

Living on the edge

It is not the fault of geology, experts tell [Gamal Nkrumah](#). People die in shantytowns because shantytowns are there

"Everything is transitory, everything is ephemeral, everything comes and goes, everything moves on," Milad Hanna, former head of the Housing Committee in the People's Assembly, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. At once candid and philosophical, he deplored the disaster afflicting the shantytown of Dweiqqa that took the lives of more than 60 people whose lives abruptly ended last Saturday at the foot of the Moqattam hills. "The problem is social and political. It is not a technical issue," Hanna explained, "not a question of the properties of limestone, and certainly not of country bumpkins who cannot cope with life in the city."



Waiting and waiting: the now homeless of Dweiqqa, staying in temporary tents, seek shelters more permanent, while relatives of the victims hold their breath for any sign that their loved ones might be found alive

"We ought to learn from our mistakes. Unfortunately, we turn a blind eye to them. I am not sure how long we can continue in such a way. Will we learn in my lifetime? I seriously doubt it." the septuagenarian shrugged his shoulders in despair.

"The number of collapsing buildings will grow. The poor are obliged to construct houses with cheap materials. They access electricity and water supplies in ingenious but illegal ways. The dangerous buildings that result might provide temporary shelter but they are liable to collapse at any moment. The only question we need to ask ourselves is whether, as a nation, we are willing to seriously tackle the problem."

"Space is both social and political. Socio- spatial organisation demarcates social relations that reflect power relations," Director of Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies Abdel-Moneim Said told the *Weekly*.

The *ashwaaiyat*, shantytowns or informal housing, that have sprung up around the periphery of Cairo were once seen as eyesores, places to be hidden from view, or at least ignored. Then, as disaster followed disaster, they became a cause for grave concern among city planners and the authorities, at last awake to this most embarrassing of national fiascoes.

When the *hitta*, a piece of land, colloquial for neighbourhood, makes it onto cinema screens, the lives of its inhabitants are eulogised and idealised, mediated by the fancy of middle class scriptwriters and directors who seem determined to turn slum dwellers into the embodiment of the longsuffering Egyptian masses, all the better to serve as vehicles for their own state-of-the-nation moralising. Real lives are relegated to a dream world because reality, as the Dweiqqa disaster so graphically illustrates, is far from funny.

Slum dwellers are inevitably the aggrieved parties in any dispute, left seeking redress. They are excluded a wide gamut of welfare provisions and amenities to which they strongly believe they are entitled. Their pitiful earnings permit them to make ends meet, but only just.

Yet the residents of Dweiqā will resist forcible removal to temporary camps and they are clearly far from keen to move to apartments provided by the government. After all, Dweiqā is located in the heart of Greater Cairo, and its residents are unwilling to be exiled to the outlying fringes of the city.

There seems little agreement on the number of shantytowns encompassing Cairo. Government agencies have yet to approach a consensus on the number of slums enveloping the city. The Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics believes there are 909 slum areas in Greater Cairo. The National Planning Institute puts the figure at 1,109, somewhat higher than the 1,034 identified by the Demographic Centre.

When no one can quite agree what a slum is, or where they are, what hope for any credible plan of action?

More alarming, still, is the refusal of various ministries to acknowledge the existence of slums at all. For them, the residents of these informal areas are non-entities. They do not count.

Businessmen are not interested in the development of slums. It is far more lucrative to invest in compounds for the wealthy in the new satellite cities surrounding Cairo. What development occurs is a result of philanthropy, of charity: Egypt's economic elite finds it convenient to pretend to assist the authorities in resolving the "crisis of the poor".

But where are the *Kibar Al-Mantiqa*, the elders of the district? Do the authorities and do-gooders consult them? Do they consult young people in the shantytowns, or members of the most vulnerable communities?

Narratives of oppression and resistance abound and part of the dilemma, as always, concerns the politics representation. The *ashwaaiyat* has a PR problem. Every girl's dream is to elope with her lover from the *hitta*, to get out of the hellhole.

The lack of communication that pits the wealthy against the poor contributes to the disaster.

According to one *Al-Ahram* pundit, the shanty towns encircling Cairo are but potential danger zones, ticking time bombs, nestling within Egypt's capital. They are areas beyond the control of the state and the authorities. In physical and symbolic terms they are beyond the city proper, beyond the control of urban planners and state authorities.

"The main characteristic of shantytowns is the lack of control of their social spaces," political sociologist Ammar Ali Hassan told the *Weekly*. "I do not think that it is ethical or feasible for the authorities to lay siege to the shantytowns. Yes, many of the residents of informal housing units in the shantytowns have installed electricity and water illegally. But most do not have proper sanitation facilities."

"These people have escaped rural areas because there was nothing for them there. There is no work. They die of hunger. There are jobs in the cities. There is food. Nobody dies of hunger in the cities."

Unregulated housing, no places of entertainment and recreation, but at least there is shelter and nearby, perhaps, a job. Unplanned, unregulated, informal, substandard housing meets the needs of the poor.

"They dream of living somewhere permanent. Their lives are transitory. They live in one slum for a decade then move to another. There is no direction, no control. The slum dwellers are not city-dwellers in the proper sense of the word, they are not even citizens. They are considered second-rate or even third-rate city-dwellers. Their votes do not count. They can be bought and sold for pittance," says Hassan.

Served with eviction orders, the residents of the shantytowns tenaciously resist, even after such catastrophes as Dweiqqa.

"They tolerate rising heaps of refuse. They live beyond the regulations affecting the residents of the city proper. Indeed, some of these slums are inaccessible to outsiders. This is why we desperately need a comprehensive plan of action," argues Hassan.

Awlad Al-Balad, sons of the country, sons of the soil: the phrase denotes cultural authenticity. And the defiantly anti-urban sentiments of the urban poor are perfectly legitimate. (*see pp.2, 12-14*)