2. It's the Policy

The year 1963 revealed what Policy can do. Check the records and you will find that January 1963 was outstandingly cold. And it was precisely during this exceptionally cold spell and just before Chinese New Year for good measure, that Resettlement Policy was applied to make about 400 people homeless in Jordan Valley, Kowloon, in the Colony of Hong Kong.

Colonials and their local satellites have a special term for the human beings they consider to be of an inferior breed to themselves: they refer to them as "these people". On this occasion "these people" had built for themselves flimsy huts on a barren piece of sacred Crown Land, because they had nowhere else to live. Rents had been rising and most of the people there had sought an alternative to greedy landlords by squatting. How could they know that the Government, nearly ten years earlier, in 1954, had decreed that no new squatter huts were to be tolerated? This Government decree had not taken into consideration the yearly increase of 100,000 in the population, nor the ever-increasing flow of tenants from old buildings due for demolition.

Policy usually deals with the past, and seldom prepares for present or future contingencies; at least, that is the case in Hong Kong. Government servants inherit a policy that they seldom question; it is as incontrovertible as the law of the Medes and Persians, or as the law of God Himself. They speak of policy as if it were an excuse for any atrocity
they might commit, and as if it were never within the power of man to change. The men who tolerated the gas chambers of World War II must have been made of similar stuff. "The law is made for man," said Christ, "and not man for the law." But in Hong Kong, man has to be bent to the law, and the law here is seldom reasonable, at least towards the poor that is the case.

This cold January of 1963 found people too poor to rent the new flats being built, and the Government would not relax its policy on squatting which literally dictated that they were to be left homeless. And so they were left homeless. The destitute made their own makeshift shelters for their families: chicken-pens for the children: a bed with a piece of dilapidated iron sheeting dangling in front of it for an old couple huddled there. One woman, the mother of a family, tried to kill herself on that hillside by jumping, to end her homeless grief. While those who sat before their maps in their comfortable offices did not see the grief of the homeless; they only knew and applied the policy.

1963 was, in fact, a very bad year: it sowed the seeds of bitterness, not only here in Jordan Valley, but in many other places throughout the Colony.

Some old residents had lived in Hung Hom in east Kowloon since before World War II. Their houses were old and brought little gain to the landlord, so he got permission to pull them down and rebuild. This promised him much greater gain. The only trouble was that no one had planned what to
do with the tenants. All they ever dreamed of was a single room for all purposes, but to rent one in an old building cheap enough to meet their purse was impossible, while the rent of a new building would have cost more than their earnings in toto. So they tried to make their own plans. They built overnight a flimsy shanty town on a nearby barren hillside. Pathetic huts they were too, mostly of sheets of old cardboard. But the Government officials found them, and on a cold wet day the men with crowbars were sent to smash up whatever they found. Small children, left in the rain, caught cold. The men with crowbars found a woman lying on her bed having just left hospital after a Caesarian operation. They tore down the hut and left her there on her bed. After all, that was the policy they had been told to carry out. No one had mentioned what to do about babies and sick people found in huts to be demolished.

The big official in charge was informed of the affair, and he made the statement of the year. "These people", he informed everyone through the newspapers, did not qualify for resettlement. Resettlement was intended for "genuine" squatters with registered huts, and that, only if the Government ordered their huts demolished for development of the land. ("Genuine" meant that they had been registered nine years earlier, in the magic year 1954). Homelessness, we were told, did not entitle anyone to a resettlement room.

This statement should have opened the eyes of the world, which up to that time had been told in
documentaries prepared by the Hong Kong Government Information Services, that Hong Kong was providing flats for the poor and homeless. It was providing flats for neither per se. A rich man living in an area due for clearance could obtain a resettlement room (often even a better kind) while a homeless person was automatically disqualified from getting one at all.

It took years to change the policy of 1954 — ten years to be precise. But even the new policy was stingy: squatters found to be "imposters" (a Government name for post-1954 squatters), were given, not resettlement rooms, but remote resites for their huts to be built at their own expense. Those ten years, however, had built up something else — resentment and hatred which are not easy to demolish.