-storey resettlement block program.

### Resettlement blocks

The first resettlement blocks completed in 1955 were primitive in design and spartan in living facilities. A decade later the newest housing estates show more variation in design, imagination in land use, and large living space. The new housing estates also demonstrate Hongkong's economic success. After the first resettlement blocks were built, the Hongkong government moved toward a policy which integrated its housing program into a plan for industrializing its economy. The key was the development of new towns. The new town of Tsuen Wan, which brings together housing, new industries and community facilities, grew from 95,000 in 1961 to 223,000 in 1968. Through this policy Hongkong has gone a long way to meeting its housing crisis and at the same time building up its industrial sector.

Hongkong still has a large squatter community. Although the government has, through its various programs, provided housing for over 1½ million of its people, there are over 400,000 people who still live as squatters in «tolerated illegal structures.» This is 10 per cent of the population of Hongkong. Since 1964 the government has not allowed any new squatter structures to be built. The current six year building program, which ends in 1973, will substantially eradicate squatting as a problem in the colony.

The issue in Hongkong is no longer squatter housing — the issue is better housing. The increased standard of living has raised the sights of many people. Many of those originally housed in the resettlement blocks are demanding better accommodation and more living space. Along with this demand is the growing pressure for greater educational opportunities. The educational policy of the colonial government has been restrictive. It has been an education for the elite. With a larger number of working people participating in the colony's prosperity, there is an eagerness for the benefits of a more democratic educational system. The children of the squatters of the 1950's demand, and expect to receive, an education which will enhance their technical ability, cultural growth, and social mobility.

### Advantages of a city-state

The example of Singapore provides us another insight into the development of housing policy. Singapore has the advantage of being a city-state. As such it has been singleminded about its development. Since Independence in 1959, the government has concentrated its energies on creating a modern Asian metropolis. Capital has been channeled into housing and industry, and into making the city attractive to the tourist trade.

Singapore has not had to concern itself with the rural problems which beset its neighbor states. Its small rural population of 40,000 farmers is prosperous. Singapore farmers have a ready market for all the fresh vegetables, poultry, eggs, and pigs they can produce. This «market-gardening economy» adds $100 million (US) to the Republic's gross domestic product every year.

Singapore has not had to face the continuous rural-urban migration which keeps the squatter problem alive in other Southeast Asian cities. Even though 350,000 people are still classified as squatters, the government has gone a long way in solving its housing crisis. The public housing program of the 1960's provided housing for 700,000 of the Republic's two million people. It also provided employment in construction at a crucial time in Singapore's economic development.

Criticism of the government's housing program comes from an unexpected quarter. The Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR), an association of architects and planners, claims that the government is more concerned with development than people. They question the haste with which the government's urban renewal program is tearing down old structures. Urban renewal has slated for clearance older areas which contain shop houses with a large residential population. In their place the government is encouraging the construction of hotels, commercial buildings and parking garages.

The SPUR critics call for a rethinking of the government's goals in development. They suggest that the need now is for quality in environment rather than more housing and commercial buildings. «We must plan for people and not population,» writes William Lim of SPUR, «to create places with spatial relationships, not voids between buildings, and achieve quality and sophistication, not just pure function». The issue raised by many people in Singapore today is whether development will be concerned with social issues as well as economic growth.

The experience of Hongkong and Singapore, while exemplary in breaking the back of a difficult squatter problem, raises questions for the other cities in the region. The physical environment of the other cities mentioned is different from Hongkong and Singapore. Their land area still provides them the alternative of housing people in single family units in the outskirts of the city. Economically, high-rise housing would be an expensive solution to a problem which still can be solved on the ground. Socially, there are still grave doubts among government authorities and social planners about the appropriateness of multi-storied housing for the rural-oriented people the housing would serve.

## Latin American approaches

The cities of Southeast Asia are not alone in their squatter problem. Latin American cities have been confronted with large scale squatter communities. The social ferment in Latin America has pushed the squatter issue into the foreground. Some of the approaches developed during the last decade provide insights into the Southeast Asian region's problem.

### 1. Self-help housing

One approach which has had widespread application in Latin America is self-help housing. This has been associated with a number of projects sponsored under US Aid during the Kennedy Administration: Ciudad Kennedy, which houses 100,000 in Bogotá; Columbia, developed as an aided self-help project under the Alliance for Progress.

The emphasis is upon a cooperative housing venture between the government and the people. The housing is usually single family units in which the government provides the material and management, while the people provide the labor. There is a variation in what materials the government provides, but the generally accepted practice is that the government provides the design and the management and the people construct their own homes.

The shortcoming of this approach is that government administration of a project increases cost because of the expense of government management and material. The people, many of whom are employed in the construction industry, have experience in managing their own home construction. They are usually able to cut expenses on materials and they prefer to build their own houses without interference. This does not detract from the possibility of using aided self-help as an approach to housing needs in areas where land is available for single family units.

