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To:
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Solidarity with the people threatened by evictions in the Arakawa riverside area (Tokyo), demand an halt to MLIT's projects immediately, and consider an alternative plan

Dear friends,

I am writing to you on behalf of the International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI), an international network of social organizations (inhabitants' associations, tenants' unions, homeless and poorly sheltered people's committees, housing cooperatives and social centres, volunteers' and migrants' associations) which for many years has been committed to the defence of housing rights 'without frontiers'. Besides, we cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur on Right to Adequate Housing and UN-Habitat to defend the housing right and fight evictions.

We write to you with deep concern because the very disturbing information sent by you about the forced evictions of homeless people living in the tents and huts in the Arakawa riverside area near Horikiri Bridge (Tokyo) because two public works projects, named "Sumida nature conservancy" and "Onagigawa weeding and maintenance", leaded by the the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

Japan is a State party to the International Covenant on Economic Social Cultural Rights (ICESCR), ratified on 21 Jun 1979. Under Article 11 (1) ICESCR, all authorities are therefore obliged to refrain from the practice of forced evictions, and to prevent third parties, including private companies, from carrying out forced evictions. The relocation can only be justified, as described in General Comments n. 4 and 7, under very exceptional circumstances, with the agreement and throughout meaningful consultation with all those affected and adequate compensation for the loss of homes and land.

Furthermore, by subscribing the Habitat Agenda, Japan committed themself to "protecting all people providing legal protection against forced evictions that are contrary to the law, taking human rights into consideration. But even when evictions are unavoidable, appropriate and alternative suitable solutions are to be provided". The Commission on Human Rights has also indicated that "forced evictions are a gross violation of human rights".

For these reasons we stand in solidarity with the people threatened by eviction and we full support your demands to that MLIT halt these projects immediately, and consider an alternative plan.



In what follows, we explain four main reasons for this demand:

1) MLIT ordered the evacuation of the area with no consultation with residing homeless people

In August, MLIT distributed a warning notice to homeless people, ordering them to vacate from the area by the end of September due to the public works projects starting in October. At that time, none of the homeless people residing in the area received any sort of explanation pertaining to the projects, and it was not until September 12th that we first held a public meeting with the officials from MLIT in response to our demand. One of the series of questions and concerns that we raised to MLIT was where the evicted could live afterwards. The ignorant responses by MLIT were: "this is an illegal occupation," "it is prohibited to live in the river bank area" or "what do you think?" The officials showed no consideration for the life and well-being of the disenfranchised. MLIT officials dismissively asked us to "go to the office of public welfare", but this statement reveals a complete lack of understanding of the fact that the current Japanese system of welfare programs is a total failure in terms of safeguarding the basic human rights and welfare of homeless people. Article 11 of t

he International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations Treatise on Human Rights), which Japan ratified in 1979, recognizes the rights of all humans to an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing. To ensure these rights, it is understood that no one ought to be forcefully evicted without 1) effective and sufficient consultations with the interested parties, and 2) provision of appropriate and sufficient alternative measures. In other words, it guarantees those who suffer eviction the access to appropriate measures, particularly the rights to alternative living space in order to secure an adequate living, and to assure the economic activities where they reside. The actions taken by MLIT are violations of these basic principles of human rights, and should be legally recognized as such.

2) MLIT's planning and execution of public works projects reveal a strong prejudice and discrimination against the homeless

At the meeting on September 12th, MLIT explained that the projects in question are intended to maintain a nature park to conserve waterfront flora and fauna, such as reed. At that moment, there were 48 homeless people living in the affected area. Yet, the officials repeatedly made statements that ignored basic human rights of the homeless people, and even our own right to existence. Such remarks include "we do not consider the lives of the people living in the area in executing these projects" or "we are concerned with reed and other natural phenomena, but not the homeless." The officials also maintained that local citizens (with homes), local governments, and academia are demanding the "elimination of homeless" and the "crackdown on illegal occupations through environmental adjustment", while complaining that "we cannot go for walk in the park because there are homeless people t

here." We strongly believe that such remarks reveal a strong prejudice and discrimination against the poor and the disenfranchised. The government should, if anything, try to prevent the reproduction of such cultures of bigotry. Instead, they are busy implementing public works projects using tremendous amounts of tax money based on these discriminatory ideas and culture. This is totally unacceptable.

3) The officials are endangering the safety of the homeless people in the process of implementing the projects

MLIT started weeding grasses and bushes in the area before we even had a first meeting in September. Such measures exposed the private living spaces of homeless to the eyes of many passersby. In October they started removing vacant tents and cutting down trees. Heavy machinery is operated and dump trucks are passing by right next to the tents of homeless people, creating an extremely dangerous environment for them.

Furthermore, the officials has surrounded the area with fences to block free entry. The officials' comment on this was once again threatening; "Get out of here if you do not want to feel endangered." Before the projects started, there were friendly interactions between the homeless people and other citizens, adults and children alike. There were some children who used to attack the homeless people, yet through live interactions and conversations, came to change the attitudes to befriend with the homeless. The riverside area provided the citizens, especially the children to dissolve the prejudice and the discrimination among them and deepen their understanding on the poverty as a social problem. However, the projects that MLIT conduct not only endanger the lives of the homeless people, but also



completely shut such learning opportunities that are very important for the communities and the society as a whole.

4) Nature conservancy is a hollow excuse for the public works projects, which are destroying the coexistence of human beings and the natural environment

The large number of cats living in the area were abandoned by residents of nearby neighbourhoods, and the homeless people living here are caring for these cats at their own, personal cost. These cats have been sterilized thanks to volunteers from animal protection groups, and there is no worry that they may breed with out of control. Despite this coexistence, now both the homeless people and the cats are becoming victims of the MLIT projects. MLIT staff claim that the projects will conserve "biodiversity" in the area. However, real "biodiversity" is intimately related to "human diversity", where international society recognizes the importance of a society inclusive of the poor and marginalized. During the meeting on September 12th, MLIT admitted that it has not conducted any biological survey in the area. It is now obvious that MLIT makes no actual consideration of nature conservancy, not to mention the lives of the poor.

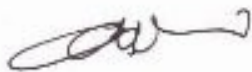
For these reasons, we strongly urge MLIT to halt and reconsider the public works projects mentioned above

Many of the homeless people here used to be day-laborers in Sanya (a typical day laborer's town in Tokyo) and worked with the constructions of dams, highways and buildings across all over the country. They were the ones who built the social and economic infrastructure; the foundations of the Japanese economy in the era of rapid economic growth. The Japanese government, as a part of its economic policy, gathered day laborers from poor rural regions and for a long period of time left them to work without decent labour rights and stable livelihood. Now, they are living as homeless. It is the government that made use of these now homeless people when needed, only to dispose of them afterwards. The tents in the river banks are the last shelter that the homeless people had secured on their own to survive. The government should assume responsibility for the poverty, created through its economic policies, and now rampant throughout our society. Instead, it is trying to hide the problem from the sights of citizens through excluding the already displaced and disenfranchised from society, and destroying their lives.

Expressing our whole solidarity with the community, we strongly urge MLIT to recognize its obligation to secure basic human rights and well-being for the homeless, and seriously reconsider the their approach to the projects.

To this purpose we are ready to work together on implementing these demands in solidarity at international level (please have a look to www.habitants.org) , including appealing to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing to take action.

Ciao in solidarity.



Cesare Ottolini
IAI Coordinator

