

Paris's poor struggle to find decent homes

REUTERS, Paris

For the last year, Fatima Louam and her family have shared a tiny Paris hotel room because they could find nowhere else to live. Now she is pregnant and the owner wants to kick her out.

About 8,000 people live in shabby hotels in Paris, often sharing a bathroom with dozens of other people, and living off sandwiches because they are not allowed to cook in their rooms.

"It's not a life. You feel like you're in prison," says Louam, a 37-year-old unemployed Moroccan who shares a room with her son and sick husband, partially paid for by housing aid.

"Whenever we go to see friends, he doesn't want to leave. He knows this is not home. It hurts."

More than 100,000 families from modest or poor backgrounds were looking for social housing in the capital last year, up from some 85,000 10 years ago, but only around 12,000 homes were allocated in 2004, according to Paris city authorities.

The remaining tens of thousands of

apartment hunters, many of them immigrants, stay with friends, live in hotels, squats or apartments which are tiny or in an appalling state.

The fate of these tenants came into the open in April, when a fire in a hotel used by immigrants killed 24 people, half of them children. Many victims were asleep when the fire began and tried to save their children by throwing them out of windows.

Deputy Paris Mayor Jean-Yves Mano says the city has been trying to convert such hotels into proper social housing, buying up 30 hotels over the past few years. But given the dire housing situation, the guest houses are still needed, he said.

"We must keep them as a welcoming zone for certain groups of the population, responding to the urgent need for housing," Mano said, adding many came to Paris in search of a job. "Often, the place might not be great, but the main thing is to have a roof."

HOUSE PRICE SURGE

Mano says that with unemployment and social insecurity rising, many people cannot find an apartment on the private market because rents have risen sharply over the past few years.

French apartment prices have increased by about 15 percent over the last year alone, data shows.

"There's a strong correlation in the rise in apartment prices and the increase in people asking for social housing," says Mano.

He says the city has created some 14,500 new social homes over the past five years -- still not enough.

Living space in Paris is so scarce that landlords can rent out the tiniest spaces -- such as the so-called "chambres de bonne," former maids'

rooms, often without kitchen or bathroom, usually tucked away at the top of staircases under the roof.

The conservative government caused a controversy this spring when it suggested that chambres de bonne measuring just 75 square feet should be allowed to be rented out, cutting the minimum size from 97 square feet at the moment.

It withdrew the proposal after protests from social groups and housing associations.

"There's limits," says social worker Sofia Bounouri, who works for Abbe Pierre, a group helping poor people find homes.

"It's essential to have a roof. But at what price? It weighs on you psychologically if you live in a tiny cell," she says.

"The other day, a man told me he lived in a 3 square meter (32 square foot) apartment. I congratulated him on still being able to smile and talk like a normal human being."

GOVERNMENT UNDER FIRE

The French government is under pressure to do more for society's worst off after many voters said they rejected the European Union constitution in May because of concerns over unemployment and their general economic outlook.

Social Affairs Minister Jean-Louis

Borloo already promised last year to create some 500,000 social homes over five years.

New Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who was appointed after the EU vote, noted in his first policy speech that many people had "very big difficulties" finding an affordable home.

But Abbe Pierre says that without new measures and funds, Borloo's plan will only be realised "to 60 percent at best."

"As the housing situation undergoes an unprecedented crisis... the first announcements of Dominique de Villepin's government show that housing is not among the priorities," the group said.

Bounouri says finding social housing in Paris is "like a lottery," with some people waiting for more than a decade.

Matenin Kone, a 30-year-old mother of three, says she has been trying to find a home for three years.

"We live in a squat now. The walls are damp and the windows don't shut. The children have nowhere to play," she says.

Louam, who holds a pharmacy degree from Morocco, says she is willing to leave Paris to find a home.

"I always wanted to go far in life. But I realise now that sometimes the conditions are just not right," she says.