MILITARY & DEFENSE

A Singaporean couple built 500 homes on the Ukrainian frontlines as the war raged around them. Here's how they did it.

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Lam and Taslim have traveled to Ukraine seven times in the last two years. Lam Baoyan and Rudy Taslim

- **Lam Baoyan and Rudy Taslim are a Singaporean couple who built 500 emergency homes in Ukraine.**
- **They focus mostly on warzone locations and the frontlines, helping the poor, elderly, and disabled.**
- **They told BI that together, they've traveled to Ukraine seven times in the last two years.**

In Bucha, the first person who saw Lam Baoyan couldn't stop screaming.

Lam had been offered a chance to see the frontlines in Ukraine in May 2022. As she entered the city, an elderly Ukrainian woman spotted Lam's east Asian features, and fearing Lam was a Russian, started sobbing, Lam said.

"I have nothing left to give you," an interpreter translated, Lam recounted to Business Insider.

Lam, a 39-year-old Singaporean, was astounded. Aid workers managed to calm the elderly woman, and she eventually told Lam her story — of how her entire family was killed, of how she only had corners of her roof to live under and potatoes in her garden to live on.

It had been weeks since Russian forces pulled out of Bucha, but the small city was still bleeding, Lam said.

"The Russians took everything from their houses, and burned them down. They were living in their chicken coops," Lam said.

Lam's first trip to Ukraine drove her to eventually build some 500 free emergency houses for war victims in hard-hit areas of Ukraine like Moshchun and the Donbass. She and her husband, Rudy Taslim, said they've traveled to the Ukrainian frontlines more than seven times since the war began, launching and funding aid projects on their own dime.

The couple, who run an architecture firm in Singapore, designed and manufactured a series of container homes meant to house families in need of shelter.

One of Lam and Taslim's larger delivered homes, next to a destroyed building in TKTK. Lam Baoyan and Rudy Taslim.

They declined to share how much they've spent on aid projects in Ukraine.

BI verified their humanitarian work with the Ukrainian embassy in Singapore and spoke to three Ukrainians who work with the couple on their aid projects.

Building a local base

While much of the global conversation for aid in Ukraine has centered around weapons, Lam and Taslim said their focus is on the people who can't flee the war.

"Who hasn't left? The handicapped, the poor, people who are the most marginalized," Lam said. "They're looking for basic things, a sense of stability, food, shelter."

Some of the Ukrainians that Lam met were living in chicken coops or in corners of their homes that were still intact, she said. Lam Baoyan and Rudy Taslim

Lam spent April 2022 at a refugee center in Bad Blankenburg, a city in Germany, assisting Ukrainians who'd fled Russia's invasion.

At the end of the month, she and seven other volunteers made a 21-hour drive through Germany, Poland, and then into Ukraine, she recalled. It was her first time in the country.

When she chanced upon a group of Christian pastors in Lviv, they asked her if she wanted to see Bucha and other areas of Ukraine that had seen fighting.

Lam accepted. Both staunch Protestant Christians, she and Taslim would go on to work extensively with these pastors, who formed a base team for finding aid workers and translators.

By the end of her first trip, she knew she'd be back to help the people made homeless by the war.

Designing a home for a war survivor

Lam flew back to Singapore in June. She and Taslim run a firm called Genesis Architects, which oversees projects in countries including the Maldives, Singapore, Taiwan, and New Zealand.

Lam runs business operations, while Taslim, also 39, covers design.

Lam and Taslim said they spent their summer designing a simple way to house Ukrainian families.

"We were confronted with several issues," said Taslim. "Number one was that winter was approaching."

Taslim looks over design plans with a Ukrainian partner. Rudy Taslim and Lam Baoyan

Winter temperatures in Ukraine can drop to -4 degrees Fahrenheit, and much of the infrastructure in war-ridden civilian areas was obliterated.

He eventually designed a modular home that's slightly bigger than a shipping container, replete with running water capacity, heating, electricity, kitchen, and bathroom.

Each house is prefabricated and can be put together in a week, but it's also built to withstand shockwaves from shelling, provide insulation, and last for years, Taslim said.

But Ukraine was also actively battling an invasion, and acquiring construction materials and building the houses would be tricky, he said.

Lam and Tuslim's homes come with electricity, furniture, running water, and a toilet. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

Buying materials from foreign suppliers would have turned Lam and Tuslim's project into profits for a corporation, he said, and their goal was also provide business opportunities for local companies.

"When the war started, obviously a lot of construction projects stopped," he said. "So they had in their possession a lot of materials that can be purchased off them."

Many Ukrainian men, who couldn't leave the country but hadn't been conscripted yet, needed jobs, Tuslim said. And a house requires laborers, logistics workers, and electricians.

Labor and materials would have to come from within Ukraine, the couple decided.

Their houses would also have to be situated directly in their beneficiaries' neighborhoods. Lam and Tuslim said they were determined not to displace any families in the process of giving them a new home.