### 2. Sites and services

This is an approach developed in Chile for meeting large scale squatter problems. Under this program the government provides the site and the services needed to make an area liveable. The people build their own homes and pay for the land over a period of time. The payment includes the cost of the service, e.g., water, sewerage, roads, electricity which are provided by the government. Since most of the people choosing this approach are paying rent for crowded quarters in downtown areas, they readily accept an opportunity to put their money into land which will have a long term value to them.

### 3. Cooperative housing associations

The cooperative housing association has grown out of the squatter organization in Peru. In Lima, well-organized squatter groups have taken over large tracts of government land by invasion. The government has forced the squatter groups to form as cooperative associations to whom the land is then guaranteed. The individual family cannot alienate the lot from the cooperative association. The association reserves the right to buy the lot from the member if he decides to leave the area.

The cooperative association approach makes good sense in the Philippine situation. The government is often reluctant to give titles to lots for fear of the occupant's sale of the lot once it is in his possession. If, however, the government encourages the growth of voluntary cooperative associations, these organizations become responsible for the distribution and the assigning of the lots. They would also be responsible for the disciplining of their membership, particularly in regard to the rules of ownership. They would be responsible to help plan development of the land area held by the association. The cooperative association, made up of former squatters, would become owner-developers.

Where one person might falter in his responsibility if he holds title as an individual, as a member of a cooperative association which holds its land rights as a community, the individual is called upon to see his particular interests in the light of the wider concerns of the community. The development of the community becomes his interest since the value of the property he holds depends upon the total development of the community.

This means a willingness on the part of the government to recognize the validity of those «community organizations» whose aim is acquisition of the land upon which its members squat. Beyond this recognition, it means the encouragement of squatter organizations to become cooperative associations which will assume responsibility to decide on the ownership and development of the land. Going one step further, it means acceptance of the cooperative association's right to decide upon the kind of community its membership wants. On the other side, it means the willingness of the leadership of the cooperative association to develop their people's participation in the decision-making of the organization and in the responsibility for their community.

## Guidelines for action

I began by saying that the squatter community had become a natural part of the growth of the Southeast Asian city. If this is true, then it is to the advantage of governments to consider guidelines which will channel the energies of the squatter community into the development of the city. Here let me cite those aspects of squatter life which need to be understood and supported if the squatter is to be integrated into urban society.

First, we need to recognize that a public housing program is not, *per se*, the solution to urban squatting. Many governments have anesthetized themselves into inaction by burying themselves under the statistics of their annual housing deficits. The cumulative housing deficit figure, cited for a ten or twenty year period, is even more devastating, since there is no conceivable financial resource available to build the number of houses needed for low-income people.

A good part of this statistical nightmare would be relieved if the self-built houses which abound in the city were considered as a part of the country's housing stock. As temporary as his house may be, the «do-it-yourself» squatter has provided himself with his own dwelling. Looking beyond the poor state of his present dwelling, we need to see that the aspiration of the squatter, like any other ordinary citizen, is for self-improvement. Given time and certain guarantees, the low-income person will provide a better house for his family and will enter more fully into urban society.

The guarantee of land, either in the city or in close proximity, gives him the initiative for improvement. He will provide his own house, at little or no expense to the government. He does require the assurance from the government that if he is to maintain his community in good order, the facilities of electricity, water, drainage and roads will be available.

The second fact we need to recognize is that where he lives is more important to the squatter than the kind of house he lives in. The low-income person needs to be close to his work. He cannot afford transportation expenses which cut into his small income. He also needs to be in the city so that his family can help earn family income. Many wives help by selling in markets or by working as laundresses or cooks. The family needs to have access to free medical services, markets and those other services necessary to their well-being. Squatter relocation schemes cut the low-income person off from the opportunities the city offers for other economic income and from necessary services. Ultimately, the relocated squatter becomes even more dependent upon government welfare services, since resettlement undermines his economic base and makes him even more demanding upon government resources. If the low-income person is to survive economically he will need to live near job opportunities.

Finally, there is need to recognize the right of the low-income person to help shape his own community. Planners often are frustrated by the roadblock squatters throw in the way of their plans. Since their plans are to make the city more suitable for living, the people of the city should have a voice in determining their environment. This can be done through community organizations which are the people's means of having their voice heard. The cooperative housing associations, which have developed in Latin America, are examples of such organizations. The cooperative associations give people the power to bargain with the government for land and facilities. They also provide a sounding board for the people's ideas about the development of their community.

It is to the government's best interests that such people's organizations be encouraged. They not only keep the government in touch with people's aspirations and ideas, but they provide the means for responsible action in community development. The organizations become the training ground for the people's participation in the creation of more responsive national institutions, insuring the strengthening of the processes of democratic government.