

Apple Daily

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Since 2006, the Hong Kong Government has selected the Hong Kong International Social Service (ISS) as the contractor responsible for providing assistance to foreign refugees, asylum seekers and torture claimants, granting the organisation an annual subsidy of around 200 million Hong Kong Dollars every year. Apple Daily obtained multiple copies of the refugee contracts and found that at least 10 refugees, who the contracts indicated were living in village houses and huts in Ping Che or some non-existent addresses, actually had living arrangements in former pigsties reconstructed into squatter homes. Concerned groups suspect that someone is trying to conceal the inhumane treatment of refugees.

Many Bangladeshi refugees live in Ping Che. One former pigsty in the village was reconstructed into squatter homes and partitioned into tiny rooms. They became the homes of more than 10 Bangladeshi refugees for about 5 years ago. The place is called "Place under the tree." Abandoned electrical appliances are piled up at the entrance of the place. Refugees also have to share the pigsty with factories and recycling yards.

The place is located near the Ta Kwu Ling Rural Centre Government Offices but the actual address is not clear. Different addresses were put down on the ISS contracts for different refugees living in the same place.

Hossain has been living in a tiny cubicle with a squat toilet at the above place for about 2 years. The address on her ISS contract is No. 95, Ping Yeung Village, whereas the address of another refugee living there is listed as No. 116, Ping Yeung Village. Other addresses such as Ha Shan Kai Wat Village, Ping Che Village, Ng Chow Road were found on the ISS contracts of other refugees. Although they are all located within Ping Che, they are located in an entirely different area of Ping Che. Refugees living in Shui Lau Hang Village, a place near Ping Che, also have the same problems. The addresses on their ISS contracts are different despite the fact that they are living in the same squatter home.

Arif has been living in "Place under the tree" for one and a half years. The address on his ISS contract is No. 77, Ng Chow Road. However he said that he did not know where Ng Chow Road is and that he and the others did not know that the addresses on the ISS contracts were not the actual addresses. He said that since moving into the above place, the social worker from ISS had never visited him until recently, after the media exposed the poor living conditions of the refugees there.

Our journalist conducted a search according to the addresses on several copies of ISS contracts. It was found that a local woman has rented the house at No. 116, Ping Yeung Village, for at least a year. Another address, No. 116A, Ping Yeung Village, is an abandoned hut. According to the neighbor, Mr. Chan, the hut was owned by an old woman who passed away around 10 years ago.

Another address on the ISS contracts is a small abandoned house covered in cobwebs. A villager said that only a pair of expatriates is living in the village and that he had never seen any other ethnic minorities living in the village.

Another address, No. 45, Ping Che Village, is a 3-storey village house. According to the postman working in that area, the above address is occupied by some locals and no other ethnic minorities are living in the village.

Other addresses that were found on the ISS contracts are either incomplete or inaccurate. Some even have no records in the Land Registry, which makes it difficult to trace.

Cosmo Beatson, the Executive Director of a refugee advocacy group, Vision First, said that during a visit in May, the organisation discovered that refugees living in the same place have different addresses on their ISS contracts. He also said that the refugees have no knowledge of this. According to him, ISS had also arranged for the refugees to live in squatter homes in Kam Tin and Pat Heung but put down a different address on the ISS contracts. He suspected that these acts were done to conceal the poor living conditions of refugees.

The Director of ISS refugee service, Adrielle Panares, replied that on-site inspections were conducted before rent subsidies were granted, to make sure that there are cooking facilities and bathrooms in the squatter homes. She said ISS rents the places only when it is determined that the places are suitable for residential purpose. She also claimed that social workers from ISS visit the refugees once a year and inquire about the refugee's willingness to live there.

She said the addresses were provided by the refugees and the landowners. She admitted that there is some confusion as to the addresses and the organisation is looking into it. But refugees are moving and their addresses are changing. "We have been looking for them," she said. She also pointed out that there were no problems in the past and emphasized that refugees live in the above address voluntarily. Social Welfare Department said there was no information indicating that ISS arranged for the refugees to live in places different from the specified address on the lease and that they will be monitoring ISS closely.

The UNHCR office in Hong Kong said it would assess the situation of refugees annually. It welcomes relevant welfare agencies and government departments to participate in the process. It will also follow up on the Government-funded refugee support services in order to protect refugees.