



Mother and son sit outside their makeshift home in the slum. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima

# SQUATTER FEARS

## Yangon's illegal slum dwellers face eviction

Eva Casper

**T**he future of more than 1,600 people is lying now in the hands of U Soe Thein. The 65-year-old man carefully takes a piece of paper out of a plastic folder. This piece of paper has the power to stop bulldozers.

Sitting in his bamboo house, U Soe Thein explains that the official paper he has in his hands can stop the likes of bulldozers that came to Dagon Seikkan Township on the outskirts of Yangon in January this year to remove about 500 houses. Likewise, demolition teams came to





Hlaing Tharyar Township in June. All these houses had one thing in common – they were built without the permission of the government, and the government is increasingly taking action against illegal squatters in Yangon.

U Soe Thein knows about the actions of the government and he knows that his community is in danger, too.

“We want to stay here,” he said, pointing to a small area on a black and white photocopy of a city map showing the Shwepyithar Township of Yangon. There are hundreds of small squares on the map, closely placed next to each other in lines with a number. This is the “official” Yangon: counted, conducted, accepted, with electricity lines and water supply.

#### **Official and unofficial Yangon**

On paper, only one centimetre separates U Soe Thein and his community from this “official” Yangon. In reality it is a whole world away. In the real world, the area they are living in is nothing but a blank white unshaped space on a piece of paper, inscribed with handwriting naming the owner of the land and its size.

This scribble on a piece of paper protects them, at least for now.

“He donated the land to us,” claims U Soe Thein, who was elected by the community to negotiate with the government, handing over the precious piece of paper that is supposed to prove this deal: a general power of attorney signed by the owner and confirmed by a lawyer, seal date 25 February 2014. But although this document gives the community the power to manage and conduct the land, it is not an official ownership document. They say, the owner left Yangon after he gave the land to them. But as there is no official owner document, the situation remains uncertain.

Land ownership is a sensitive topic in Myanmar. Many people don’t have official ownership of the land they are living on, let alone understanding the bureaucracy behind it. And even those who possess a land paper might have found themselves the victims of land grabs, especially during the long decades of military regimes. So, owning land in Myanmar doesn’t always mean actual ownership.

#### **Caring for their property**

Four years ago, people started to settle down in this area, says U Soe Thein. Their houses are mostly made of bamboo and other materials



Many children live in the slum. Photos: Hong Sar/Mizzima





cheap to come by. Even though the land is officially not their own, they act like a caring owner, spending money to build at least a small road and to buy a generator for a little light at night. As their houses are not legal, they lack the town benefit of electricity, water and sewage.

The decision to illegally squat is typically a rational one. U Shwe Htee, 39, came here because he couldn't afford to pay the rent anymore for his apartment in North Okkalapa. "We used to pay 20,000 Kyat per month but then it was raised to 50,000 Kyat." This is a huge sum for someone who earns only about about 2,000 Kyat per day and has a family of five members to feed. He says he doesn't miss the apartment as it was very small and now they have their own home that they can expand.

#### **Rapid expansion**

Myanmar's biggest city has experienced rapid population growth during the last few years. From 1998 to 2011 the population doubled from 2.47 million to 5.14 million, according to the Yangon City Development Centre (YCDC). And they expect another over double the number

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by 2040. That means there could be around 12 million people living in Myanmar's commercial hub.

As the city centre has almost zero population growth, the suburbs of Yangon are seeing an annual growth rate from 6 to 7 percent, says the report. There is a housing shortfall. The building of new houses and apartments in Yangon has not caught up with the development so far, especially not in the low-cost sector. This means that many poor people have no other choice than to live in illegal houses as they cannot afford the typical rental costs of apartments and houses.

#### **Failure to keep up with demand**

Currently, the largest low-cost housing development under construction is the Mahabandoola housing project, totaling 20 billion Kyat, which is providing 1,200 new apartment units in South Dagon Township. According to media reports, more than 4,500 people have applied for these apartments, which will cost 30,000 Kyat per month, which is a very low rental price for Yangon.

Daw Hla Htay can't even afford 30,000 Kyat. She lives alone in the







house of her sister who passed away recently. It is a small bamboo-made hut with such a low roof that you cannot stand up inside. The 66-year-old woman says she has worked very hard her whole life. She and her husband were travelling around Yangon, working in different places and jobs, mostly construction. They never stayed in one place for a long time. They were sleeping outside, wherever they could. Her husband died one year ago and now Daw Hla Htay depends on the generosity of her neighbours. She also tries to earn money through cleaning jobs and washing clothes. She shows her hands with the skin peeling off, because of the detergent.

"I wish I could spend money to give something to the monks. That would make me happy. But I can't, because I am too poor," she said.

#### **Problem of criminals**

Daw Hla Htay is just one of an estimated 400,000 squatters in Yangon, most of them living in the north and east districts. Yangon Region Chief Minister U Phyo Min Thein recently announced a new census to count the exact number of squatters. He said the government will provide help to those in need but will be strict with criminals who hide in the squatter areas.

"We have no criminals here anymore," said U Soe Thein, adamantly. There used to be a gang making trouble, he admits, but the police came and arrested them.

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Daw Hla Htay in her small home. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima

“They were not from here. They came from outside to hide here.” They were hanging around at night, threatening to beat people up. During that time, nobody dared to go out after sunset. “It was very bad for the reputation of this area,” said U Soe Thein. “We are no criminals. We just want to live in peace.”

But the illegality forces some into crime, he says. Many of the squatters don’t have a registration card which is needed to apply for a job or an apartment in Yangon. But as they are illegal, they cannot apply for such a card - a vicious circle. So many depend on daily work or don’t have any work at all.

Just like Daw San San Mau, 31. The floor of her house is made of thin bamboo slats which shake under foot. “But they don’t break,” she laughs.

She smiles a lot in the company of visitors but there is a look of sadness in her eyes. She came from Ayeyarwady Region three years ago after her husband abandoned her and their two children. She is paying rent of 20,000 Kyat for her house, a practice also criticized by the government - the renting out of illegal houses by people who are not the official owner.

“But anywhere else it is too expensive,” she said. At the moment, she depends on the help of her brother who works in a factory.

### Finding work

The community managed to negotiate with some of the factory owners nearby to hire people even without registration cards, says U Soe Thein. “Many people here have jobs now. We are not making trouble. The government should accept us, so we can part of the ‘official’ city.”

He puts high hopes in the new National League for Democracy-led government to solve the squatter issue peacefully, although he hasn’t spoken to any of the new politicians yet.

He said that when U Thein Sein was still president, their houses were under threat of removal.

U Soe Thein showed the demolition people the power of attorney paper and they finally left them alone, but they also didn’t acknowledge them either. An acknowledgement is what they need to get electricity, water, and sewage pipes. And to take away the fear at night that bulldozers might be coming, he said.

What would they do, if the bulldozers come one day? They would apologize and beg to stay, he said, and if nothing could be done to prevent the demolition, they would just stand and watch. “And when they are gone, we would build it all up again or just go somewhere else,” U Soe Thein said.