Singapore couple build free bomb-resistant homes for Ukrainians

Singaporeans Mr Rudy Taslim (left) and Ms Lam Bao Yan (right) are building new bomb-resistant emergency homes for citizens in Ukraine. PHOTO: COURTESY OF LAM BAO YAN

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SINGAPORE - On his second trip to Ukraine in August, architect Rudy Taslim, 38, almost wandered into a forest of pine trees, before he was yanked by his collar to a halt by his local guide.

Pointing to a nondescript sign with "mine" in Ukrainian written in black paint, barely visible amid the foliage and rubble of the war-torn countryside, Mr Taslim realised that he had nearly lost his life venturing into a field of landmines.

"Although I could have lost my life that day, this is just part of the everyday landscape for Ukrainians," he said.

He and his wife, Ms Lam Bao Yan, also 38, are two Singaporeans working in Ukraine to build new bomb-resistant emergency homes for the millions of citizens affected by the war with Russia.

To date, the couple have built 200 homes with local partners in the region since the war started in February.

The couple went to the country twice, in May and August, to assess the situation on the ground and build homes for a few weeks each time. They expect to roll out a total of 500 homes by winter in November.

With the winters in Ukraine getting as cold as minus 20 deg C or lower, Mr Taslim said: "If these homes are not up by winter, the cold could kill these people even before a bullet does."

Ms Lam, who works with Mr Taslim in their firm Genesis Architects, said: "When the war struck, we knew that only some fraction of the population comprising able-bodied women and children were allowed to leave... This means that men, people in rural villages and those with severe mental health conditions and physical handicaps would have likely slipped through the gaps."

During one of their trips, the couple had heard about three children living alone in a ravaged home in the village. The trio were bereft of their parents, and the youngest - a five-year-old girl - had cerebral palsy and was being taken care of by her brother, who was only 15.

The middle child, a girl who was only eight, was vulnerable to the risk of sexual exploitation by opportunistic predators.

Ms Lam said: "These are the people still left behind without support, who have become invisible as the world moved on from the war in Ukraine."

While the trio have since been funded by the couple to go to school and directed to local help, Ms Lam said most homes had also been completely destroyed, forcing residents to live in bomb shelters or makeshift tents made of tarpaulin.

Ms Lam added: "Many of these people just live for weeks on end in bomb shelters and leave only to collect food outside. But it really is no way to live - it is dark, damp, dusty and windowless... It's as if they're not even human."

Through their architectural expertise, the couple have designed modular homes that are cost-effective, using local-sourced materials such as pine wood and even styrofoam blocks that comply with European Union standards for health and safety.

Each housing module is slightly bigger than a container and comes fitted with a toilet, kitchen and living spaces. These modules can be further connected and modified to create larger homes. A family of five can live in two to three modules.

Mr Taslim said: "Although styrofoam is often seen as this sort of fish-market, flimsy material, industrial styrofoam can be quite robust and is a cheap and light material that is also quite effective as an insulator against the cold.

"Besides this, the houses being cheap, light and modular makes it easy to manufacture these homes centrally and get them transported to places of need."

Each housing module is slightly bigger than a container and comes fitted with a toilet, kitchen and living spaces. PHOTO: LAM BAO YAN

Mr Taslim said GenesisArchitects worked with Ukrainian suppliers to bring costs down from an initial €16,000 (S$23,000) to €4,000 per housing module.

The design plans were also shared with interested parties to build these houses by themselves.

Funded privately through donations from friends and family, the houses are provided to people for free. Mr Taslim and Ms Lam have also been able to create local employment in Ukraine through the building of these houses.

The occupants of these homes are chosen based on how incapable they are of moving away.

While the couple know that their help might only be "a drop in an ocean", Ms Lam said what matters to them is that they are actually contributing directly on the ground.

Recalling a woman who hugged her and wept when the couple rescued her after she had been living without food for a few days in a bomb shelter, Ms Lam said: "What these people want most is to know that the world is with them, here, and that they have not been forgotten, that someone will come and save them."

While many have sent love and support to Ukraine in the form of online messages, she said: "Ultimately, to us, love is not a word but an action... Love is a thing in the world that can be seen and felt."

On their trips to Ukraine, the couple also took along a team of professionals such as dentists, doctors and counsellors, so that they could provide more holistic support to the people there.

Ms Lam added: "With the skills and resources we had, building houses for Ukrainians was what we thought love and support looked like... And we would like to encourage others to imagine what love might look like if it were a thing as well."

Those who want to donate or help can visit https://loveonukraine.com/ or e-mail impact@loveonukraine.com to find out more.

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