

Unhygienic shacks home for workers in Serangoon sites

MOM probes 9 contractors after sweep of Serangoon Gardens construction sites

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THIRTY-NINE workers have been discovered living in cramped wooden shacks and unfinished buildings at construction sites in Serangoon Gardens.

The Manpower Ministry (MOM) has launched an investigation into nine contractors after it discovered the poor conditions during a sweep of the upper middle-class neighbourhood last Friday.

Three of the 10 sites involved were found to have "compromised the well-being of foreign workers", and contractors have been told to close the living quarters and move their men to acceptable housing. The other seven were ordered to improve housekeep-

ing and maintenance, MOM said in a statement.

Contractors are allowed to house workers in uncompleted buildings or temporary quarters on their sites under Building and Construction Authority regulations. But these must meet safety rules.

The Straits Times visited the 10 sites last week and found workers living in cramped and unhygienic conditions.

In one at Hythe Road, four men sleep on two double-decker beds in a windowless wooden shack the size of a parking space. The entrance was strewn with litter and piled high with wooden planks.

"Even if it's crowded, it's not as though we have a choice," said worker Wang Ruzhong, 49, a Chinese national. "On rainy days, the roof will leak too."

Another seven workers stay in the dingy basement of the half-finished building, using canvas sheets as the walls of their rooms.

At Huddington Avenue, the "toilet" was a hole in the ground. The men shower in the open using a garden hose.

Mr Fu Chong Nam of Fu Beng Construction, which is in charge of the site, said it has no choice



but to use makeshift toilets.

"If the owners come in and see the workers use their toilet, there'll be a quarrel afterwards," he said.

While most workers who spoke to The Straits Times said they accepted their living conditions, oth-

ers admitted that their quarters were poor.

Tucked away at the back of a site in Tavistock Avenue is a zinc shack housing six men. It is so poorly ventilated that some workers say they would rather not sleep in it.

Mr Ramalingam Rengasamy, a 55-year-old Indian national who works at a site in Cowdray Avenue, was found sleeping on the roof of the half-finished building.

"I'm here for the air because it's very hot downstairs and it's very hard to sleep," he said.

Contractors for the sites where workers were found living in shacks declined to comment when contacted.

One hung up the phone in mid-sentence.

Neighbours who spoke to The Straits Times were mostly unperturbed by the workers who live around them as they generally behave and keep to themselves.

But a resident at Huddington Avenue, who did not wish to be named, complained that the portable toilets they used were smelly. "The conditions are definitely unsanitary," she said. "The contractors should give them proper lodging."

Singapore Contractors Association chairman Ho Nyok Yong said companies sometimes house their workers on site to save time and transport costs. He added that his organisation does not condone housing workers illegally.

The ministry said it took action against 62 employers last year for failing to provide acceptable workers' accommodation.

It added that errant bosses face a fine of up to \$10,000, a year of jail, or both.

These penalties may act as a deterrent, but Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics chief executive Bridget Tan said it is still about putting the workers' welfare first.

"They work long hours on construction sites and are away from home," she said. "We should not house them in conditions that we as Singaporeans will not accept."

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