

After page 3

While those who own rooms in the slum have started rebuilding makeshift structure using tarpaulin and bamboo poles, tenants (like these two women) have no such scope.

Although Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader and Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) officials declared that the government will



PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

provide full support along with relief materials until the affected are completely rehabilitated, the residents say they are not getting any support other than food. In fact, many complain that newer tenants (who had only been renting for less than four to five months) are not even getting food, because the slum leaders who are providing food do not recognise them.

"They are even skipping our names in the list of affected people as they don't

know our faces. At this time, we have no other way to survive," says Rahim, a rickshaw puller who has only been living at the Jhilpar slum for the last four months.

With no other option, a large number of tenants of Jhilpar slum have already taken shelter with relatives or left for their village homes. Those who have no such support have scattered to other informal settlements in the city or are living on the streets.

According to the Census of Slum Areas and Floating Population 2014, administered by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), around 2.23 million people live in informal settlements, 60 percent higher than the last census (1.39 million) in 1997. Although article 15 (a) of the constitution states that it shall be a fundamental responsibility of the state to provide basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care, these provisions are rarely used in the case of millions of urban migrants who live in informal settlements.

After many such fires, although both government and non-government organisations promise to rehabilitate those affected, in reality, these are nothing but broken promises, say the residents. Salema Khatun has had her home burnt down in two fires in two years. She migrated to 'Jahangirer Bosti' at Bhashantek area of Mirpur after the Ilias Mollah slum at Mirpur 12 caught fire last year. Although she was promised a shelter in the aftermath of the fire, she ultimately

had to give up hope as her house owner was facing hardships in rebuilding. Later, in February this year, her house in Bhashantek slum was burnt in a massive fire. Now she is living in her daughter's house at Kazipara, Mirpur.

"We both work in people's houses as domestic help. It is very difficult for my family of six to live in one room, but I don't have any option as I cannot rent more space with our small income," says Rabeya Begum, Salema's daughter.

The Korail slum fire that gutted at least 500 houses and left nearly 4,000 families homeless in 2017 also showed that tenants in informal settlements are forced to migrate after the fire. In accordance with the decision of DNCC and BRAC's urban development programme, owners were provided with housing materials such as tin and bamboo poles to rebuild. "We had instructed the house owners to excuse rent for the first few months so that the tenants can also stay there. This way we were able to lessen the number of migration, because everyone was eager to rehabilitated," says Chowdhury Md Fahim Ragib, senior regional coordinator of BRAC's Dhaka urban development programme.

But the migration rate goes up when the government remains unwilling to initiate housing in particular slums, which leave thousands of house owners homeless. They had once bought these rooms for around Tk 30,000 to Tk 90,000, depending on the location and size of the rooms. In such cases, both tenants and owners allege that fires set in informal settlements are nothing but an act of sabotage to evict them. Their claims are not out of the blue—informal settlements in the city have time and time again been 'developed' to be replaced with high-rise buildings, by either the government or real estate companies after a fire or forced eviction. For poor tenants and owners of rooms in these areas, there is no change in this never-ending cycle of migrating around the city in search of a place to live.

INTERNATIONAL

After page 7

Broadly speaking, Beijing first promises a high degree of autonomy to ethnic minorities before its rule is secured. After its rule is secure, coercion increases—extensions of political and military control, measures to culturally assimilate, integrating and dominating the local market, commodifying culture to promote ethnic tourism. If there is resistance, Beijing imposes a higher degree of coercion to ensure local compliance.

Uighurs and Tibetans have a separate religion, connecting them to global communities, and this threatens the CCP because their loyalties are not restricted to the state. Any stirrings of separatist movements are dangerous for China because these two groups (especially Xinjiang) account for large land mass, important for natural resources and connections to Central and South Asia. Beijing is also interested in industrial projects, like the current Qinghai-Tibet railway, as a part of their Belt and Road Initiative.

It's important to recognise that only an authoritarian government can pursue these

policies with such speed and effectiveness. However, the main distinction here is that Beijing supports minority regions rather than minority groups, and Han Chinese benefit disproportionately. With patriotic education, language suppression, media control, environmental degradation, market domination, displacement, and hidden re-education camps (one of the biggest human rights violations today), it becomes a question of narrative: state-led development or internal colonisation?

Tibet and Hong Kong, for example, actually have the same "one country, two systems" offer, but the difference is that China wants to preserve the island's status as a global financial center. Looking at Tibet paints a stark picture—Hong Kong is of global capital interest, not at the margin of global capitalism. Hong Kong is wealthy, cosmopolitan, and secular, whereas Tibet is deeply religious, with an impoverished rural economy. The main divisions from China Proper come from civic culture in one, and ethnic and religious culture in the other. However, for both minorities, neither economic development nor nationalism is sufficient to resolve conflicts with the sovereign

power.

"The degree of coercion was stepped up when Hongkongers were perceived as becoming increasingly alienated from the new regime," Chou said. "Even though Hong Kong has a tradition of rule of law which prevents the administration from abusing power and violating human rights, Beijing can rely on the Hong Kong police to carry out violence when it feels its national security is threatened."

The current situation

By comparing and contrasting these histories, Hong Kong's unique position is made clear. The tight targeting of language, cultural, and religious autonomy in Tibet and Xinjiang is subtler and limited in Hong Kong due to its past colonial history, constitutional rights, and civic culture. Still, China's pursuit of assimilation has led to an acute sense of occupation, and Beijing is eager to spin the uprising the other way.

The police violence Chou mentioned is exactly what we're seeing play out today. Right now, the situation in Hong Kong is developing rapidly, building on the momentum that started on June 9 when people marched for seven hours

through central Hong Kong to protest an extradition bill proposing to send certain fugitives to the mainland courts. There have been well-documented reports of police brutality and violent crackdowns on protestors young and old—tear gas, rubber bullets, beatings, sexual harassment.

But as we've seen, it's beyond this immediate legislation. There are older histories at play, larger and more important grievances. CK Lee, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, has characterised it as a time of living "dangerously and truthfully".

Lee recognises the protests themselves as a victory. She said it marks a new moment in the political imagination of Hong Kong, an unprecedented level of solidarity and "existential desperation". The actions of Hong Kong's people have "opened up new territories in their hearts and minds—something Beijing has tried in vain to capture for 22 years."

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