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Prof Chan Heng Chee gets first hand look of transformation of Jakarta

By Zakir Hussain

JAKARTA - The transformation of once-chaotic parts of Jakarta into orderly spaces in recent months has begun to attract attention from visitors to the city and on Tuesday, veteran Singapore diplomat Chan Heng Chee accompanied Governor Joko Widodo for a first hand look.

Prof Chan, who chairs the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, described the changes as "quite phenomenal" and the process by which Mr Widodo persuaded residents to relocate as worth studying by other cities.

She followed him on one of his regular walkabouts on Tuesday afternoon, accompanied by Singapore's ambassador to Indonesia, Mr Anil Kumar Nayar.

Reluctant street vendors have been moved off the streets in central Jakarta's Tanah Abang neighbourhood and relocated into a nearby market complex, and the first batch of squatters from 7,000 families over the city's main dam in Pluit have been rehoused in new flats, achievements many once believed to be impossible.

A section of the dam has been spruced up as a park, and the project aims to restore the depth of the dam to mitigate against floods.

Residents will be moved to new flats being built nearby.

These changes are seen by observers as a test of Governor Joko Widodo's powers of persuasion and political acumen, as he emerges as the main frontrunner for next July's presidential election - even as he remains coy on whether he will run.

Professor Chan told reporters: "In big cities around the world, it's not easy to change people's habits." "But from what I saw in Tanah Abang and Pluit, the governor has promised a better living for them and this is a way through."

Prof Chan, who also chairs the World Economic Forum's global agenda council on urbanisation, added that Jakarta's experience was worth studying.

She said of Mr Widodo's achievement: "He's been able to persuade people and to me that's a process that's interesting".

"He's got some good ideas," she added.

But a modest Mr Widodo said he gained some of this experience from relocating street vendors in Solo, where he was mayor from 2005 till last year.

The governor had previously expressed interest in learning from Singapore's experience in urbanisation, in particular its HDB estates, open spaces and parks which he visited on a trip with officials in March 2013.