

Press Statement: "Zero Squatters", a flawed policy

Contributed by Ambiga Sreenevasan
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Forced evictions not the way, says Bar Council

The Bar Council is deeply concerned that the new Menteri Besar of Selangor, Tan Sri Khalid has announced that he will continue on the path embarked upon by his predecessor to eradicate all squatter settlements in the State. The "zero squatter" policy of the previous State Administration was in our view

flawed and an unmitigated disaster from the high handed manner in which the forced evictions were carried out to the manner in which the State Government all too quickly defended the actions of the developer against the urban settlers. The inhumane treatment and the failure to address the basic housing needs of the poor and marginalised is of great concern. Rather than support such a policy, the State Government should abandon it and make an open declaration that they will desist from using the draconian Essential (Clearance of Squatters) Regulations promulgated under the Emergency Ordinance.

Any enlightened policy on urban resettlement should have at its core, negotiations and the willingness to give these settlers affordable and decent alternative housing. Human Rights norms decry forced evictions. They demand instead that no one should be left homeless or vulnerable to human rights violations. It is the responsibility of the state to ensure proper resettlement in such circumstances.

Foreign workers

We are also disturbed about Tan Sri Khalid's comments on foreign workers and the possibility of imposing an additional levy supposedly to be paid by their employers. Such a levy would almost certainly be transferred to the worker by his employer.

There appears to be a long held, and wrongly held, view that decreased dependence on foreign labour will result in less crime and less social problems! Statistics show that foreigners only account for 2% of the crimes committed in the country, and while no one will discount that we have our share of social problems, it is unfair to lay the blame for them solely on foreign workers. Xenophobic responses such as these must be avoided. Our language, vocabulary and mindset must change. Rather than blame foreign workers for crime and social problems, the new State Government should focus on what it can do to ensure that all workers in this country receive fair treatment and equal access to justice. We must not forget that reliance on foreign labour is Government policy.

It is hoped that the focus will shift from coming down hard on migrant workers, urban settlers and other disadvantaged people to uplifting them and improving their lot. Nothing less is acceptable from any government.

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Malaysian Bar

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