



Still beyond the border

by Charlotte Wat

Residents in Sha Tau Kok put up a banner which means 'open the restricted area and give me freedom!' in English.

The latest government's proposal to partially open up Sha Tau Kok, a restricted area at the northeast of the territory, has frustrated the villagers as their freedom to move beyond and businesses have been restrained.

"The present situation of Sha Tau Kok is like a cage and prison," said Cheng Ma-fook, village head of Kuk Po Village in Sha Tau Kok, which is one of the Frontier Closed Area (FCA) in Hong Kong.

The entry into the FCA is subject to restrictions. Only those who get the permits from the police can get into the restricted areas. Local residents and tenants are usually issued a five-year or one-year permit of multiple entries, while their relatives and friends are usually issued permits of multiple entries which are generally valid for the maximum of four days.

Mr Cheng added that the restrictions for entry into Chung Ying Street, a major commercial

street in Sha Tau Kok, have become tighter after the handover in 1997.

"Policemen check the permits of local residents even after they have passed the control point for ten times," he said

The government released a proposal to open up the some of the frontier closed areas in January this year, under which Lok Ma Chau Loop and its adjacent Hoo Hok Wai, at the northwest of Hong Kong, would be opened up gradually by 2013, while Sha Tau Kok would remain restricted.

The government said due to the continued smuggling activities and illegal immigration near Sha Tau Kok town and Chung Ying Street, the FCA boundary would only be pushed northwards to Gate One, which is the entrance of Sha Tau Kok town. Under the proposal, the whole Sha Tau Kok town and Chung Ying Street would still lie in the FCA.

According to the government's statistics, the number of smuggling cases rose from 363 in 2006 to 612 last year. The number of illegal

immigrants via Chung Ying Street and were arrested in the FCA, however, has decreased for the past three years, from 83 in 2005 to 28 in 2007.

Villagers criticised the government's failure to tighten the border security, at the expense of the villagers' livelihood.

"The present Sha Tau Kok is like a cage and prison."

Tang Pun-sang, village head of Kong Ha village in Sha Tau Kok, said the government is responsible for managing the security problem. "Smuggling exists in every part of the world. It is not reasonable to use this as an excuse (not to open up Sha Tau Kok)," Mr Tang said.

Although Sha Tau Kok town and Chung Ying Street would still lie in the FCA, the government is now discussing the feasibility of

allowing tourists to use the Sha Tau Kok public pier. Some shop owners in Sha Tau Kok, however, are discontent with the government's plan to open the pier only.

"Opening up the pier for public use only cannot help the business because the tour buses would simply pass Sha Tau Kok Town and tourists cannot go into the town to shop around," said Ms Fung, owner of a grocery in Sha Tau Kok Market.

Wan Wo-fai, District Councilor of Sha Tau Kok, said most of the shops in Sha Tau Kok could not make any profit and were forced to close their business. He hoped the whole of Sha Tau Kok Town could be opened up so as to improve the business of the shops.

Tsang Yuk-on, Chairman of Sha Tau Kok Trade Union, suggested that Sha Tau Kok, if opened up completely, tourist industry could be developed which would boost its economy.

"Security of Hong Kong overrides local economic interests,"

Mr Tsang added that Chung Ying Street and San Lau Street had unique historical background and villagers in Sha Tau Kok had traditional cultures, which may appeal to tourists.

Michael Wu Siu-ying, the Chairman of Hong Kong Association of Travel Agents, also regarded Sha Tau Kok as a valuable tourist spot. He said a lot of travel agencies would invest in the tours along the FCA if Chung Ying Street was opened up.

"Chung Ying Street would be the main course while eco-tourism in other neighbouring area would be the side dish for the tours," added Mr Wu.

Lau Kong-wah, policy spokesperson of security for Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), said the government's decision is unfair to the residents in Sha Tau Kok.

"The residents in Sha Tau Kok have been kept in the restricted areas for many years. The unreleased parts (of Sha Tau Kok) will be turned into a walled city if the situation continues," he said.

Mr Lau added that the Security Bureau should resolve the smuggling problems instead of pushing the responsibility of security to the residents.

James To Kun-sun, vice-chairman of the security panel of the Legislative Council, however, had a different view on the security problems in the FCA.

Mr To said smuggling and illegal immigration activities are more serious in Sha Tau Kok than in other border areas because of the absence of physical barriers to separate the residential areas and the boundary.

"Security of Hong Kong is public interest, which overrides local economic interests," he said.

"The residents and shop owners should have understood the security problems and accept this once they chose to live in the FCA," he added.

Having noticed the direct conflict between tourism development and security problems in the FCA,

Mr To suggested developing high-end tourism in Sha Tau Kok, which involves a smaller number of visitors but higher expenses.

While villagers and councillors are urging for the release of Sha Tau Kok Town and Chung Ying Street, some problems need to be resolved before the release.

The set up of the FCA can be traced back to the 1950s. Due to frequent commercial activities along the border and illegal immigration problems, the colonial government established the restricted areas along the border between Hong Kong and Shenzhen in 1951.

Being untouched for over 50 years, many heritages such as altars, graveyards, wells, bridges and steles in the FCA are of high historical and cultural values. There are approximately 300 historical and

residential buildings in the present restricted areas. Ten of them have been graded by the Antiques Advisory Board of the Antiquities and Monuments Office. For example, the blackhouses built in the colonial periods to defend communist attack, have been graded as Grade II historic buildings.

Under the government's proposal, three villages including Tak Yuet Lau, Ha Wan Tsuen and Ma Tso Lung in Sheung Shui will be opened up. The land value in the villages is expected to rise and the present residential buildings, some of which have over 100 years of history, may be pulled down.

Tsang Yuk-on, Chairman of Sha Tau Kok Trade Union, said the FCA should be developed by well-planning, with the coordination of the government and local residents.

He added that the government should provide guidelines for local residents so that they can understand how to make good use of their land instead of selling it to developers immediately.

Kim Chan Kim-on, Vice-chairman of the Hong Kong Planners Association said Sha Tau Kok can be opened up in a progressive manner.

He suggested that trial points could be set at the entrance of Sha Tau Kok Town and Chung Ying Street and the number of tourists and the time of visits could also be restricted during the trial period.

He added that a well-planned proposal is needed before the Government carries out any development.

"Both hardware and software are needed for further development of this town," he said. ▼



Residents have to show their Identity cards and police-issued permits.



Most shops in San Lau Street are closed.



Mr Wan hopes the whole Sha Tau Kok Town can be released to save the business of the shops.