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SWD Outsourcing Responsibilities and Refugees Left like Hungry Dogs

The government has increased the amount of assistance to be provided to refugees and asylum seekers, and yet there is no heartwarming tale to be told. The Metro found that the expenditure allocated by the government to purchase the same goods is lower at market price than on the food list. On the other hand, almost 20 refugees have been crammed into slums reconstructed from pigsties by external contractors, facing inhumane conditions, while landlords take home bags of public funds. Councillors have criticized the Social Welfare Department (“SWD”) for its failure to regulate and monitor these external contractors, resulting refugees having to get by with minimal assistance and face with inhumane treatment.

Starting from 2006, the responsibility of providing assistance to refugees have been outsourced to the International Social Service. The ISS receives 200 million in public funds annually, and is responsible for the food, accommodation and providing other support services for nearly 5000 refugees in Hong Kong. The Social Welfare Department is in charge of the quality control of such outsourced organisations.

Recently the government has again increased assistance to refugees: the value of the food that each refugee receives increased from \$1060 to \$1200, while the allowance for accommodation increased from \$1,200 to \$ 1,500. Investigations have found the food aid, which the refugees depend on to survive, have not only not improved, but the actual amount of food they’re receiving from the ISS is less than the amount set by the government by at least 25%.

Over the years many refugees have complained that the amount of food was not enough, but the ISS was never addressed this problem, and even reduced the amount of food given to the applicants. Mr Hussain, a 44-year old Pakistani, said that although the government aid has increased, whenever they applied for food the ISS staff would declare that the application exceeds their budget, strike a few items off the list of food, and then give them the reduced quantity.

The Metro has been able to get its hands on one of the refugees food lists; the refugee in question receives food assistance three times a month, with each ration in theory equivalent to 400\$ of food. The last time that food was handed out was 5th February. According to the food items stated on the list, the market prices of the same goods at a nearby South Asia food store in Hung Hom – including rice, carton milk, tomatoes, onions and more, the total amount is only around \$300.

That adds up to just \$900 per month, and this is less than the official aid amount by \$300. Aside from that, when comparing the freshly purchased tomato with a tomato a refugee had just received from ISS, the refugee’s tomato is not only smaller, but even carries dark spots, displaying signs of decay.

Cosmo Beatson, executive director of Vision First, an NGO that safeguards the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, said that the food aid is not only insufficient in amount, but refugees have also received rotten food which cannot be consumed in some cases. He calls for the authorities to end the exploitation of the already impoverished refugees.

The accommodation arrangements for refugees made by outsourced organisations have also raised doubts. An abandoned pigsty in Tuen Mun which has long been converted into a squatter is now a partitioned series of room for over 10 refugees. Feces can be found flowing from the pipes, there are all sorts of pest infestations, the walls are made of metal and styrofoam, there is no water heater, and 10 people share a single broken toilet – the conditions are outrageously unhygienic.

Landlord Mr. Ho states that the ISS began arranging for refugees to live in such depilated houses three years ago and each month he collects a rental payment of over \$10000. When asked about the living conditions, he said, “If you’re asking for better accommodation, ask the government to give more money,” and even pointed out that he’s only received 7 tenant’s worth of rent, and that the others are merely living there for free.

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Note 1: ISS-HK is currently sheltering 17 refugees, men, women and children in this abandoned pig farm in Lam Tei. For each adult ISS-HK was paying 1200\$ and for children 600\$. There were three homeless refugees sleeping on the floor when Metro visited this slum.

Note 2: The Metro reporter repeatedly asked Mr. Ho to show the monthly ISS-HK statements and payments, but Mr. Ho refused categorically, saying “That is enough. You must believe me!” Mr. Ho also lied about being in the slum business for only three years, as current refugee tenants recall living in his slums for at least five years.

Note 3: Mr. Ho offered a litany of outrageous lies to the Metro reporter, including, “There is no hot water because I gave them the money to install the water heater and they spent it on something else.” It is unheard of that Hong Kong landlord would use anyone but their trusted contractor to make any repairs or improvements. As a consequence newborn babies are bathed in cold water.