



27 July 2012

Ms Farida Shaheed
Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights
Special Procedures Branch
Office of the Human Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais Wilson
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OHCHR REGISTRY

27 JUL 2012

Recipients : SPD.....
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Dear Ms Shaheed

**COMMUNICATION FROM SPECIAL PROCEDURES
ALLEGATION LETTER AL CULTURAL RIGHTS (2009) SGP 2/2012**

Please refer to your letter of 29 May 2012 regarding the planned building of a new road¹ through the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore.

The Singapore Government announced in September 2011 the intention to build the new road at Bukit Brown. The long-term development plans for Bukit Brown were also publicly made known as early as 1991. A mix of private and public housing is planned for development at Bukit Brown in the future in order to provide about 15,000 homes for an estimated 50,000 residents. The new road will alleviate the traffic congestion currently experienced along an existing road, cater for the expected growth in traffic demand, as well as serve these future housing developments in Bukit Brown.

Since the specific plan to build the new road was announced in September 2011, the rationale for as well as various alternatives considered on the issue of the road and housing at Bukit Brown was fully debated in Parliament in November 2011 and March 2012². In addition, the authorities also held about 15 various discussions with civic groups

¹ Your letter refers to the new road as an "eight-lane highway". We wish to clarify that the new road is not considered a highway because it is not designed for the traffic speeds of highways.

² See recording of Parliamentary Speech by Minister of State for National Development Tan Chuan-Jin at <http://youtu.be/rOIERhmmMs0>

and interested individuals over a period of eight months. Studies were conducted to explore suggested alternatives to the new road, such as widening the existing road, and viaduct and tunnel options. The findings showed that these alternatives would not only impact Bukit Brown as well as some private residences, they would also adversely impact the Central Catchment Nature Reserve.³

Concerns raised by some of the civic groups which could be mitigated were taken up and factored into the plans. For instance, the Government made changes to include a bridge section as part of the new road, although this raised the cost of the project. This measure was selected in order to minimise the potential adverse impacts on the hydrology of the area and to safeguard the connectivity of the natural habitats.

Apart from the above, the Government agencies had in fact also been working with key stakeholders such as Chinese clan associations and heritage groups over Bukit Brown to seek their support and advice on the best way to go about saving what was of heritage value through documentation. Committees comprising key stakeholders including the Singapore Heritage Society and the National Heritage Board (NHB) were set up from the start to oversee and carry out the documentation of affected graves at Bukit Brown Cemetery. The Government fully funded the documentation work led by Dr Hui Yew-Foong, a trained anthropologist who is Fellow and Coordinator of the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. The documentation comprises photographic records of the graves, research into the social history, memories and rituals associated with the cemetery, as well as the exhumation process. The goal is to document the cemetery's above ground artefacts, its intangible cultural attributes as well as other studies to record as much information as possible for the 3,746 graves affected by the road construction⁴. The NHB is also leading efforts to selectively curate information gathered from the affected graves and to advise on plans to celebrate the heritage of Bukit Brown Cemetery. Efforts such as the ongoing documentation will enable us to preserve, celebrate and enjoy that which is of heritage and historic value in Bukit Brown.

³ The Central Catchment Nature Reserve (CCNR) is one of the 4 Nature Reserves in Singapore that are legally protected under The Parks and Trees Act 2005, administered by the National Parks Board. CCNR harbours important lowland dipterocarp forests and freshwater swamps that support rich native biodiversity.

⁴ The affected graves can be exhumed under private arrangement by next-of-kin or under public arrangement by the Government. Public exhumation will begin from early 2013 onwards.

All material collected by the documentation team will be archived at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) under the NHB, providing a valuable database for future reference by students, scholars and the general public. The NAS has also been providing a public service for members of the public to locate their ancestors who had been registered in the burial registers at Bukit Brown. To date, it has assisted more than 13,000 members of the public in their search.

Singapore is a small country and within its area of just 712 sq km, the Government needs to house a nation of over five million people and the full functions of a sovereign state, including land for defence, industry, utilities etc. In such a highly land constrained setting, difficult decisions on land use need to be made for present and future generations of Singaporeans. A Concept Plan and Master Plan for such long-term and medium term development is shared with the public.

The Government regularly consults stakeholders on land use plans in our reviews of the Concept Plan and Master Plan. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)⁵ solicits and takes in feedback and views from the public as part of these land use plan reviews. The draft Master Plan is exhibited for public viewing and comments before it is gazetted. Focus group discussions, involving stakeholders such as the Singapore Heritage Society and Nature Society (Singapore), as well as public surveys are also conducted early in the Master Plan and Concept Plan review process to gather feedback and views from a wide spectrum of Singaporeans.

Preservation and conservation of our built heritage is seen as an integral part of urban planning and development. For its efforts in preserving the rich heritage of buildings and neighbourhoods as well as its collaborative approach of involving government organisations, the public, and developers, in striking a balance between free-market economics and cultural conservation, URA's conservation programme was conferred the Urban Land Institute Global Awards for Excellence in 2006. The community is actively engaged and involved in our conservation efforts such as through a Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP) which comprises members from various fields, including business persons, journalists, teachers, architects, public servants, tour guides and taxi drivers⁶ work to collect and give input on URA's built heritage

⁵ The URA is Singapore's national land use planning and conservation authority.

⁶ To promote public awareness of Singapore's diverse heritage, we have a programme marking heritage trails and the erection of historic site markers island-wide is also pursued.

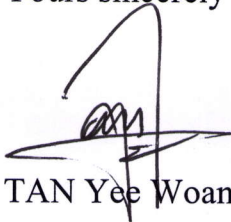
proposals. It also proactively identifies and proposes buildings for URA to study for possible conservation.

Singapore also gives due recognition to the cultural significance of our natural biodiversity heritage. We have initiated the City in a Garden programme to enhance and infuse our native biodiversity into our urban landscapes. Our effort in facilitating the come-back of the Oriental Pied Hornbill to the densely populated city area is one illustration of our commitment to the conservation of our cultural heritage.

We recognise that often there are no straightforward answers and trade-offs may have to be made between conserving our built heritage, together with the memories they embody, on the one hand, and freeing up scarce, valuable land for other developments like public housing on the other. Overall, we seek a balanced approach to development and work with the community to arrive at such difficult decisions and these decisions are never taken lightly.

Although Singapore is constrained by size, the Government working with its community partners has gazetted 64 national monuments and over 7,000 conserved building, legally protecting them. One of them was the Hong San See temple which was recognised and awarded the Award of Excellence in the 2010 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards. This is the highest UNESCO award for excellence in heritage conservation. It was awarded as recognition for the restoration of the temple undertaken between 2006 and 2009, as well as in recognition of Singapore's community based approach to restoration.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'TAN YEE WOAN', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and somewhat abstract.

TAN Yee Woan