"We didn't want to create some sort of mass refugee camp or something that's temporary, but something dignified," he said.

How Lam and Tuslim started their own house-building operation

In August 2022, Lam returned with Tuslim, flying into Germany, driving through Poland, and entering Ukraine via the western border.

Lam and Tuslim said they've traveled to Ukraine at least seven times together. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

Their idea was to build the portable houses off-site, then deliver them to war-ravaged towns.

Lam and Tuslim said they used their first trip to meet Ukrainian contractors, warehouse owners, and delivery drivers.

A team of Ukrainian aid workers helps them identify people who need homes the most and coordinate delivery.

Lam and Tuslim drivelled in several neighborhoods decimated by the war, such as this location in Lyman. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

In August 2022, the first of their houses were built and delivered to families in Irpin and Moshchun — just before the summer nights in Ukraine started to grow cold.

Tuslim prints in a container home loaded on a truck, while Lam poses next to one of their delivered houses. Rudy Tuslim and Lam Baqyan

One house initially cost them around $25,000, but Tuslim said they've managed to reduce its price to around $4,200 through supply chain tweaks, such as sourcing timber from Ukraine's forests. It was not able to independently verify the costs.

Lam and Tuslim's team manufactured and delivered 400 homes before the winter of 2022, and another 100 after January, they said.

One of Lam and Tuslim's houses, delivered to a bombed neighborhood in Moshchun. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

Lam said the elderly, those with disabilities, and widows get priority among the recipients. She and Tuslim visited dozens of neighborhoods to approve house deliveries, she said.

"We're giving this away for free, without conditions, so once we've identified these people, we need to walk on the ground and do background checks," she said.

Lam and Tuslim visit an elderly beneficiary in one of their container homes. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

After establishing their production chain, they've left much of the house-making and delivery in Ukrainian aid workers, Tuslim said.

Checking on homes

Lam and Tuslim said they continue to visit Ukraine every few months, checking on the homes and starting new aid projects for civilians and soldiers on the frontlines.

Lam and Tuslim started a warehouse they intend to Turnaje. It was bombed in July 2023; they said. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

They have had to reclaim several houses from people, Lam said. The couple discovered that one family in Moshchun had been living with relatives elsewhere, while keeping their gifted container house as a summer home, she said.

"We've had to make that decision and give the resources to someone who really needs it," Lam said.

The couple has since moved their focus to other aid projects in Ukraine, supplying generators in the winter, furnishing aid shelters for new mothers whose husbands were killed in the war, and bringing medical supplies to the frontlines.

Yulia is a worker at House of Bread, an organization that runs soup kitchens in Ukraine and that has partnered with Lam and Tuslim.

"They reached out to so many people, including soldiers on the frontline, encouraging them and supporting for them," she told BI about the couple and their work. "So many lives have been saved, many lives restored," she added.

Tuslim and Lam visit a TR/TR factory in TR/TR. Rudy Tuslim and Lam Baqyan

In late 2022, they were awarded Ukrainian temporary residency permits, which were seen by BI.

Lam and Tuslim delivered fuel and aid up shelters for those with special needs. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

They work with charities such as the Red Cross. The Red Cross Singapore confirmed its partnership with Lam and Tuslim but declined to comment further.

"What's important is that they're not just bringing what they want to bring or whatever they have at the moment," said Andrii Lupasiuk, the pastor of the Power of Revival church in Kyiv. "They always ask what is the need of people in the area. What is the need right now?"

Lam and Baqyan pose for a photo with their Ukrainian partners and other foreign aid workers. Lupasiuk is holding the Singapore flag in the center of the photo. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

Lupasiuk told BI via a translator that the couple has accompanied him on humanitarian trips since late autumn 2022.

He brings medicines, food, and supplies to the frontlines, and estimates that without Lam and Tuslim's resources, his aid ministry would be operating at half capacity.

Lupasiuk watches Tuslim hug a Ukrainian beneficiary after delivering supplies. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

Together, they've distributed freezing-temperature sleeping bags, 200 tons of food, and winter clothing to areas of the Donbass such as Lyman, a city that was retaken by Ukraine in early October after multiple battles, Lupasiuk said.

Lam and Tuslim pose for a photo with doctors and directors at a hospital in Ukraine after delivering medical equipment. Lam Baqyan and Rudy Tuslim

Lam and Tuslim are aware of criticism that they're foreign civilians putting themselves in a conflict that doesn't directly involve their country.

"A lot of people, maybe out of love, or disbelief, have tried to dampen our spirits," he said. "But I think over the months we've learned to

Their motivation, they said, stems from their faith.

"Love is an action. It looks like something. It looks like bread for the hungry and a home for the homeless," Lam said, when asked why she'd spent time and resources on projects that carried such personal risk.

"I'd say that question could be rephrased," said Tuslim. "Why not? Why not me?"

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